

PROMOTING SCARCITY OR COURTING ABUNDANCE? UNDERSTANDING THE RESILIENCY OF MACHINES IN URBAN GOVERNANCE

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Abstract: One of the persisting characteristics of a financial crisis is the lack of resources for competing users, uses and interests. In the political sphere, a financial crisis may cause a squeeze on the capacity of political parties to practice clientelism but will also provide opportunities for political parties to take advantage of the increasing destitution to further political interests. Grounding the arguments on two persuasive literatures - Erie's *Rainbow's End* (1987) and Chubb's *Patronage, Power, and Poverty in Southern Italy* (1982) – this paper attempts to answer the question as to what is the most appropriate political behaviour of machines when confronted by resource insufficiency and massive voter demand. The paper argues that if local control rests on the hands of political machines at a state of monopoly, and the electorate is characterized by extreme poverty and voiceless existence, managing scarcity will perpetuate the machine naturally. On the other hand, if the control of local politics is on a stiff competition, while society is fragmented as to socio-economic condition where some can afford better living while others can't, then the machine that has the most resource and is able to capture a significant support base will likely fare better and exist longer than others.

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Introduction

Some countries in the world may have buried machine politics and the predominant role of bosses in defining local governance as matters of nostalgia (Stone, 1996). But undoubtedly, this is not necessarily the case in developing countries which seem to be poor reflections of the colourful past of advanced democracies. Machine politics and bosses still thrive in these environments where there is widespread insecurity and poverty and where on the hands of politicians, rather than the state, rests the relative power and means to appease these conditions (Hedman and Sidel, 2000).

What happens to machine politics and bosses in a period of increasing scarcity, where financial crisis affects the availability of resources to serve competing users, uses, and interests? While this essay may be construed as an exercise in retrospection, it serves the purpose of understanding the persistence of machines in local governance in present-day fledgling democracies characterized by increasing financial insecurity, by looking into one aspect of machine dynamics – the rules of supply and demand in local politics. Grounding the discussion on two persuasive literatures – Erie's *Rainbow's End* (1987) and Chubb's *Patronage, Power, and Poverty in Southern Italy* (1982) – this paper attempts to answer the question as to what is the most appropriate political behaviour of machines when confronted by resource insufficiency and massive voter demand.

In answering the question, the paper briefly outlines Erie's theory of balance between claimants and resources (Section 1) as well as Chubb's theory on the power of scarcity manipulation (Section 2). In the succeeding section (Section 3), the paper provides an attempt at analyzing the merits and limitations, points of differences and convergence between the two theories presented. As a matter of conclusion, the paper presents answer to the primary question by arguing that despite the similarities and differences in conceptualization, there is a prevalent characteristic that underlines both explanations – that these are context theories that explain the development of machines in a continuum or progression. Accordingly, the appropriate behaviour depends on the phase to which the structure of local power and the corresponding condition of the electorate belongs.

Section 1. Erie's Balancing Act

Erie's theory is anchored on the statement that "The secret of the machine longevity, then, was bringing electoral demand into balance with resource supply" (Erie, 1988, p. 10). He argued that the nature of local politics and the dominance of machines in election results require that the demand of electorate, not necessarily the whole but a substantial portion of it, must be met and taken cared of at all times. Failure to do so will tip the balance of the equation leading to the machine's downfall.

Drawing his generalizations in the analyses of big machines in Irish-American cities between 1840–1985, he proposes that what local machines were successful of was to increase the resource base on one hand, to be able to meet the increasing demand for patronage, and deflate voter demand on the other, to compensate for resource insufficiencies.

This requires from machines a handful of things. First, it requires that the machine is aware of the nature and propensity of demand, not only in terms of current but also of future terms, in order to gauge the magnitude of supply required. Second, it requires that the machine knows well the limitations of its supply base as well as the prospects of expansion. Third, it must be able to determine the appropriate mix of resource enhancement and voter deflation strategies that will not compromise current political gains with long-term machine sustainability.

The case presented by Erie suggests certain types of resource enhancement strategies as tax increases, increases in public debt, annexation and incorporation, reliance on private sector patronage, and alliances with county, state and federal bosses to capture additional public sector patronage (his theory of intergovernmental alliance). But in this case, resource creation is conventional wisdom, since any sane person who would enter politics will know that resources are necessary and that with the growing demographic trend, one has to prepare more.

What is novel about Erie's theory is the concept of voter demand deflation. It moved away from the traditional notion of indiscriminate inclusion and extensive mobilization in order to "enlarge the electoral universe and pre-empt (their) opponents by reducing the pool of voters available for counter mobilization" (*ibid.*, p. 217). He justifies this by

positing costs reasons (doing so would drain the machine of its resources) and the dangers of patronage and power reallocation (shifting allocation from the Irish to the non-Irish). Several forms were used in this respect but the primary of which were repression and corruption.

How does Erie understand this exclusionary procedure? First, he argued that the procedures of incorporation were highly exclusive – as soon as the machine reached its point of stability, it stopped mobilizing the electorate and warded off new joiners, thereby concentrating on its traditional power base. Second, the machine made a glaring distinction between the new and the old and put an economic premium into the distinction by over-rewarding previously incorporated groups and under-rewarding newly incorporated ones.

This conceptualization however, while novel, is not surprising. The theory, which leans more on the supply side of the equation as evidenced by the statement “to bring the electoral demand, into balance with resource supply”, alludes to the concept of the infiniteness of electoral demand and the boundaries of resource supply. Hence, because the supply is scarce, it is but a logical proposition to curb the abundant demand in order for the machine to cope up and survive.

Within this frame of analysis, Erie did not discount the importance of the manner of distribution when resources are pooled and when target demand has already been defined. He argued that the Irish-American machines worked on the concept of “different strokes for different folks”, segregating the electorate to classes and their particular interests. For example, the machines appropriated costly patronage and welfare services to poor inner city wards while offering efficient low cost homeowner services to outlying middle class homeowners.

Part of the whole process, is the skilful management of externalities that has effects on both the supply of patronage and the demand for it. The resilience of machines first is exemplified by its never-ending search for patronage sources, as the bundle decreases due to externalities, and as opportunities for creation becomes evident. Secondly, this resilience is also evident by the intentional exclusionary procedures that machines undertake in order not to enlarge the mass of people to whom it shall make itself accountable in the midst of an inevitable increasing trend.

Section 2. Chubb's Rules of Exploiting Scarcity

Chubb's theory of machine success, in response to the question of demand and supply, is comprehensively captured by the statement that "the power of the party rests on the manipulation of scarcity, on maintaining large numbers of people in competition for scarce resources" (Chubb, 1982, p. 215).

Chubb's proposition is situated in a particular context, where there is amass poverty and insecurity and the only way to salvation is a government that should have responded sensitively to the needs of the people. In the context of Palermo in Italy, the government did, but in an entirely different way, a clientelistic way that did not only dispense actual material favours but also, ironically, hope.

Chubb's proposition does not indicate the neglect of the supply side of the equation. As a matter of fact, she laboriously expounded on it. However, the process of the party's wealth creation in the context of the research locale was highly dependent on regional spending, government funds, and nothing else. While Erie mentioned increased taxation for purposes of revenue maximization, such can not be made an option in Palermo where the majority of people were poor and where even the business community, a primary source of tax revenue could not even be relied upon since it was highly subsidized, and where the white collar employees, a source of tax-deducted-at-source, represented a huge powerful negotiating block that would be very sensitive to these types of deductions in gross pay.

The forms of patronage in Palermo did not differ significantly from Erie's account. The primary support mechanism is related to the provision of jobs, by manipulating the public payroll and by the dispensation of hopes of job acceptance through recommendations. In the case of the business community, there was a very high degree of public intervention in the form of direct public spending (incentives, subsidies, contracts and special industrial salvage programs), credit assistance (both from private and public banks), and the exercise of discretion in the implementation of the regulatory powers of government (e.g., licensing). As such, "the different strokes for different folks" argument mentioned earlier, also holds true in Chubb's proposition where the machine sliced the electorate into chunks of homogenous needs.

The critical element, however, of Chubb's analysis which also made it significantly different from Erie's account is the trade of future goods in the political exchange - the element of hope that she repetitively referred to in her book. In which case, there is a trade of actual versus future goods. However, this paper argues that both the supply and the demand side are trading on hope in specific and particular instances. For example, the moment the patron signs a recommendation, it is a promise in itself, and thus a future element. Conversely, the moment the client receives it, he undertakes the promise to vote, thus, another future commodity. However, it will be different if what is traded is a recommendation for a vote on election day and the recommendation is given only upon the sight of an affirmatively-filled ballot.

This analysis, however, is not peculiar. In moments of supply scarcity, it is customary for sellers and buyers to trade future goods (like in the case when two persons pay to reserve an out-of-stock item in an antique shop). What is peculiar is the proposition that one does not have to do so much about supply (like the antique shop owner searching for the reserved item), but to maintain the scarcity (make the item always unavailable) to ensure that the supply is most sought assuming demand is increasing (more people request for the item) or is held constant (the same persons come back to follow up on the request).

How then does Chubb operationalize this theory in the context of local politics?

Chubb proposes that there is a great incentive to maintain the poverty and insecurity that characterized an area while the machine retains political control in alleviating it. So long as there is poverty, and so long as the machine holds the key to all resource opportunities available, the machine will always succeed. This proposition is very volatile and vulnerable and requires a handful of things.

First, it requires that development is kept beyond the gates. It means warding off all opportunities that will give people a certain degree of economic power, because surely it will have large implications on political ones. The reason why Chubb argued that it is economic development, and not economic crisis that presents the greater threat to a machine, is the recognition that it offers alternative sources of economic goods that may not anymore be controlled by the machine and may therefore compete with its power to accommodate the demand.

Second, it requires the continued hegemony of the government (and therefore the machine, assuming situations of majority control) in the provision of alternatives to the poor. The cooption of business sector, the control of non-profit institutions, the subjugation of labour unions and even the misapplication of development funds are necessary in order to recreate every day the same poverty that fuels the scarcity that assures the machine's immortality.

Finally, while ensuring that poverty and insecurity persist, the machine should be able to raise the banner of hope and the promise of the future that one only attains by a sustained loyalty to the machine. Thus, stories of inspiration, of ascending up the ladder, of entrepreneurial success that owes largely to the possibilities that the machine can offer, should float in the minds of people so that while scarcity is in the air, the much-desired abundance does not seem to be so far. Conversely, stories of failure because of disloyalty should also be spoken of in the streets so that the reliance on the politics of hope will become more convincingly real.

Section 3. Points in Conversation

It can be said that both Chubb's and Erie's account focused more on the economic favours that the machine can logically, or illogically allocate to clients - patronage, services, contracts, franchises, tax freezes, jobs, garbage collection, homeowner services - and how these can be sourced. Both exclude in the discussion the allocation of power as a form of patronage that may also be ably distributed to generate significant results if dispensed and managed at their appropriate levels.

In this context, it can be said that both theories propose that more than anything else, a machine's birth and survival rely heavily on the economic resources it can dispense to be able to get the monopoly of the political power that it seeks to establish. This, among others, reflects the electoral exercise as a cycle of economic-gain-for-political-power exchange. The voters get favoured economically, while the boss got favoured politically. However, this is entirely not so. With every dispensation of economic favour, a political power is added to the demand side, thereby increasing its potency to bargain and to demand

for more. Also, with every vote that a client gives, it is with the client's awareness of the patron's economic gain in it and the latter's increased power to gather the resource.

Thus, the demand and supply side can not be simply understood as an expression of economic needs and favours. Had this been so, voters may not have the power to demand other types of goods and the machines may not have to give in. In Italy for example, the bargaining power of the white collar middle class causing fear to the leaders, and even resulting in the passage of a bill that it previously rejected, is an indication that indeed, what were dispensed as jobs are not mere jobs in themselves but also a fraction of the power that the ruler holds. In U.S. cities, the fact that machines shift the response to the client's demand speaks of the power that the latter is able to wield.

It is important to note here, that in the context of this demand and supply analysis, Chubb's proposition comes from the same ground as Erie's – that the supply is finite while demand is entirely the opposite. While Erie suggested on expanding demand and restricting supply, the components of the equation, Chubb's prescription is not on these but on the context at which the equation is held to operate.

The demand and supply law of economics only applies to the assumed situations of scarcity (which undoubtedly characterizes the world) that when needs are unlimited and there are boundaries in supply, one has to manipulate either the demand or the supply in order to achieve optimal results. Thus, the scarcity, in this case, is a given, in the context of the equation, without which the equation is meaningless. It may be tempting to conclude that Chubb's prescription is on the demand side, by holding it as constant (as suggested in Erie's argument), but this paper would argue that it is not so. The scarcity is the reason of the equation, and Chubb's argument focused on this. In her theory, one does not have to manipulate the equation, but rather to make its underlying assumption hold true at all times.

Erie on the other hand treats scarcity as a given that one can not do anything about, hence his preoccupation with manipulating the two elements of the equation. This is maybe conditioned by the assumption that abundance is never possible, but if it is, it will always be relative and time-bound. However, the differences in generalization are more on the point of reference, the context of the argument rather than the

belief of an economic assumption of finite resource, which, after all, is general knowledge.

Palermo's scarcity was so overwhelming, that its influence on conceptualization is persuasive. On the other hand, the U.S. cities may have not been in the same condition in its recent history, that's the reason why the theory can not support the construct. But what if Erie's study is situated in the same scarcity situation as Palermo, at a point in the U.S. history that mirrors exactly the same condition? It is very likely that a different generalization may have been arrived at, and may even liken Chubb's conclusion. Conversely, Chubb's interpretation is grounded on the seemingly unlimited control of the state since, as earlier pointed out, the manipulation of scarcity requires the precondition of power monopoly. What if given the scarcity that there was, the machine does not have a near-to-absolute control? More likely, Erie's proposition is more tenable. Indeed, without the machine or the government's power monopoly, the manipulation of scarcity is not at all possible, even when the population is characterized by intense poverty and insecurity. If the power veil is susceptible to the piercing, the maintenance of scarcity will lead to higher expectations and graver discontent that can even incite revolt.

Conclusion

This is not to argue that the appropriate behaviour of the machine in situations of scarcity and high voter demand is dependent on place, or culture, or time, or ethnicity mix, or nature of people, but rather on the phase by which local politics, defined as the system of control, evolve (the supply side) and the manner by which development, defined as improvement of well-being, has taken place (the demand side). If local control rests on the hands of the machine at a state of monopoly, and the electorate is characterized by extreme poverty and voiceless existence, then managing scarcity will perpetuate the machine naturally. On the other hand, if the control of local politics is on a stiff competition, while society is fragmented as to socio-economic condition where some can afford better living while others can't, then the machine that has the most resource and is able to capture a significant support base will likely fare better and exist longer than others.

On this last note, Chubb may be right when she argued that the state of economic development and the structure of political power serve a mutually reinforcing bond. It is just that she framed the argument in the negative that it precludes all other types of conditions to benefit from the explanation.

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