

The Alexander Hamilton Center Presents

BIG MEN AND BALLOTS:

EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE ON THE POLITICAL POWER OF PATRONS

Thursday, October 15th, 2009

12:00 PM

19 West 4th St: Room 217

In many developing democracies, non-elected local patrons are believed to influence the electoral choices of their wider communities. However, scholars have little evidence of the power of these leaders and limited understanding of how they convert their socioeconomic power into political influence when voting is secret. I develop a theory that argues voters defer to the political preferences of patrons not out of fear of punishment but because they understand their patrons are pivotal actors in the process of securing development for their communities. Patrons monopolize control of key local development inputs and they are uniquely positioned to lobby for government resources. This makes their connections to and willingness to collaborate with elected representatives consequential for the amount of development their communities can expect to receive from politicians. As a result, voters rationally take their patron's preferences into account when casting their ballots. I test this theory using data from an experiment in Zambia. In the experiment, I revealed traditional chiefs' opinions about local Members of Parliament to a randomly selected subset of survey respondents. Then all respondents were asked to participate in an opinion poll on whether they would support their Member of Parliament if an election were held in the next year. I assess the plausibility of different theories of patrons' influence by examining whether there are heterogeneous treatment effects across different groups of voters. The types of voters who are most influenced by their chief's opinions are very consistent with the theory outlined in the paper.

PRESENTED BY

Kate Baldwin

POST DOCTORAL FELLOW WITH THE ALEXANDER HAMILTON CENTER



Kate's research examines how democratic institutions operate when they are imposed on top of unequal social structures. She is interested in the effect of local-level patron-client relationships on the way voters cast their ballots and the type of representation elected politicians provide. Her dissertation analyzes the influence of hereditary chiefs on the operation of democracy across different areas of Zambia. She uses experimental methods, spatial analysis and natural breaks following the deaths of chiefs to identify the effect of these local patrons on voting behavior and redistributive politics.