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Der

Workshop on Democratic Constitutionalism

lädt zu folgender Veranstaltung ein:

„Acting Democratically under Clientelism“

Vortrag von

Udit Bhatia

University of York

**Donnerstag, 6. Juni 2024
18:00 Uhr**

Konferenzraum des Instituts für Politikwissenschaft
NIG, 2. Stock
Universitätsstraße 7
1010 Wien

Wir freuen uns darauf, Sie bei dieser Veranstaltung begrüßen zu dürfen.

Alexander Somek - Fabio Wolkenstein

Short abstract

Acting Democratically Under Clientelism

In many democracies, at least some candidates and parties offer particularistic rewards to ordinary voters in exchange for political support. In doing so, they transgress core assumptions about how democracy is supposed to work. And the establishment of such practices—often known as “clientelism”—substantially alters the choice environment facing other actors within the political system. Thus far, however, the normative stakes of these choices have received very little attention in political ethics and democratic theory. Perhaps this is simply because there few dilemmas with genuine normative interest. After all, clientelistic practices blatantly violate basic intrinsic principles of democracy, and may also undermine its instrumental benefits by threatening bureaucratic independence and accountability. It might therefore be assumed that anyone aiming to uphold democratic principles should simply reject them categorically.

The paper is born out of skepticism about this instinctive response. Assuming an approach to political ethics that accommodates instrumental concerns, more specifically, we find at least two distinct problems with categorical rejection of clientelistic practices. First, the apparently stark contrast between such practices and the competitive practices that are more common in “advanced” democracies is overdrawn. No society comes close to realizing the highest democratic ideals. And in our non-ideal world, clientelistic practices can sometimes have concrete benefits—especially for the poorest sectors of society. At least in the short and medium term, then, eschewing clientelistic practices altogether will not always be the best way to advance democratic values. Second, even when a transition away from clientelism does seem desirable, complete and unilateral withdrawal from an entrenched system of clientelistic exchange may not be the best way to pursue it. If most competitors offer concrete, particularistic rewards, after all, voters will come to expect compensation in this form, such that parties and candidates who refuse to offer it may have trouble building a constituency. Political elites who seek to promote democratic values thus face a genuine dilemma: how can they compete effectively for power within a clientelistic system—and thereby put themselves in a position to effect change—without exacerbating the democratic harms of clientelism? How is it possible, in other words, to act democratically under clientelism?

First, the paper argues that party leaders and other political actors should generally seek to shift from *individualized* to *collective* forms of clientelism, which will usually be more conducive to the growth of organized collective power. Second, party leaders under clientelistic circumstances should seek mutual rather than unilateral disarmament in pursuing these goals—aiming to disable otherwise profitable clientelistic tools for everyone simultaneously. This will allow them to remain competitive in the process of pursuing power, and then to use that power to gradually dismantle the underlying institutional conditions that enable and reinforce (the most destructive) clientelistic practices. In short, then, this framework acknowledges the clientelistic reality faced by many political actors and allows them to compete effectively within systems built on such particularistic exchange. Yet it points beyond those systems as well, directing well-meaning party leaders towards strategies that encourage relatively more organized countervailing power in the short term, and facilitate counter-hegemonic forms of programmatic politics in the long term.

Udit Bhatia

is a political theorist whose research focuses on normative democratic theory, constitutionalism, and political epistemology. Some of his recent papers have examined the legal and normative status of political parties, asking how their internal rules should be configured. In other work, he has engaged with epistocracy, the notion that competent persons should enjoy exclusive or disproportionate political power. He is also interested in the history of political thought, especially in relation to democratic institutions.

Before starting at York in September 2022, Udit was a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Sheffield (2021 to 2022). Previously, he was a Junior Research Fellow at Jesus College and Lecturer in Politics at Lady Margaret Hall, University of Oxford. He studied philosophy as an undergraduate student at St. Stephen's College, Delhi before moving to the UK for postgraduate studies at University College London and later Cambridge. He then moved to Oxford for his doctoral studies, completed in March 2019.

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