BOOK REVIEW

PAUL D. HUTCHCROFT, ED.

Strong Patronage, Weak Parties
The Case for Electoral System
Redesign in the Philippines

Mandaluyong: Anvil Publishing, 2019. 220 pp.

One classic criticism against the Philippine political system would be its persistent sustenance of patron-client relations. This much is reflected in most literature written regarding the topic, especially since Carl Landé's (1983) explicit usage of the term in "Political Clientelism in Political Studies: Retrospects and Prospects." The ubiquity of this argument in Philippine political science has led to the risk of it being casted as the end-all and be-all of the country's institutional and social ills. There has also been no shortage of sloganeering, ideological discourse, and even civil society intervention upholding this line of thinking—if only because of its ubiquity and its casting of clear political "undesirables." Subsequent literature thus takes it uncritically, thus also casting purported responses and solutions along similarly personalistic and/or partisan lines (Quimpo 2008).

It is easy to see why "patron client relations" has become a rule-of-thumb explanation for most stories of political underdevelopment in the Philippines (and, to an extent, most of the developing world). There is also a consistent tendency for popular discourse in the Philippines to primarily cast it as a personal or moral failing—an understandable but ultimately misinformed view. It can either be due to the active maneuverings of the political elites, who are explicitly

sanctioning/keeping the arrangement for their personal and/or class-wide benefit. Otherwise, it may be casted on the misshapen preferences of the Filipino electorate. Political socialization has been stunted and/or heavily-segmented based on socio-economic divides—a self-perception that also differs across different social classes. Research published in recent years, to their credit, has sought to debunk some of the above ideas, suggesting that what is usually cast as a personal or moral failing is in actuality hyper-partisan prejudices in action (Kusaka 2017).

The realization of this changing discourse opens opportunities toward asking whether the problems causing the entrenchment of political elites have fundamental systemic causes. Reaching this first step, in my view, helps in identifying the needed specific solutions to them. Furthermore, admitting that the problem is systemic would also entail the need for long-term institutional design. This requires that the people and stakeholders involved in the problem acknowledge that it cannot be wholly solved simply by implementing the agreed-upon solution. It also requires realistic projection and awareness that the implementation of such reforms may in fact also cause unintended effects. Most countries pursuing this tend to require much institutional pragmatism and bipartisanship—one that is difficult to come by in heavily-polarized times (or regimes).

It is in this vein that the writers of the volume *Strong Patronage, Weak Parties: The Case for Electoral System Redesign in the Philippines* jump into the debate, with an openness of insight and clear command/ appreciation of the subfield they seek to write about. The volume's editor, Paul Hutchcroft, pegs the problem of contemporary Philippine political realities (and thus, the objective of the project) as follows:

> *. . . the current combination of electoral systems in the Philippines pretty much guarantees the perpetuation of weak and incoherent political parties.* As long as parties are weak and lacking in coherence, the primary focus of political contention is much more likely to be on patronage and pork than on policies and programs. *To fix these fundamental ills of the Philippine polity, there is no better reform option than a well-constructed set of changes to the electoral system* (3).

Hutchcroft openly critiques the presumed enabling mechanism of the current 1987 Philippine Constitution itself while simultaneously

framing these institutional problems as follows: First, he opines that while it may not have been the intention of the framers and writers of the Constitution, the peculiar combination of electoral systems we currently have (multi-member plurality systems, separate-ticket executive voting, as well as the party-list system) "effectively ensure the perpetuation of weak and incoherent political parties" (10). Second, while he also continues to incorporate long-standing observations on patronage, he is somewhat explicit in suggesting that the maintenance of such is primarily due to a lack of viable, popularly-marketable alternatives and problem-driven analyses (13)—not because of the electorate itself.

To support this line of thought and action, the contributions to the volume pointedly outline specific system and institutional issues in the Philippines and provide points of comparison in other countries (especially within its home region of Southeast Asia). By doing so, they seek to demonstrate why certain reform efforts/proposals in other countries worked in their specific contexts and highlight/caution whether such are in fact viable or desirable in the long term in the Philippines. Benjamin Reilly's account of mixed electoral systems and how it became fashionable to adopt them in Southeast Asia (as recounted in Chapter 3) point to how the adoption of such systems does not automatically guarantee progressive governance or results (56–57). A similar comment could be made of Edward Aspinall's discussion of Indonesia's shift to the open-list system, sounding the warning that merely pursuing change for presumed populist/popular responsiveness may spell ill for the formation of political behavior and electoral contests (107–108).

As a student of politics, I find that the current volume contains a good mix of re-evaluated long-standing debates in institutional design, complemented with new areas of concern being introduced. Of particular interest to me is Socorro Reyes's recounting of emerging systemic options for women representation. The reality of gender-neutral political systems simply reinforcing patriarchal and gender-insensitive policymaking is well-documented in recent research (Carlin, Carreras and Love 2019; Jalalzai and Krook 2010; O'Brien 2015). Reyes's insights provide significant opportunities toward rethinking not only how women should be represented, but more importantly how they choose to see themselves represented by their governments. The changing demographics of women in the Philippines (as well as the kind of representation more appealing to

them) is likely to change with each succeeding generation, which means this is a serious point for concern.

Nevertheless, I would be remiss in being silent at one major assumption of the volume: "patronage thrives within a polity in which candidates are strong and parties are weak" (14). This refrain, repeated in different forms throughout the chapters, continues to assert that patronage is primarily identified with personality politics and that the formation of strong political parties will neutralize political patronage and clientelism. Both classic and recent literature continue to contend this assertion. Alex Weingrod (1968, 383) suggested that "[p]arty patronage becomes of great importance as state power expands throughout society, and as the political parties themselves become even more closely linked within the state structure." Furthermore, Scott Desposato (2007) argued how even institutionalized political parties may still be driven primarily by patronage in crafting policies that will guarantee public support instead of programmatic, long-term reform appreciation. By making this slippery dichotomy, the line of advocacy that *Strong Patronage, Weak Parties* may inspire in its readers would be an uncritical appreciation of political parties as the panacea toward neutralizing political families and patrons. The reality of party-building in the Philippines is contentious enough to suggest that even usually-hailed reform-oriented parties themselves, however program-oriented they seek to build themselves and project themselves as, will ultimately fall under the spell of patronage-cultivation. There is in fact no shortage of case studies worldwide demonstrating this. But we may be asking too much in criticizing this work specifically for the limitations of its chosen reform platform.

Strong Patronage, Weak Parties is accessible and spells out the possible consequences of certain systems and design trajectories—instead of the stereotypical, equivocating "on-the-one-hand-on-the-other" tone of most institutional design authors. The work does not only become a situationer (plus case study catalogue) of electoral issues that the Philippines is facing. It also handily serves as a working primer for any student, researcher, or policy-maker seeking to educate themselves about the basics of institutional design in general. This book's readership does not only target students and scholars but includes practitioners (both inside government and even those within civil society) involved in the current attempts at constitutional reform. By casting a wide net, it probably hopes to

convince the larger section of the political classes that institutional change need not be a concern primarily of technical experts. It can and should involve the very stakeholders who will be compromised first should patronage and personality-oriented politics in the Philippines remain entrenched.

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