Patronage Guaranteed? Public Policy Reform, Patronage and Party–building in Rural India

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Abstract

In many polities, political parties reach out to voters through the distribution of material enticements. Voters decide to provide political support based on this material quid pro quo, which forms the basis of a patronage transaction. With its large pool of poor voters, India is often described as a 'patronage democracy,' in which political parties seek to mobilize political support against expectations of patronage – along the lines of caste. While public resources in the form of poverty alleviation policies remain a potential source of patronage, institutional reforms promoting local democracy along with the introduction of rights–based policies create a unique challenge for political parties, especially in the absence of extensive party operations at the local level. In this paper, I show that while new policies emphasizing rights and a demand for benefits may be conducive to clientelism, this form of political patronage is not the product of party strategies. In rural India, members of the district–level party elite, such as the Members of the Legislative Assembly or MLA, seek to build broad–based, multi–caste coalitions at the local level. While they occasionally rely on local elected officials at the village level to mobilize support, the ties they develop with local brokers remain informal and selective. As a result, party elites refrain from interfering with village–level politics, and thus play no role in the distribution of policy benefits under the new institutional regime. While the implementation of NREGS allows for forms of clientelism to persist at the local level, distributive politics under NREGS remain the product of political competition *within* village communities.

1 Introduction

In many democracies, voters continue to vote on the basis of material inducements, rather than on the basis of programmatic platforms. Political parties provide these material benefits either to buy votes ahead of an election, or use the distribution of public patronage to create lasting linkages with voters. This political quid pro quo occasionally reflects a power asymmetry, along the lines of a patron–client relationship (Hicken 2011; Scott 1977). Political parties pursue different strategies, at times rewarding partisans, or else reaching out to swing voters (Stokes et al. 2013) as they rely on public resources to reach out to voters (Levitsky 2003).

This is certainly the case in India, described as the quintessential 'patronage democracy' where political parties capture public resources for political benefit (Chandra 2004, p. 6) and where the resources dedicated to poverty alleviation have increased significantly in recent years, buoyed by economic growth and a corresponding surge in tax revenue (Jenkins and Manor 2017). A potential source of public patronage, this increase in the public resources for welfare and development has nevertheless happened against a background of radical institutional reform. With the passing of constitutional amendments in 1992–1993, the Indian state has – on paper at least – significantly empowered local government agencies through the *Panchayati Raj* Institution (PRI) (Bohlken 2016). It has also promoted social policies that emphasize individual rights and entitlements, which affect important policy areas, such as unemployment relief (2005) and more recently, food distribution and subsidies (2013).

The new institutional environment poses a challenge to state agencies tasked with implementation. But critically, it also presents new challenges to the political entrepreneurs that were traditionally known to distort policy implementation for political benefit (Migdal 1988). Public resources made available by the state for poverty alleviation represent a boon

for political parties that have no resources of their own (Thachil 2014*a*). With a budget outlay of US$ 7 billion in 2016,[1] NREGS is not only the world's largest public works program, but also a unique opportunity for political parties to reach out to poor, rural voters.

In this paper, I argue that the unique nature of party–voter ties in rural India makes it difficult for parties to use public policies for patronage purposes under the new institutional regime. At the district level, party elites use local elected officials to rally political support at the time of elections, but their ties with these local elected officials remain informal and selective. Party elites are relatively unable to identify 'their' voters, even when voting happens along caste–based expectations of patronage (Chandra 2004). As a result, they prefer to cast a wide net to build multi-caste coalitions and ward off defections among their expected supporters. More importantly, these party elites hedge their bets by not interfering with local politics so as to ensure broad–based political support, regardless of who gets elected at the local level. These informal party structures, and the general reluctance of party elites to interfere with local politics, therefore insulate the distributive strategies of local leaders, the *Gram Pradhans*, from the patronage strategies pursued by district–level party elites. With its emphasis on individualized and decentralized delivery, NREGS proves to be particularly inimical to these traditional party–voter linkages.

I make these claims through the use of data collected through interviews with former NREGS beneficiaries at the village level, sitting *Gram Pradhans* and candidates during the *Panchayati Raj* elections of November–December 2015, and also through multiple meetings with local party leaders and elected officials. The data not only shed light on the informal structures of political parties in this part of rural India, but also provide insights into the nature of political leadership at the local level, and the interactions between traditional

[1]Source: MGNREGA Data Portal.

forms of caste dominance and the formal incentives provided for the representation of traditionally disenfranchised groups such as the Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes (OBC).

This paper brings a nuanced account of patronage and clientelism that takes into account the structure of political parties and the new policy regime at the local level in rural India. It makes three broad contributions. First, it contributes to our understanding of citizen–state relations (Krishna 2002, 2011; Kruks-Wisner 2017) as the Indian state promotes new institutional incentives for poverty alleviation (Jenkins and Manor 2017; Khera 2011; Marcesse 2016). Second, this study builds on a literature that has investigated the interactions between formal and informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004), particularly as they determine policy outcomes (Tsai 2006; Marcesse 2016) to investigate the institutional incentives that make patronage and clientelism more or less likely. This study goes beyond the formal models that are usually developed and applied to the study of distributive politics in India and elsewhere to provide an empirical account of the *informal* nature of party structures and party–voter linkages. Lastly, the paper contributes to a growing literature on political parties and party–voter linkages in rural India (Auerbach 2016; Wilkinson 2007). As such, the paper informs our understanding of distributive politics in ways that complement traditional, survey–based studies of patronage politics in rural India (Dunning and Nilekani 2013). While political parties continue to make caste–based appeals to voters (Chandra 2004), this paper shows the party–building strategies pursued by political parties at the local level do not mirror these appeals.

2 Public Policy Reform and Institutions: Local Democracy and Entitlements in Rural India

The Indian state has since 1992–1993 pursued significant reforms in the field of public policy. Institutional change has translated into both the promotion of local democracy following the constitutional amendments of 1992–1993 and, a decade later, with the promotion of rights–based policies, such as the Right to Work (2005) and the Right to Food (2013).

2.1 Decentralization and local democracy

While the 1950 Indian constitution included provisions for local democracy, the plans drawn by political leadership at the central level in the immediate post–independence did not originally result in either local elections or decentralized service delivery. Local government agencies, known in India as the *Panchayati Raj* Institution, were critically empowered by the constitutional amendments passed in 1992 and 1993 (Bohlken 2016). This legislation created room for decentralization and local democracy, yet left the individual states chiefly responsible for the enforcement of the constitutional provisions, in accordance with the federal constitution of India, under which local government remains a prerogative of the state. As a result, the implementation of these provisions has varied greatly. While with some states have devolved significant administrative responsibilities to the *Panchayati Raj*, others have refrained from doing so (Bohlken 2016). The variation is two–dimensional since it not only reflects the extent to which the Indian states have devolved administrative responsibilities, but also reflects the frequency with which the states have held local elections (Bohlken 2016). While some states, such as Kerala, have significantly empowered local government, others such as Bihar have refrained for instance from holding elections.

Across states however, overall the emphasis on local democracy has newly empowered large sections of India's rural population which had previously suffered historic discrimination – usually on the basis of caste (Chauchard 2017; Jensenius 2015). The enforcement of quotas for members of the Scheduled Castes (SC), the Other Backward Classes (OBC) and women has transformed the conditions under which traditionally disenfranchised segments of India's rural population have access to opportunities of political leadership, as much as it has translated into better service delivery (Chattopadhyay and Duflo 2004; Pande 2003). The result is a constellation of local government agencies, with a varying ability to implement policies, especially in the field of poverty alleviation.

2.2 Entitlements and rights–based policies

The promotion of local democracy is only one facet of the new institutional environment. Under the leadership of the Congress–led United Progressive Alliance or UPA,[2] the Indian state has profoundly changed the conditions under which basic services and poverty relief are delivered at the local level. With the enactment of legislation such as the Right to Work, Right to Information and Right to Food[3] the Indian state has developed an approach to poverty alleviation based on rights which creates near–universal entitlements, and which departs from other approaches, such as those favoring a means–test. While these new rights are intended to overlap largely with the exercise of citizenship in rural communities, they do not necessarily drive policy implementation. For instance, in the case of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or NREGS – the policy translation of the Right to Work legislation – policy benefits only materialize when rural households activate their

[2]The UPA was in power 2004–2014.

[3]The Right to Information Act does not deliver specific policy benefits, other than ensuring – at least theoretically – individual citizens enhanced access to public records. The National Food Security Act (NFSA) of 2013 creates an entitlement to food for 50% of urban households and 75% of rural households. This new entitlement replaces the official means–test used thus far, the Poverty Line.

right and claim work benefits. Policy implementation remains entirely dependent on the willingness, and in many cases, the ability, of rural citizens to claim their benefits from local elected officials. State agencies and their representative play no role in deciding who is eligible for benefits, but are responsible for the delivery of benefits, such as wages paid under the policy. The demand for benefits remains latent if citizens do not claim policy benefits.

The scope of these new policies is significant. NREGS is at present one of the largest welfare policies to be implemented in rural India, with a budget outlay in 2016 of US$7.5 billion. In 2015–2016, the policy provided 45.5 billion person–days of work to rural households in India, making it by any measure the world's largest welfare program (Gulzar and Pasquale 2017; Maiorano 2014; Marcesse 2016). Unlike other public policies for poverty alleviation,[4] NREGS relies for its implementation on the claims made by citizens, which together contribute to the emergence of a *demand for work*, as a condition for implementation.

3 Parties and voters in rural India: policy outcomes and informal institutions

Institutional incentives to promote local democracy and the empowerment of the poor do not solely determine policy implementation, particularly under policies such as NREGS. They interact with informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky 2004; Marcesse 2016), such as patronage and clientelism, to yield unique policy outcomes that often ostensibly depart from the expectations of policy makers (Migdal 1988). As such, the implementation of a policy such as NREGS in rural India represents a unique opportunity to study these

[4] The enactment of the National Food Security Act in 2013 represents another important development, given the size of the food subsidy program in India and should ultimately make the Targeted Public Distribution

interactions.

3.1 Informal institutions: non–programmatic party–voter linkages

Institutions, broadly defined as the 'rules of the game' (North 1991, p. 98) are not necessarily derived from formal legislation. They can represent informal norms of expected behavior that escape state sanction (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Such is the case, for instance, with non–programmatic party–voter linkage strategies, which include patronage and clientelism (Chandra 2004; Hicken 2011; Ziegfeld 2016). In contrast with programmatic linkage strategies, in which political parties seek to mobilize support through the promotion of specific policy positions, patronage and clientelism involve a quid pro quo, which reflects a material transaction – political parties offer material inducements to voters in exchange for political support. While patronage typically reflect party strategies and can be channelled through a party machine, clientelism is more dependent on a power asymmetry between patron and client (Chandra 2004, p. 51) (Weitz-Shapiro 2014).

India, with its vast population of poor rural voters, has been described as a 'patronage democracy' (Chandra 2004, p. 6), in which "the state monopolizes access to jobs and services, *and* in which elected officials have discretion in the implementation of laws allocating the jobs and services at the disposal of the state." Indian parties' typically lack the independent resources (Thachil 2014*b*) that are required to reach out to voters. This makes them particularly eager to capture public resources for political gain and makes access to state resources uniquely important in order to engage in a quid pro quo with voters. From the perspective of voters, the scope of welfare policies and the weight and prestige of public sector employment make the distribution of patronage particularly appealing, as rural poverty persists and opportunities in the private sector remain scant. In many parts of rural India, and especially in the Northern states of the 'Hindi belt,' ethnicity and caste provide

cues for the mobilization of political support as voters expect a targeted distribution of public resources to their individual benefit (Chandra 2004; Wilkinson 2007).[5]

Political parties that effectively gain access to public resources and use them for political benefit must also find the ways to distribute these resources in order to engage in a quid pro quo with voters. In many polities, these resources are distributed through a network of brokers who consolidate voter support in exchange for the distribution of material benefits (Camp 2015; Stokes et al. 2013). Because these resources provide from state coffers, brokers who work for the incumbent party are generally considered at an advantage (Weitz-Shapiro 2014) since Opposition parties are by definition barred from accessing public resources for political benefit. Yet this literature tends to overlook the institutional incentives – formal or informal – in which political parties deploy patronage strategies. For instance, while some studies have emphasized the informal nature of party structures (Levitsky 2003), the conditions under which these transactions materialize are usually taken for granted, without due consideration of the *nature* of the benefits involved in the transaction and the *mode* of delivery. This question takes unique relevance in the Indian context I argue, given both the emphasis on a demand for benefits and the parties' lack of formal and extensive operations at the local level.

[5]In the presence of information asymmetries between party elites and voters, ethnicity provides an important clue to facilitate the aggregation of votes (Chandra 2004). To the extent that these information asymmetries and factors such as poverty and illiteracy create incentives for political quid pro quos, in the form of the distribution of patronage in exchange for votes, voters will support parties that maximize their expectations of patronage benefits. As a result, voters 'count heads' (Chandra 2004, p. 6) and scrutinize the party leadership for individuals that are from their own caste or ethnic group. In doing so, however, they consider not the party label itself (which need not be openly supporting specific caste groups), but rather the threshold of electability, i.e. whether the party under consideration has a real chance of winning elections (Chandra 2004). In the specific case of India, this calculation is made easier by the electoral system, which allows the party that wins a simple plurality of votes to win a parliamentary seat, according to the First–Past–The–Post rule. Parties therefore emerge because of the political activation of caste cleavages, but these cleavages are theoretically only politically salient to the extent that parties gain power and gain access to public resources to distribute patronage.

3.2 Parties and patronage: new policy incentives and patronage

Because it significantly changes the incentives that political parties have to pursue patronage strategies, the new institutional environment for poverty alleviation represents a puzzle for the politics of distribution.

On the one hand, the emphasis on local democracy and the empowerment of village councils suggests that political parties must consider the type of coalitions that emerge at the local level in order to consolidate broad–based political support. This is especially likely to be a challenge in rural India, where political parties typically run thin operations (Chhiber 1999). This challenge in reaching out to voters at the local level presumably affects both parties that are in power and have access to public resources as well as parties that are not.

On the other hand, the emphasis on rights that are to be claimed by rural citizens creates a problem of a different nature, since the implementation of policies depends on the claims made by rural citizens, as is the case for instance under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme or NREGS. In theory, elected officials play no role in determining who receives policy benefits, and as a result political parties are unlikely to exercise discretion in the allocation of public resources. In practice however, rural citizens have a varying ability to make claims (Kruks-Wisner 2017) which political parties can presumably take advantage of. Furthermore, the mechanisms of policy implementation potentially leave room for discretion, as is the case for instance under NREGS, where wages are distributed to workers, contingent on bureaucratic approval (Marcesse 2016). [6] The combination of electoral competition at the local level and the emphasis on a demand

[6] Theories of patronage politics often consider material benefits that form the basis of patronage transactions as interchangeable, but there is a qualitative difference between public jobs, often seen as the source of patronage expectations in rural India (Chandra 2004) and demand–based work benefits under a policy such as NREGS. For instance, these policy benefits do not necessarily allow for the same level of discretionary authority, nor do they empower the same individuals in the exercise of this authority.

for work creates a unique challenge for political parties seeking to pursue patronage as they must concurrently develop ties with local elected officials and determine strategies to activate the demand for benefits in ways that benefit them politically.

3.3 Variation in policy outcomes: the case of NREGS

The implementation of a scheme such as NREGS generates significant variation. This is for instance the case in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populated and one of its poorest states. This variation is observed across districts within the state and to some extent can be traced to the relative levels of poverty across districts. Yet, the variation is also observed *within* districts, with some village communities spending funds and others not.[7] While each village community – *Gram Panchayat* in Uttar Pradesh – is unique, and none can be considered as equally poor, the variation still remains to be explained. Table 1 below shows the extent of this variation across Blocks within a poor, rural district of Uttar Pradesh, Bahraich, for two years, 2013–2014 and 2014–2015.[8]

Owing to the new policy incentives under NREGS, the variation in policy outcomes under NREGS suggests that the demand for work benefits under a policy such as NREGS is more likely to emerge in some village communities than others. Data collected by the Government of India point to variation across Blocks (which roughly have the same population – around 250,000 in Bahraich district), along with a significant number of *Gram Panchayats* registering no spending at all (on labor) – approximately 20% of *Gram Panchayats* in Chitaura Block for instance. This variation should be puzzling to scholars

[7] This variation is both measured across time and space. For instance, the variation takes the form of unequal levels of spending across *Gram Panchayats* within any given year, but also between years, whereby *Gram Panchayats* register no spending for instance and spending in another year.

[8] I provide the Block average person-days of work, but also the standard deviation *within* each Block, along with the percentage of *Gram Panchayats* with no spending at all. I am only using these two years to show the variation across the same *Gram Panchayats*. Some administrative boundaries changed ahead of the *Panchayati Raj* elections of 2015, so I am not including data from 2015–2016 and later.

Table 1: Employment generation (person-days of work), and percentage of *Gram Panchayats* with no spending, Block level, Bahraich district (UP), 2013–2014 and 2014–2015. Source: MGNREGA Data Portal

Block	2013–2014				2014–2015			
	Average person–days of work (GP level)	Standard deviation (person–days)	Labour expense per capita (Rupees)	Percentage no work	Average person–days of work (GP level)	Standard deviation (person–days)	Labour expense per capita (Rupees)	Percentage no work
Balaha	4603	2576	142.7	8.4	5407	3793	201.9	0
Chitaura	3205	2690	143.8	20	2962	4511	157	0
Huzoorpur	3683	2273	200.8	11.5	4390	2569	277.4	0
Jarwal	2445	1690	110.7	15.3	2240	1909	98.5	2.5
Qaisarganj	2958	2331	139.2	15.4	3135	2833	158.6	4.2
Mahsi	3261	2412	121.1	16.2	2508	2214	138.1	6.7
Mihinpurwa	4478	3594	130.9	17.4	3955	3616	131.2	2.32
Nawabganj	2791	1925	127.6	18.5	3049	2669	174.2	2.85
Phakharpur	2551	2401	105.8	17.4	3173	3462	150.9	10.4
Payagpur	2320	1522	109.6	13.8	2149	1927	102	4.1
Risya	3746	3173	160.3	16.21	4272	3712	214.9	5.4
Shivpur	4485	2987	152	14.7	3459	2844	134	4.4
Tejwapur	2668	1957	118.9	13.69	2226	2027	113.2	5.4
Visheswarganj	2287	1290	108.4	13.3	2996	1680	163.9	2.6

of distributive politics, and not simply because policy outcomes should perhaps reflect more faithfully levels of social disenfranchisement. If the distribution of public patronage remains a privilege of the party in power, then policy performance in this rural district of Northern India raises some questions. For instance, in 2013–2014, labor spending per capita was highest in a Block whose Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), one of the most prominent elected officials at the local level in India, did not (then) belong to the party in power (Shivpur).

Recent evidence from India (Dunning and Nilekani 2013) suggests partisanship plays a role role in the delivery of welfare benefits, including work benefits under NREGS, *despite* the enforcement of quotas of representation for disenfranchised minorities.[9] These findings, based on experimental survey methods, raise an important question however, namely what mechanism, if any, allows the distribution of benefits under NREGS to reflect partisanship,

[9]

at a minimum, partisan identity. While not entirely irrelevant, party labels at the local level in rural India do not carry the same weight as they do at the state level. In rural Uttar Pradesh for instance, local elected officials, the *Gram Pradhans* do not officially affiliate to a political party. This leads me to cast doubt on the ability of political parties to effectively mount patronage strategies that employ NREGS benefits. In the rest of the paper, I argue and demonstrate that while a policy such as NREGS can generate forms of patronage *within* the *Gram Panchayats*, or village communities, these forms of clientelism remain disconnected from the parties' distributive strategies. This is because of the informal nature of party–voter ties, and the peculiar relationship between party elites at the district level and voters. Party elites seek to mobilize support at the local level, *while refraining from directly interfering in local politics.* This non–interference explains why party elites are virtually unable to steer the individual distribution on policy benefits under NREGS. In the rest of this study, I detail the ways in which party elites seek to mobilize political support at the local level, and the extent to which local elected officials enable these strategies, using qualitative data collected through participant observation, and interviews carried out with both party elite members and village chiefs (*Gram Pradhans*).

4 The setting: Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh

The data presented in the rest of the paper were collected in Bahraich district, located approximately 120 km north of the state capital, Lucknow. The district was chosen based on the author's previous work in this part of central Uttar Pradesh, the historical region of *Awadh*.[10] To some extent, Bahraich is a representative district of rural Uttar Pradesh. Agriculture follows a pattern common to other districts, with two cropping seasons – *Rabi*

[10]This author carried out field work in the neighboring districts of Gonda and Faizabad in 2013.

in the winter and *Kharif* during the Monsoon.[11] The percentage of small and marginal holdings is close to the state average (95.06% to 92.46% at the state level)[12] and the district is irrigated, much like the rest of the state.

Bahraich district departs from the state average in three aspects (even when one excludes the urban districts):[13] the literacy rate, the percentage of Scheduled Castes and the percentage of the population that belongs to the Muslim community. At 49.4%, the literacy rate is the second lowest in the state and is well below the average for rural districts (66.7%). However, the percentage of Scheduled Castes is lower than the rural average (14.6% against 20.73%).[14] and Bahraich has a higher percentage of Muslims than the rural district average (Muslims represent 33.52% of the population against 18.9% for the rural state average).[15]

I do not expect this departure from state averages to invalidate the overall argument made in this paper. While the persistence of patronage and clientelism is not necessarily correlated with poverty levels (Kitschelt 2000), the structural conditions of poverty in rural Uttar Pradesh make the persistence of non–programmatic party–voter linkages, such as patronage and vertical relationships, such such as clientelism, likely. Likewise, low literacy levels suggest that individual voters may be more receptive to material inducements than policy platforms, particularly as the implementation of NREGS *requires* citizens to make claims.

[11]The *Rabi* season usually involves crops such as corn, pulses and mustard seeds whereas the *Kharif* season is usually dedicated to paddy.

[12]Marginal landholdings are those under 1 ha. and small holdings between 1 and 2 ha. Source: Agricultural Census of India, 2010–2011.

[13]I consider districts as 'urban' if the percentage of the urban population is 50% and more. This is a purely arbitrary measure, but one that I believe provides an adequate measure of the rural population. The Census of India uses different criteria to determine the urban share of the population, but that measurement is done within the districts themselves.

[14]Slightly less than half the state districts (33) have a percentage between 11% and 22%.

[15]Source: Census of India, 2011. I am including here the literacy rate and not the number of literates (which typically represents the 'crude' literacy rate. The literacy rates counts the same number of literates as the crude literacy rate but uses a smaller denominator (population aged fifteen and above).

Table 2: Bahraich, Kheri and Uttar Pradesh in perspective (Source: Census of India, 2011 and Agricultural Census of India, 2010–2011)

	Small and marginal holdings, less than 2 ha, %	Literacy, %	Percentage of Scheduled Castes, %	Percentage of Muslims, %
Bahraich	95.06	49.4	14.6	33.52
Kheri	89.71	60.6	26.40	20.58
Uttar Pradesh, average	92.46	67.7	20.46	19.26
Uttar Pradesh, rural average	92.48	66.7	20.73	18.90

Figure 1: Uttar Pradesh and Bahraich District in India

The data presented in the rest of this paper are drawn from 18 months of field work that included participant observation, repeated interactions with party cadres and elected officials, along with structured and semi–structured interviews with former beneficiaries of the scheme. I took advantage of local government elections (*Panchayati Raj*) held in the Fall of 2015[16] to examine the extent to which political competition generated forms of distributive politics. I selected 40 *Gram Panchayats* across four (4) different *Vidhan Sabha* constituencies and across eight (8) administrative Blocks.[17]. The interviews were carried out with both sitting elected officials (the *Gram Pradhans*) and candidates to the position of *Gram Pradhan*, to more accurately gauge the conditions for party building at the local level, and specifically the relationship between elected officials and members of the party elite at the district level.[18]

This qualitative approach, along with the selection of one district to examine the variation in policy outcomes was especially useful to uncover the mechanisms of implementation at the local, but also to document the relationships between citizens and elected officials, and between elected officials at different levels.

4.1 The 2012–2017 *Vidhan Sabha*: Political Parties in Bahraich district

India's federal structure of governance allows different party–systems to coexist across the different states (Ziegfeld 2016). The state of Uttar Pradesh is home to several parties that are found in other parts of India, but only four are generally known to be competing

[16]These local elections were held at the three levels of the *Panchayati Raj*, *Gram Panchayat*, *Khand Panchayat* [Block] and *Zilla Panchayat* [District]. The data presented in this study only reflect election–related work carried out at the *Gram Panchayat* level.

[17]The Block is the second tier in the administrative structure of the *Panchayati* Raj

[18]In each Block, I roughly followed the percentage used by the Government of Uttar Pradesh to award reservations. For instance, out of five *Gram Panchayats* in one single Block, I chose one reserved for the Scheduled Castes, two reserved for the Other Backward Classes and two non–reserved (known as a *Samanya* [General] seat), in keeping – whenever possible – with the 33% reservation quota for female candidates.

for power: the *Bahujan Samaj Party* or BSP, the *Bhaaratiya Janta Party* or BJP, the *Samajwadi Party* or SP and the Indian National Congress or INC.[19]

Table 3 below provides an overview of the parties' performance during the state assembly elections of 2012. A * indicates the winner of the election. Figures 1 and 2 below show a map of the different constituencies, both the state assembly constituencies and the national assembly constituencies.[20]

[19]The 2017 state assembly elections (*Vidhan Sabha*) saw the landslide victory of the *Bhaaratiya Janta Party* or BJP in the state of Uttar Pradesh. While four parties were represented in the district until 2017 (the SP, the BSP and the INC, only one party (other than the BJP) has retained a seat in Bahraich – the *Samajwadi Party* in Matera constituency. At the state level, it is interesting to note that while the *Samajwadi Party* was routed in March 2017, it managed to retain 47 seats in the state assembly, despite its alliance with the INC. In application of the agreement between the SP and INC agreed on January 22, 2015, the SP fielded candidates in 298 constituencies while the Congress Party fielded candidates in the remaining 105 (`http://www.hindustantimes.com/assembly-elections/samajwadi-party-congress-announce-alliance-for-uttar-pradesh-election/story-2wi745RFdRuaYYTBfsCdzH.html`). The INC, which has retained 9 seats has been all but wiped out in a state that had been its historical stronghold.

[20]Unlike the *Vidhan Sabha*, the *Lok Sabha* constituencies do not neatly overlap with the district boundaries. One of the two state assembly constituencies, Qaisarganj, includes parts of the neighboring district of Gonda (the state assembly constituencies 282 and 286).

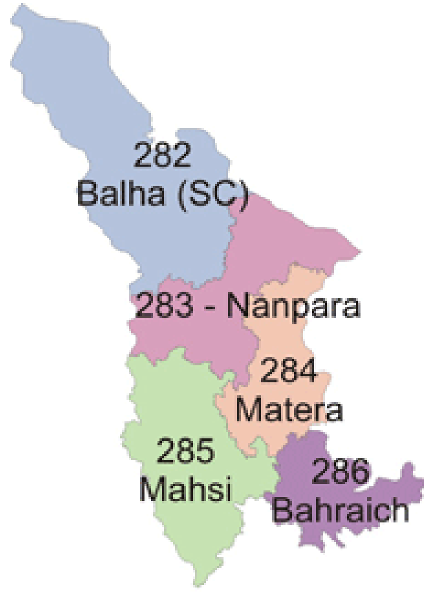

Figure 2: Map of Bahraich National Constituency (*Lok Sabha*) and State Assembly Constituencies (*Vidhan Sabha*).

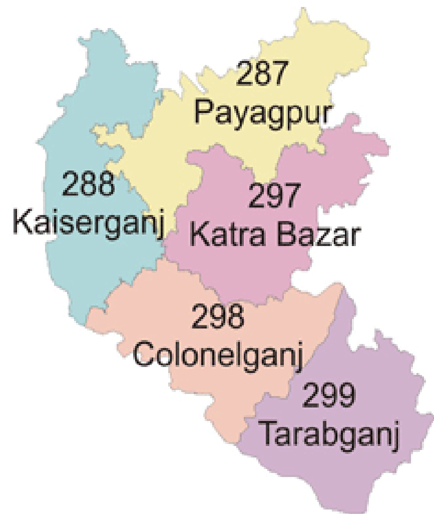

Figure 3: Map of Qaisarganj National Constituency (*Lok Sabha*) and State Assembly Constituencies (*Vidhan Sabha*).

Table 3: Election results, state assembly (*Vidhan Sabha*), 2012 (% of votes tallied). Source: Election Commission of India.

Constituency (*Vidhan Sabha*)	BJP	BSP	INC	SP
Balha (SC) – 282	33.2*	21.9	11.8	19.8
Nanpara – 283	9.7	25.9	28.5*	14.1
Matera – 284	18.2	17.3	24.4	26.2*
Mahsi – 285	23.5	25*	19.8	22.9
Bahraich – 286	18.8	16.3	20.5	29.5*
Payagpur – 287	11.8	20.3	34.7*	17.8
Qaisarganj – 288	24.3*	20.1	8.7	20.5

5 Clientelism and Party–voter linkages in Bahraich district

The variation in policy outcomes – labour expense per capita for instance – suggests that a policy reflecting the new institutional regime for poverty alleviation may not emerge spontaneously from levels of disenfranchisement, as intended by policy-makers. Instead, it suggests that policy outcomes may reflect forms of discretionary spending, or, as in the case of villages which recorded no spending, discretionary decisions that *prevented* funds from being released (**?**). In this section, I show that the policy incentives generated by NREGS are compatible with forms of clientelism, but that this clientelism is set against the backdrop of informal party structures, which work against party–based patronage strategies that would rely on NREGS.

5.1 The activation of the demand for benefits

My empirical investigation of NREGS implementation in Bahraich district showed that the demand for work was articulated by local elected officials, *despite* the new institutional incentives. In other words, policy implementation at the *Gram Panchayat* level wasn't driven by the individual claims made by individual rural citizens. Instead of citizens self–

enforcing their right to work and activating the demand, *Gram Pradhans* were likely to select workers by simply having them called on the day the projects were scheduled to start.

In contrast with the assumption of policy–makers, interviews with past beneficiaries of the scheme revealed that more than 50% of the respondents (58 out of 92) had been called for work[21] by the *Gram Pradhan* (either directly or through the *Panchayat Mitra*, the administrative assistant who oversees development activities at the *Gram Panchayat* level). The *Gram Pradhans* that I interviewed in the Fall of 2015 admitted as much. As many as 14 out of 38 (36%) I interviewed across all Blocks and constituencies explained that they were calling laborers for work, suggesting that the emphasis on a demand for benefits – and the concurrent displacement of eligibility criteria under NREGS – created opportunities for political discretion: "Here (...), they go from house to house to call workers. When there are two parties in the village, then the workers won't be able to go on their own."[22] Additionally, a majority of the candidates interviewed (34 out of 40) explained that the *Gram Pradhan* selectively called workers and many of the *Gram Pradhans* I interviewed – 17 out of 38 (44%) admitted that government schemes, such as *Indira Aawaas Yojna* and the *Samajwadi Pension* Scheme [23] were also used to mobilize political support at the local level, alongside NREGS.

The selection of workers reflects strategies that sought to reward partisans, in large part to allow local elected officials, the *Gram Pradhan* to be able to meet the bureaucratic demands for rent (Marcesse 2016). The need to generate a surplus compelled the *Gram Pradhans* to *selectively activate* the demand for benefits in a way that maximized the chances

[21]Respondents typically used the word *bulaanaa* in Hindi, which can be translated as 'call' or 'invite.'

[22]Author interview with a *Gram Pradhan* from Matera Constituency, Dec. 3, 2015.

[23]While *Indira Aawaas Yojna* is funded by the central government, the *Samajwadi Pension Scheme* was launched by the state government of Uttar Pradesh after 2012. Both technically rely on eligibility criteria (poverty line for the former and age for the latter).

of extracting a surplus from wages paid. As a candidate from Payagpur constituency suggested: "(...)The Pradhan invites only workers from whom he can get the commission [from]. Those he knows don't give the commission he does not invite to work."[24] This selective activation of the demand therefore occasionally reflected a distributive strategy that resulted in benefits (in the form of wages paid) being distributed to kin and partisans, which allowed the *Gram Pradhan* to maximize the return on cash withdrawals even when he needed to compensate workers for work effectively performed under the scheme. As a candidate from Qaisarganj constituency put it:

> "The job cards are prepared for their own people, those who perform the work on NREGS their name is not written on it, on the muster roll are only the names of the people from the Pradhan, the money is withdrawn in their name, and once he has given them some money, the Pradhan keeps the remaining money to himself, and those who effectively perform the work, they get it with difficulty."[25]

5.2 Power asymmetries at the *Gram Panchayat* level: the endurance of caste–based inequality

In Bahraich district, the selective activation of the demand for work occasionally reflected power asymmetries between local elected officials and rural citizens, and thus translating into clientelism more than patronage (Chandra 2004, p. 51). Power asymmetries at the village level were deeply grounded in caste inequality, which largely overlapped with asset–based inequality. Table 5 shows the variation in landholding among *Gram Pradhans* and candidates, sorted by caste status, which provides an indication of the varying ability

[24] Author interview, Dec. 3, 2015.

[25] Author interview, Qaisarganj constituency, Dec. 6, 2015.

Table 4: Average landholding size (in acres), by status (*Gram Pradhan*/candidate) and caste group

Constituency (*Vidhan Sabha*)	*Gram Pradhan*			Candidate		
	Forward Castes	OBC	SC	Forward Castes	OBC	SC
Qaisarganj	34.5	12.2	2.4	na	9.8	1.22
Mahsi	na	13.5	3	24.4	14.8	19.8
Payagpur	20.7	4.3	na	32	7.3	1.5
Matera	28	20.74	4.6	24	2.74	14.8

of these elected officials and candidates to run for office.[26]

These caste–based power asymmetries prevailed despite the enforcement of quotas of representation for members of traditionally disenfranchised communities such as the Scheduled Castes. Affirmative action policies have come to represent an important aspect of the democratic deepening that has taken place in rural India over the last quarter of century (Sadanandan 2017) and the enforcement of quotas has often successfully resulted in the empowerment of communities traditionally marginalized (**?**Jensenius 2015). Opportunities for leadership that the quotas created were often thwarted by the weight of traditional caste hierarchies, in ways that were deeply inimical to the progressive goals of public policy. Caste dominance – correlated with high levels of asset–based inequality – allowed high caste families to control electoral competition even when they were officially deprived of the opportunity to contest elections. The distortion of the policy was obvious in a village such as Mathurpur *Gram Sabha*[27], where the official *Gram Pradhan* – a woman from the Scheduled Castes – worked as a maid for a wealthy landlord for belonging to the *Thakur* caste. My request to interview the *Gram Pradhan* was politely turned down, on grounds

[26]The questionnaire asked respondents to provide data on landholdings in *bighe*, India's traditional unit of measurement for land. In the table, I provide the data in acres, using the customary value of 1 *bigha* = 0.61 acres (and approximately .25 hectare). The value of one *bigha* is customary and varies according to the location in India. I am using here the value used in central Uttar Pradesh.

[27]The name has been changed.

that it would be a 'waste of time' and that we had better speak with the '*asli*' [the real] *Gram Pradhan* – a lawyer by profession, who described having run in the past for *Gram Pradhan* out of 'tradition.'[28] In the neighboring constituency of Qaisarganj, the award of a *Gram Panchayat* to the Scheduled Castes in Maikuntha *Gram Panchayat*[29] ahead of the elections had resulted in the electoral competition being fought through the proxy of two *Thakur* families.[30]

The quotas were particularly popular among the targeted communities, such as members from the Other Backward Classes or the Scheduled Castes – a testament to the survival of traditional forms of caste dominance. As some of the candidates I interviewed noted: "There is no respect for our caste in the village, therefore I am contesting the election to increase the respect for the people from my caste."[31] Others pointed to the nature of caste relationships in the countryside and specifically the dominance of the *Thakurs*:

> "The people said that I should contest, we have contested the election, and the people made us win. Before the Thakurs were Pradhans, they would kill people without reason, we thought of contesting the election, we won and for five years have made the people receive benefits."[32]

In Bahraich, the endurance of traditional forms of caste dominance not only illustrated the challenges posed to the enforcement of state policies for affirmative action but also pointed to the type of quid pro quo likely to take place under the new institutional incentives, which involved at times traditional forms of clientelism, but also patronage when

[28] Author interview, Mahsi constituency, Nov. 29, 2015. It was common for people to use to Hindi word *larhana* [to make (someone) contest] instead of the word *larhna* [to contest] to describe a situation in which *bade log* [important people] were pulling the strings.

[29] The name has been changed.

[30] Author interview, Dec. 7th, 2015.

[31] Author interview with a candidate from Matera constituency, Dec. 3, 2015.

[32] Author interview with a candidate (OBC) from Payagpur constituency, Dec. 9, 2015.

the power asymmetries were muted (depending on the caste configuration at the *Gram Panchayat* level.

The prevalence of clientelism and patronage raised the question of political affiliation and partisan identity. While clientelism generally reflects micro–level interactions (Weitz-Shapiro 2014), the scope of the resources distributed at the village level represents an important resource for district–based party members and elected officials, such as the MLA. In the following section, I detail the informal relationships between district–level party elites and local elected officials. In Bahraich district, these relationships reflected informal and selective ties, and translated into the non–interference in village–level political competition by party elites, which worked against party–based patronage strategies that relied on NREGS.

5.3 Party elites, electoral brokerage and patron–client networks

In a state with a population of over 200 million, political parties face significant challenges in reaching out to voters and maintaining linkages in between election cycles. These information asymmetries combined with limited resources at the state level (Thachil 2014*b*) create particular incentives for party–building at the local level, which in Bahraich translated into informal party–broker ties.

In Bahraich district, the *Samajwadi Party* – in power at the time research was carried out – was the most likely to channel patronage funds, owing to its presumably unfettered access to state resources. District–level party elites such as the MLA were as a result the most likely to steer these public resources to mobilize political support at the local level. This was especially likely in the case of the MLA from Risiya constituency, Yasir Shah from the *Samajwadi Party*.[33] While Members of the Legislative Assembly are typically

[33] One of the district's most prominent political figures, and particularly among the MLAs, Yasir Shah was the son of another local politician, Dr. Waqr Ahmad Shah, former MLA himself and State Minister

provided with their own discretionary funds, called Constituency Development Funds or CDF, Yasir Shah had access to considerable resources, through his appointment as Cabinet Minister.[34] Resources were not simply coming from the state coffers, they also came from kickbacks on government tenders at the district and state level. Additionally, the portfolio of Energy Production, which he was holding at the time I was in Bahraich, was not only prestigious but carried significant political clout, in a state with poor public goods provision and chronic power shortages.[35] These resources could be spent in different ways, either through personal exchange between the MLA and visitors at his personal residence during the *Janta Durbar*, or alternatively, on 'club goods,' discretionary spending that benefitted communities rather than individuals.[36] [37] Yasir Shah relied on support across the countryside to ensure the distribution of resources, particularly at election time, as campaigns – which involved vote–buying on a very large scale – proved costly.[38]

Because of this family's longstanding involvement in politics, Yasir Shah 'inherited' a

for Labour from the *Samajwadi Party* (until 2013). A former member of the *Janta Dal*, Dr. Waqr Ahmad Shah was a founding member of the *Samajwadi Party*, along with the District Party President, Ram Tej Yadav, who was close to the *Yadav* clan in Lucknow. Ram Tej Yadav is a close friend of Mulayam Singh Yadav, whom he has known since the days of the Emergency

[34]He was initially appointed *Rajya Mantri* [Minister of State] then was promoted to the rank *Rajya Mantri Swatantrata Prabhar* (Minister of State with Independent Charge) which meant that he moved closer in the protocol to the Chief Minister.

[35]Access to these funds was often seen not just as a source of political corruption, but as the main resource for party building, to the extent that the incumbent in state elections is often defeated after one term.

[36]For instance, the bus service between Bahraich and the state capital, Lucknow, improved significantly, and included, for the first time, air–conditioned vehicles, when in September of 2015, Yasir Shah was promoted Transportation Minister.

[37]While these clients did not always officially become party members, they tended to follow the factions that had formed within the *Samajwadi Party* in Bahraich. Just like there were local *netas*, usually powerful *Gram Pradhans* who were aligned with the Shahs, there were many others who followed the other leader, Ram Tej Yadav – an important figure in the district because of his ties to Mulayam Singh Yadav, but his faction included Muslim leaders as well, such as Sabir Ahmad (who had also contested elections for the SP in the past) in part because they happened to come from 'his' home turf (Qaisarganj and Mahsi constituencies).

[38]During the latest state assembly elections of 2017, Yasir Shah was rumored to have spent close to Rs.20 Cr. Rupees on vote–buying, a considerable sum in the countryside [close to US$ 3 million]. The sum was spent on two constituencies however (and possibly through other SP candidates across the district), Matera and Bahraich *Vidhan Sabha*. His mother Rubab Sayda contested from Bahraich constituency but ultimately lost to the BJP's candidate Anupama Jaiswal.

political network of clients, who were often erstwhile clients of his father, Dr. Waqr Ahmad Shah. These clients included not just members of the traditional SP vote banks, *Yadavs* and Muslims, but also local power figures who mirrored the caste structure. Many of the SP's clients in the country for instance belonged to the powerful landholding *Thakur* caste, which, unlike other landholding groups, such as the high status Muslim *Pathans* resided in the countryside and carried significant political weight in the village community.[39] Whereas they did not faithfully mirror the SP's traditional vote bank of *Yadavs* and Muslim voters, these powerful *Thakurs* were powerful enough at the *Gram Panchayat* level to be trusted by party elite members such as Yasir Shah to bring the votes of other castes and religious groups together.[40]

Reliance on brokers who were not necessarily from the same caste or religious groups reflected the difficulty that party elite members such as Yasir Shah had to correctly identify 'their' voters. The importance of caste–based expectations of patronage that the literature has emphasized (Chandra 2004) should not obscure the fact that some of the presumably homogenous vote banks at the state level were often disputed at the local level. This was for instance the case with Muslims in Bahraich, who did not necessarily break along party lines. Muslims represented a particularly large vote bank in the city of Bahraich itself, and were targeted by the SP, BSP and Congress (perhaps with the exclusion of the BJP). For instance, the Block *Pramukh* of a Block located next to the district headquarters was a supporter of the *Bahujan Samaj Party*, despite being a *Pathan* (high status Muslim group).[41] The fact that this Muslim *Pramukh* supported the BSP and its charismatic

[39] While the caste configuration at the *Gram Panchayat* level remained relatively idiosyncratic, it also remained somewhat predictable as a *Pathan* or *Thakur Pradhan* were likely to carry political weight at the local level, given the persistent weight of caste structure (which often translated into asset–ownership inequality).

[40] In one *Gram Panchayat* of Mahsi constituency I visited ahead of the *Panchayati Raj* elections of 2015, one such *Thakur* family was running for office relatively unopposed.

[41] In a case reminiscent of the *Purdah ke piche Panchayat* [Panchayat behind the veil] that was common in the countryside, the position of *Pramukh* – which was officially reserved for a woman – was effectively in

leader Mayawati shows that the Muslim vote, rural or urban, was in no way automatically guaranteed to Yasir Shah. Inter-party competition for a specific caste group also reflected the importance voters and local political leaders accorded to individual leadership and personal ties. For instance, the *Gram Pradhan* of a *Gram Panchayat* located just outside the district headquarters was a Muslim who nurtured a deep feeling of antipathy towards Yasir Shah. Close to Bahraich district headquarters, the *Gram Pradhan* of Mohammadpur,[42] a *Gram Panchayat* right outside of the district headquarters leaned towards another local prominent Muslim leader, Mostafa Arif Khan, who was in Delhi at the time, but actively seeking a party ticket from the BSP and at odds with Yasir Shah.[43] While at the state level the leaders of political parties made specific appeals on the basis of caste, party elites within the district had to deal with the complexity of the caste makeup at the *Gram Panchayat* level, which varied significantly and involved different proportions of different caste groups across villages. While it was not unusual for a *Gram Panchayat* to have only two or three caste groups, it was difficult for any caste group to exclusively occupy a contiguous area straddling several villages, though in Bahraich, some caste groups were more likely to be found in certain areas than other. The landed *Thakur* were often found in rural areas – outside the district headquarters – where they also resided. Likewise, the *Banias*, a group that a party such as the BJP has made a point to appeal to, were more likely to be found in urban areas where their businesses were located.

A weak party presence outside the district headquarters, information asymmetries between parties and voters, and the complex equation of caste at the *Gram Panchayat* level led party elites to rely on local power brokers, rather than a disciplined body of party cadres. Yet, as I show in the next section, the links between party elites and brokers re-

the hands of the winner's husband, who, owing to his own illness, had delegated the work to his brother.

[42]The name has been changed.

[43]Mostafa Arif Khan was the son of Arif Muhammad Khan, a former Central Government Minister, who had served for the Congress Party under the tenure of Rajiv Gandhi in the 1980s.

mained informal and selective. Instead of providing blanket support to all *Gram Pradhans* in his constituency, Yasir Shah tended to rely on trusted brokers at the local level. And, more importantly, Yasir Shah systematically refrained from interfering with local politics *within* the *Gram Panchayats*.

6 Party elites and *Gram Panchayat* politics

In Bahraich district, political parties and members of the party elite were compelled to accommodate rules that determined the scope and level of political competition at the local level, such as the enforcement of mandatory quotas for the representation of traditionally disenfranchised groups. In this section, I examine how local leadership structures, particularly at the *Gram Panchayat* level interacted with party elites, given this unique institutional environment. I show that while party elites occasionally used the *Gram Pradhans* as brokers for votes, their linkage strategies remained constrained by formal incentives for political representation. Party elites such as the MLA remained reluctant to interfere with *Gram Panchayat* politics, thus limiting opportunities of resorting to clientelism – and thus making the selective activation of the demand for work under NREGS more likely to be the product of political competition *within* the *Gram Panchayats* rather than the product of strategies elaborated by party elites.

6.1 The incentive structure for political representation

In their attempts to consolidate support at the local level, party elite members such as the MLA were constrained by the electoral cycles at the *Gram Panchayat* level (every five years) and institutional incentives affecting these electoral cycles, such as the enforcement of quotas and frequent redistricting.

In Bahraich district, the enforcement of mandatory quotas of representation for disen-

franchised minorities, such as members from the Scheduled Castes or SC and the Other Backward Classes or OBCs made the task even more complicated, as they generated frequent turnaround at the local level thus affecting the stability and nature of caste coalitions at the local level. In theory, the enforcement of quotas compelled party elites to deal with local leadership that may not be politically aligned, if for instance party elites such as the MLA were from a different caste or religious group than the *Gram Pradhan*. In practice, local leadership had incentives to accommodate party elites, and specifically party elites from the party in power at the state level, which controlled the bureaucracy and could use discretion in the distribution of development funds and benefits.[44] The assignment of quotas created opportunities for leadership among communities that were often economically disenfranchised, regardless of religious affiliation, since some Muslim groups were for instance included in the OBC list.[45]

Quotas were not the only formal rule that affected the ability of party elites to reach out to voters directly, even through some form of brokerage at the local level. Local elections involved not just the award of quotas to specific caste groups, they also led to redistricting, again on the basis of population. Redistricting was intended primarily to accommodate population growth[46] and keep all *Gram Panchayats* at around the same population level,

[44]In Uttar Pradesh, affirmative action policies translated into the enforcement of mandatory quotas along the three tiers of the *Panchayati Raj* – *Gram Panchayat*, *Block Panchayat* and *Zilla Panchayat*, in application of the 73rd amendment to the Constitution of India. Affirmative Action policies historically targeted members of the Scheduled Castes. After the publication of the Mandal Commission report in 1980, these quotas were extended to members of the Other Backward Classes, or OBCs, a large caste group that encompasses many sub–groups, such as the *Yadavs*. The 1993 constitutional amendment added provisions to guarantee the representation of women within the *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, up to 33% of the seats contested during local elections. Unlike other states such as Rajasthan or Karnataka (Dunning and Nilekani 2013) where quotas were randomly distributed, the quotas in Uttar Pradesh were decided primarily by the State Election Commission, on the basis of a demographic assessment of the *Gram Panchayats*, which occasionally allowed local leaders to use discretion in order to influence the decisions awarding reservations.

[45]A growing literature on the impact of quotas for representation and empowerment of marginalized communities has already documented the extent to which these provisions have effectively been enforced, and whether they have resulted in economic gains for these communities at the local level (Besley et al. 2004).

[46]The population of Bahraich increased by 40% from 2001 to 2011. Source: Census of India.

for administrative reasons. For instance, redistricting ahead of the 2015 elections involved the creation of 15 additional *Gram Panchayats* in Chitrapur Block alone and brought the number of *Gram Panchayats* in that Block from 75 to 90.[47]

The combination of affirmative action policies with redistricting compounded the information asymmetries that plagued the relationship between party elites and voters. A sitting *Gram Pradhan* indeed had no guarantee he would be able to run again during the next election. To the extent that these elections were competitive, and evidence suggest that they were (Bohlken 2016) – particularly in non–reserved Village Panchayats – party elites were unable to fully appreciate the dynamics of local politics, which led them to rely on local power brokers, such as wealthy *Thakur* landlords, who, by subverting the enforcement of the quota system, contributed to some extent to mitigate the uncertainty of local politics. It was remarkable that many (though not all) of the powerful local political entrepreneurs at the *Gram Panchayat* level who were aligned with Yasir Shah were precisely the ones able to bypass the formal incentives created by the state to ensure the representation of traditionally disenfranchised groups, such as the Scheduled Castes. These political entrepreneurs seemed able to navigate the 'pitfalls' of the reservation system, occasionally running for *Gram Pradhan*, and when deprived of that opportunity, exercising power behind the scenes, such as was tragically the case in Yasir Shah's own village on the outskirts of Bahraich city, where the *Pradhan* from the Scheduled Castes – an alcoholic with a record of domestic abuse – was shadowed by a *Panchayat Mitra*, the administrative assistant at the Village Panchayat level, who belonged to the *Thakur* caste and was a staunch supporter of the Shahs.[48]

[47] It was not unusual for a Village Panchayat to lose several *majras* [hamlets] who came to form a new Village Panchayat after redistricting, only to be merged again after a few years.

[48] The *Panchayat Mitra* explained that while he supported the Shahs at the district level, and thus supported the *Samajwadi Party*, he voted for the BJP at the national level.

6.2 Party elites and *Gram Panchayat* political leadership

As the elected head of the *Gram Sabha*, the *Gram Pradhans* in Bahraich district represent the first level of political representation. The *Gram Pradhans*' responsibilities, particularly with respect to development funding, make them, in Bahraich district, as in other parts of North India, an important access point for party elites that seek to reach out to voters. Many (32 out of 78) of the *Gram Pradhans* and candidates I spoke with ahead of the *Panchayati Raj* elections in the Fall of 2015 described the relationship between the MLA and the *Gram Pradhans* as fundamentally political, and primarily revolving around the exchange of votes for the promise of *Vikaas* [development]. While the funds provided were politically instrumental, they were likely to be 'club goods' that benefitted the village community. A candidate from Payagpur constituency thus declared: "Between the Pradhan and the MLA there is a relation of development."[49] Though none of the people I spoke with would have defined this exchange as patronage, the quid pro quo was obvious in the exchange of votes for funds. Some of the respondents in fact emphasized the unequal nature of the transactions since in many cases, they claimed that the MLA had received political support without effectively reciprocating. As a candidate put it: "The Pradhans can make people vote for the MLA, in exchange for that the MLA has development work implemented in their Gram Panchayats."[50] This relationship of 'development' was particularly likely when the *Gram Pradhan* came from the same party as the MLA, which many respondents emphasized:

> "The Pradhans who are from the Opposition Party, they do not have much to do with the MLA, but when they are from the same party, their relationship is good. The MLA make work happen for the Pradhans, in exchange for that,

[49] Author Interview, Dec. 2, 2015.
[50] Author Interview, Matera constituency, Dec. 4, 2015.

during the election they campaign for them."[51]

To the extent that running for office at the *Gram Panchayat* level involved buying votes through the organization of parties where alcohol was occasionally made available, local candidates often had significant cash needs. When allowed to run, the incumbent found himself at an advantage, especially if he was able to accumulate public resources while in office, something that was underlined by some of the *Gram Pradhans* and candidates I spoke with: "Nowadays the election is about money, the one who is the old Pradhan kept money he earned, the other people have problems. We spent 25 thousand. The current Pradhan would have spent 2-3 lakhs."[52] The funds were especially likely to come from the resources derived from poverty alleviation schemes and development funds allocated to the village:

> "Mostly people spend their own money but I can say where the money they [the *Gram Pradhans*] make comes from - some of the money they take from Indira Awaas, from the beneficiaries, some they take from the Samajwadi Party, from NREGS 10 percent of the expense is saved. In addition to that, the Pradhan has a discretionary fund, in which approximately come 3 lakhs Rupees."[53]

Yet others mentioned the help from political leaders:

> "They all spend with their income, if there is less they take a loan, they take help from friends, many times they mortgage the land. If they have a good relationship, then they can take help from some big leader."[54]

[51] Author Interview, Dec. 4, 2015.
[52] Author Interview with a candidate from Payagpur constituency, Dec. 9, 2015.
[53] Author Interview with a *Gram Pradhan* from Qaisarganj constituency, Dec. 16, 2015.
[54] Author interview with a *Gram Pradhan* from Matera constituency, Dec. 10, 2015.

As the *Panchayati Raj* elections approached, the *Janta Durbar* at Yasir Shah's personal residence became busier with visitors, particularly *Gram Pradhans* and candidates seeking assistance from a prominent political family.[55] Yet the relationship between party elite members, such as Yasir Shah, and *Gram Pradhans* and candidates was complex. As one of the most prominent political figures in the district, Yasir Shah openly supported local power brokers, as he did during the first round of the local *Panchayati Raj* elections in the Fall of 2015. And to the extent that he did support some candidates to the position of *Gram Pradhan*, the support was remarkable in its lack of public display. A majority of respondents I interviewed ahead of the *Panchayati Raj* elections in the Fall of 2015 (51 out of 78) explained that the Member of the Legislative Assembly or MLA played no role in the local elections, i.e. that he refrained from supporting openly any candidate or sitting *Gram Pradhan*. On the one hand, this non–interference owed to information asymmetries between district party elites, and the *Gram Panchayat* level, as explained by a *Gram Pradhan*:

> "The MLA does not provide any help in the election, there are a lot of Gram Sabhas in one constituency, they cannot help all of them. They can provide some help in the Gram Sabhas that are close to their house."[56]

On the other hand, this non–intervention in the politics of the *Gram Panchayat* owed to the nature of local elections, which were often a very competitive affair involving several candidates (Bohlken 2016). It was not unusual in unreserved constituencies for upwards of 5-10 candidates to run, making the outcome relatively unpredictable, particularly from the perspective of party elites. In the words of a candidate: "The MLA does not provide any help, because if he helps someone the other candidates get angry or they can create some

[55] This was particularly the case after the date of the elections was confirmed along with the reservation of seats.

[56] Author interview, Mahsi constituency, Nov. 26, 2015.

trouble for the MLA."[57] Supporting any one of the candidates might backlash, especially if the 'chosen' candidate lost in the end, and thus potentially thwarting the efforts of the MLA to garner as much political support as possible: "The MLA have to take most votes, so they do not help anybody."[58]

The competitive – and uncertain – nature of local elections made the MLA reluctant to take sides with any candidate, unless he was a 'tested' candidate, or someone able to pull the strings even in the event of an electoral setback, or, alternatively, when the reservation system excluded the candidate from the competition. These were likely to be the wealthy, land–based *Thakur* elites, who formed part of Yasir Shah's network of clients in the countryside. Yet in *Gram Panchayats* where no such candidate was to be found, support for the 'wrong' candidate could backlash and generate resentment against the MLA, which explained why Yasir Shah generally steered clear from openly supporting *Gram Pradhans*, or local candidates at the Village Panchayat level running for *Pradhan*. This owed to his relative inability to understand and appreciate patterns of competition that were sometimes the product of the reservation system, and the resulting caste coalitions at the local level.

This also explained why members of the party elite, such as Yasir Shah, did not seek to formalize their ties with local power brokers, especially the *Gram Pradhans*. This strategy made sense to the extent that party elites sought to broaden their appeal to voters beyond their vote bank, while at the same time avoided getting entangled in local politics whose idiosyncracy posed a challenge to their attempt at reaching out to voters via the *Gram Pradhans*. At the same time, nevertheless, reaching out to *Gram Pradhans* who might have not been part of the party's traditional vote bank but still considered as 'reliable' allowed the MLA for instance to hedge his bets, and mitigate the risk of defection within his own

[57] Author interview, Mahsi constituency, Dec. 5, 2015.
[58] Author interview with a candidate from Mahsi constituency, Nov. 26, 2015.

caste or religious groups, as the case of the Muslim community in Bahraich constituency detailed above exemplified.

6.3 Political parties and distributive politics at the local level: the case of NREGS

Members of the party elites such as Yasir Shah sought to bolster support at the grassroots by channeling funds, usually in the form of discretionary funding to targeted communities, or, alternatively in forms of patronage that involved individual transactions. Yet the structure of political leadership and specifically the distance between the MLA for instance and voters was wide enough to make the individual distribution of patronage goods by the party challenging. Leaders at the local level such as the *Gram Pradhans* represented an important entry point for the distribution of patronage. Yet the implementation of a policy such as NREGS, which allowed forms of clientelism through a selective activation of the demand for work remained relatively insulated from the distributive strategies pursued by party elites.

While party–based patronage was unlikely under NREGS, district–based party elites appeared to get involved in the implementation of the scheme only to the extent that perceived some of the rents extracted by the bureaucracy during the disbursement of wages (Marcesse 2016). But under NREGS, surplus extraction and the delivery of rent payments to the bureaucracy tasked with implementation did not happen in a political vacuum. Both processes were largely dependent on the type of leadership at the *Gram Panchayat* level. Interviews with *Gram Pradhans* and candidates revealed the extent to which rent extraction drove policy implementation, since two–thirds of the respondents (57 out of 78) across all the Blocks and legislative assemblies in which the author traveled acknowledged that the *vyasvasthaa* [system] was enforced by the bureaucracy. Yet respondents not only

agreed that some respondents were unlikely to deliver rent payments, but they also singled out the *Gram Pradhans* unlikely to do so as either '*imandaar*' [honest] or those with ties to local political leaders, such as one of the Members of the State Assembly, the MLA and local party leaders (specifically the District Party President of the *Samajwadi Party*, then in power at the state level.). Overall, more than 50% of the respondents (43 respondents out of 78) identified links to a local political leader as a way to escape the bureaucratic demands for rent. *Gram Pradhans* that nurtured ties with local party leaders were often characterized as *dabangwalle* [powerful][59] an indication of their political influence in the countryside. It was assumed that the BDO would not dare challenge a power broker who could complain to the MLA (from the party in power) and risk being transferred, as a candidate from Mahsi constituency explained: "The powerful ones do not give money. The BDO could get beaten up for asking for money."[60]

Partisanship therefore played a role to the extent that the *Gram Pradhans*, and the powerful ones, more specifically, maintained ties with political elites in the district, and specifically with elites from the party in power. But few *Gram Pradhans* were able to do so as these party elites remained unable, and to some extent, unwilling, to build extensive ties in the countryside. This relative inability to reach out directly to voters made any attempt to use government benefits a perilous exercise, all the more so that NREGS benefits were attached to individuals, and were decentralized through the payment of wages by direct deposit. From the perspective of party elites, and the MLA in this case, the selective activation of the demand, which reflected patterns of clientelism *within* the *Gram Panchayat* conflicted with non–interference in *Gram Panchayat* politics. The exclusive distribution of NREGS work opportunities to specific constituencies conflicted with the MLA's goal to cast the widest net possible, in order to hedge his bets and mitigate losses.

[59] The term *dabang* can be translated either as assertive or powerful in Hindi.

[60] Author interview, Nov. 26, 2015.

For Yasir Shah, exclusively delivering benefits to Muslims at the *Gram Panchayat* level would not only have been challenging, given the absence of an extensive party operation at the grassroots level, and the dispersion of Muslim votes across *Gram Sabhas*. It would have also been counterproductive, as the strategy could have alienated the support of other constituencies that would be necessary to win an election at the constituency–level. These other constituencies could prove particularly useful if the party's traditional vote banks, such as Muslims and *Yadavs* were to defect, as they occasionally did, to other candidates and other parties.

The relative insulation of village politics from district, and even state–level politics meant that the selective activation of the demand under NREGS remained the product of political competition within the *Gram Panchayat*, allowing political leaders – the *Gram Pradhans* – to both reward their partisans and generate resources for vote–buying through surplus extraction. Party elite members, and specifically the MLA stayed out of the fray, lacking the information that would allow them to most effectively target voters at the *Gram Panchayat* level. As a result, and to the extent that the selective activation of the demand was subservient to bureaucratic demands for rent, whether *Gram Pradhans* practiced clientelism at the local remained relatively independent from their ties to party elite members. The relationship that they occasionally built with the MLA exempted them from delivering a rent payment, but did not affect their ability to reward their partisans at the *Gram Panchayat* level, since the BDO was *still* expected to process their payments.

An important implication of this absence of interference by party elites in the selective activation of the demand was the relative absence of a monopoly of access to public resources by the party in power, at least under NREGS in order to pursue patronage. While party–based patronage strategies involving NREGS benefits were elusive, the relative distance between party elites and local level elected officials meant that clientelism could be

practiced by *Gram Pradhan* who claimed to be aligned with the party in power as much as by *Gram Pradhans* who did not seek alignment or even opposed the MLA. Ties with party elites at the district level only exempted from the payment of a commission, but allowed *Gram Pradhans* to practice clientelism as they wished.

6.4 Party elites, institutions and patronage

The previous discussion does not eliminate the possibility, even marginal, that a member of the party elite, such as the MLA, would seek to interfere in the distribution of government benefits, under NREGS. Recent evidence (Gulzar and Pasquale 2017) suggests that under NREGS, policy performance increases when a bureaucrat – in the case of NREGS, the Block Development Officer – is supervised by only one elected official, rather than many, which is the case when a Block straddles several electoral constituencies.[61] Yet policy performance may not necessarily be equated with development (as an outcome), as Gulzar and Pasquale (2017) fail to emphasize. Policy performance may reflect interactions between formal and informal institutions and, in the case of NREGS, clientelism and rent extraction. Yet, many of the bureaucrats and local elected officials (including Yasir Shah himself) I spoke with made it clear that the MLA took no interest in the implementation of NREGS. In other words, the MLA did not appear to try to distort implementation in a way that would favor politically any of his constituents at the *Gram Panchayat* level. At any rate, the verticality of rent extraction at the district level would suggest that the MLA, particularly from the party in power, would have access to these resources, either at the district level, or at the state level.

From the perspective of party elites, NREGS was only one of the many resources that

[61] Gulzar and Pasquale (2017) show that agency problems that affect the relationship between elected officials and bureaucrats worsen in the presence of several principals, since the agent is accountable to several principals with different interests.

could be used for political benefit, and among all available, perhaps the least amenable to the type of patron–client network detailed in the previous section. A weak party operation at the grassroots level, the informal and selective ties with brokers and local *neta* made an interference in distributive politics at the *Gram Panchayat* level particularly risky, and potentially costly. On the other hand, the ability of party elite members such as the MLA, and particularly those in power, to extract rents from public resources offered an opportunity to accumulate resources that would be precious at the time of the election, when vote–buying became crucial to rally support at the *Gram Panchayat* level, as it became evident ahead of the state elections held in the Spring of 2017 in Uttar Pradesh.

To the extent to which party elite members could use discretion to reward partisans or attract new voters, they made use of policy instruments that afforded greatest discretion. Alternatively, they found ways to use these policy instruments to generate the cash required to contest elections and win office. This premium on cash gave a significant advantage to the party in power, which presumably had greater access to a variety of public schemes from which rents could be extracted. This was noted by a majority of the *Gram Pradhans* and candidates I interviewed, who not only considered the party in power more able to pursue these strategies but emphasized the preferences of these party elites for resources that could easily be spent and gave maximum discretion. For instance, many of the respondents (26 out of 78) explained that the MLA was unlikely to put pressure [*dabaav bannaa*] on the BDO, as a government bureaucrat, to reward his partisans. As many as 32 out of 78 respondents (and 17 *Gram Pradhans* among them) explained that the MLA from the party in power was likely to pursue discretionary spending, but rather through the use his own funds, broadly speaking:[62] "He will not put pressure on the BDO, he can do development

[62]Respondents often referred to the development funds that members of the Legislative Assemblies in India use to reward their partisans, but the MLA from the party in power had access to more resources through his party, or through his Ministry, when he was a Cabinet member, as was the case with Yasir Shah.

work with his own funds."[63]

As a Member of the Legislative Assembly, and a cabinet Minister from the party in power, Yasir Shah could leverage his influence and political clout to generate rents not just from social programs, but also from the variety of public tenders that were issued by his office or by government agencies at the local level.

7 Conclusion

This paper has shed light on the conditions under which party elites pursue party building strategies in a rural district of North India. These conditions differ markedly from the assumptions generally made by theories of patronage politics. While voters are assumed to make their decisions based on material expectations of patronage, along the lines of ethnicity and/or caste, party elites at the district level deal with information asymmetries between party and voters by relying on a number of selected brokers, who help them overcome the challenges posed by a weak and informal party presence in the countryside, and enable them to assemble winning caste coalitions at the grassroots level.

In Bahraich district, because of the unique equation of caste at the *Gram Panchayat* level, these coalitions did not necessarily match the specific appeals made by parties at the state level. Many of the party elite members I spoke with were reluctant to admit that their respective parties sought to appeal exclusively to specific groups of voters (who, in the particular case of Bahraich, would be from a specific caste group). Ironically, this also reflected the party elites' strategy to cast a wider net in order to mitigate the risk of defection within their own group, as much as it reflected the impact of information asymmetries in their assessment of potential electoral support.

A gap remained between party elites and local political entrepreneurs at the *Gram*

[63] Author interview with a *Gram Pradhan* from Payagpur constituency, Dec. 15, 2015.

Panchayat level. Party elites preferred to rely on selected local power brokers that ensured local support through patronage networks, rather than provide blanket support to all *Gram Pradhans*. This owed largely to the conditions under which political leadership emerged at the local level. These conditions were characterized by the dominance of traditional caste hierarchies, but also by the enforcement of quotas, institutional incentives that sought to politically empower communities that have historically been disenfranchised in rural India. The interactions between informal norms, such as caste hierarchies, and formal incentives in the form of quotas yielded a patchwork of leadership structures which were more or less inclined to support party elites. Party elites, for their part, were reluctant to interfere with local politics at the *Gram Panchayat* level, for fear of antagonizing voters. As a result, they steered clear from interfering with the *selective activation* of the demand for work under NREGS, which instead reflected political competition within the village community.

There is evidence that party elites consider different types of public resources as they pursue non–programmatic linkage strategies – at times privileging the distribution of individual patronage benefits, or alternatively, turning to public goods (Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros and Estevez 2007). In rural India, NREGS was less likely to be one of these instruments because of the institutional incentives it generated. The personalization of benefits and their decentralized delivery made it difficult for parties that had only weak and superficial links with voters, and preferred to support local brokers selectively.

While the introduction of new policy incentives empowers local government agencies and emphasizes the exercise of citizenship in rural areas (Krishna 2002, 2011; Kruks-Wisner 2017), informal party structures continue to mediate the relationship between voters and the state. New poverty alleviation policies such as NREGS have been characterized as 'post–clientelist' (Jenkins and Manor 2017). I have showed in other work (Marcesse 2016) that NREGS does create opportunities for clientelism at the village (*Gram Panchayat*)

level. Informal party structures and a policy of non–interference pursued by party elites at the district level nevertheless prevent parties from using policy benefits as part of a large–scale patronage strategy.

This study has also demonstrated that political parties remain constrained in the ways they reach out to voters, despite the democratic deepening that has characterized Indian politics over the last quarter of century (Sadanandan 2017; Thachil 2014*b*). Parties remain essential to state–citizen linkages (Auerbach 2016), but their presence at the local level remains superficial and largely dependent on the strategies pursued by local power brokers. A study of party–voter linkages in a district of Uttar Pradesh offers a geographically limited glimpse of these strategies, but the importance of Uttar Pradesh and its contribution to national politics in India give a unique relevance to the insights presented in this paper. The recent state elections (*Vidhan Sabha*) held in March represent an important development for the party–system of Uttar Pradesh, with the BJP's landslide victory. The Opposition parties, such as the SP, BSP and Congress have been considerably weakened. The BJP's structure, which relies on a relatively disciplined body of cadres, represents an important test to informal brokerage. The nature of caste coalitions at the local level is nevertheless likely to continue to induce non–interference in village politics, with important consequences for policy performance and service delivery.

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