

Distributive politics as behavioral localism: Evidence from a vignette experiment in Hungary

Research and Politics
July-September 2022: 1–7
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DOI: 10.1177/20531680221122279
journals.sagepub.com/home/rap


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Abstract

Recent literature on friends-and-neighbors voting focused on explaining citizens' motives behind supporting local candidates; the cue-based account suggests that local ties signal accountability, constituency service orientation, and policy representation. Localism was also posited to serve as a cue for distributive politics, but assumptions of voters making inferences about receiving tangible benefits once a politician from their own stock is elected were not corroborated empirically. Drawing on a survey experiment ($N = 2000$) fielded in Hungary, the paper provides a test of pork barrel politics and clientelism serving as manifestations of behavioral localism; that is, if voters formulate expectations of politicians engaging in aforementioned practices based on their local roots. Respondents in treatment and control group were shown the same candidate profile, fictive politicians differing only in their local roots. Results demonstrate that respondents who were told that the candidate was born and living in their hometown were more likely to believe that the politician will “bring home the bacon” as opposed to those confronted with a randomly selected Hungarian settlement as the candidate's birthplace and residence. Findings refine our understanding of friends-and-neighbors voting, as well as voters' expectations about likely non-programmatic behavior of elected candidates.

Keywords

friends-and-neighbors voting, behavioral localism, Hungary, survey experiment

Originally introduced by V. O. Key (1950), friends-and-neighbors voting quickly become one of the most frequently scrutinized empirical phenomena of legislative and local elections (Arzheimer and Evans, 2014; Hirano, 2006; Jankowski, 2016; McAllister, 2015). Voters' propensity to favor local candidates was empirically demonstrated in countries with majoritarian (FPTP), proportional (PR), single transferable vote, and mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) electoral systems (Fiva and Halse, 2016; Górecki and Marsh, 2012; Herron and Lynch, 2019). Despite having been characterized as “one of the most widely studied spatial mechanisms of electoral politics” (Górecki and Marsh, 2014: 14), we have fairly limited knowledge about *why* voters have a tendency to favor politicians with local ties. Rice and Macht (1987: 257) have already proposed “moving our understanding of friends-and-neighbors

voting beyond simply confirming its occurrence” more than three decades ago, but only recent scholarship made steps towards understanding citizens' motives behind casting a ballot for someone who grew up or lives in the same area.

Most of these studies treated localness as a cue, clarifying some of the candidate characteristics for which localness might potentially serve as a heuristic. Campbell et al. (2019) used vignettes and conjoint experiments to

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demonstrate constituency service orientation and constituency policy representation are politician attributes for which voters use localness as a cue, inferring candidates' likely behavior based on their local roots. Local ties are also perceived as cues of candidates being knowledgeable about local needs (Collignon and Sajuria, 2018). Besides being better informed about local problems (and better suited to offer solutions for them), Jankowski (2016) also hypothesized that localness makes politicians more accountable, as it might be easier for voters to monitor (and reward) if representatives cross the party line when it conflicts with local interests.¹

This paper examines if politicians' local roots serve as heuristics for voters about their future behavior involving *clientelistic exchanges and pork barrel politics*. That is, it tests whether favoritism for homegrown candidates is cue-based and if the expected allocation of collective or individual goods to voters is an empirically demonstrable type of "behavioral localism" (Campbell et al., 2019). This relationship has not been hitherto tested, despite ample scholarship hypothesizing localism being driven by considerations of distributive politics. Additionally, the paper offers the first empirical test of friends-and-neighbors voting in the Hungarian context, experimental results demonstrating voters' preference for local politicians.

Local roots as heuristics for distributive politics

Numerous studies scrutinizing friends-and-neighbors voting assumed that voters expect tangible benefits once a politician from "their own stock" is elected. Scholars have talked about the "clientelistic role of the elected deputy" (Johnson, 1989: 21), MPs acting as "intermediaries" for "extracting goods" from the state (Górecki and Marsh, 2014: 12), the importance of local representation in making distributive policy decisions and infrastructural developments (Fiva and Smith, 2017: 130–131) and "retrospective delivery of benefit to the community" (Arzheimer and Evans, 2014: 2), but failed to test or demonstrate such causal mechanisms. Voters born (or living) in settlements or electoral districts where candidates are natives (or residents) are often described as being spoiled by constituency-favoring legislations, pork, monetary gifts, patronage positions, and other forms of personal favors (Hirano, 2006; McAllister, 2015; Shugart et al., 2005).

Campbell et al. (2019: 949) suggested that voters might use candidates' localness as cues to formulate expectations about their "likely commitment to ensure pork barrel spending in their region." Fiva and Halse (2016) study regional governments in Norway, documenting a hometown bias in investment funding allocation to municipalities. Their results also suggest that party lists with top candidates

possessing local roots are electorally rewarded by voters, an effect they attribute to the provision of "particularistic benefits to local groups" (p. 17). However, Fiva and Halse never tested whether voters indeed expect this from politicians once elected, nor if such cues drive friends-and-neighbors voting.

The hypothesis on the local candidate effect being driven by distributive politics is just as old as empirical attempts of capturing friends-and-neighbors voting. Already Key (as cited in Devine and Kopko, 2016: 57) listed perceptions of candidates being "inclined to direct government resources toward addressing [local concerns]" as an alternative explanation for politicians' outstanding electoral performance in their home counties. Whereas recent scholarship has made important progress in identifying motives behind friends-and-neighbors voting, assumptions on clientelism and pork have hitherto remained untested.

Particularistic distribution of benefits in Hungary

To test whether local roots are indeed associated with expectations about favoritism in allocation of individual or collective goods, I fielded a survey experiment in Hungary. The case selection was driven by earlier empirical evidence, suggesting the high prevalence of clientelism and pork barrel politics in the Hungarian context.

The existence of clientelistic linkages between politicians and voters, that is, the provision of goods and services to individuals, in exchange of their political behavior (Stokes et al., 2013), has been repeatedly demonstrated in recent experimental studies in Hungary (Mares & Young, 2016, 2018). Relying on various brokers, MPs and mayors condition access to entitlements, informal credit and welfare-for-work programs on electoral turnout and voting for Fidesz candidates. Pre-electoral entitlements are offered to core political supporters of Fidesz, who subsequently receive election-time threats, meant to serve as "turnout buying." Mares and Young (2016) show how decentralizing the distribution of social benefits and welfare programs incentivized mayors to offer unemployment benefits or participation in the public works scheme to co-partisans and to threaten them by cutting such inducements at the time of elections.

Pork barrel politics—partisan-based allocation of central funds to legislators' own constituencies—is another mainstay of Hungarian politics. Incumbent MPs channel EU funds to settlements in their constituencies based on mayors' partisan affiliation, and such funding is subsequently associated with better electoral performance of these legislators in towns with government mayors. Such settlements also tend to have higher application and success rates in these grants, boosting electoral support for

government mayors (Muraközy and Telegdy, 2016; Papp, 2019).

Methodology

Data collection and fieldwork

To test whether voters prefer homegrown candidates because they formulate expectations regarding distributive politics, I conducted a survey experiment in March–April 2021, using an online sample ($N = 2000$), with experimental subjects drawn from an online panel, with a sample designed to be representative of the Hungarian voting age population in terms of age, gender, and place of residence. The experiment was pre-registered and a pre-analysis plan was made before data collection finished.²

Respondents were presented with a vignette describing a fictive candidate running for parliamentary mandate in the interviewee’s single-member district (SMD) at the upcoming general election of 2022. Respondents in the treatment and the control group differed in being presented a politician born and living *at their own settlement*, a piece of information obtained from the survey’s demographic block earlier, or at *another, randomly selected Hungarian settlement*.

Settlements shown to control group participants were sampled from the population of all Hungarian settlements with a population ≥ 500 , as the survey platform used for programming the questionnaire did not allow for the inclusion of all 3145 municipalities in Hungary. Some criteria for filtering out settlements needed to be established: empirical reality of Hungarian politics suggests that parliamentarians are hardly ever from settlements smaller than 500 inhabitants. During the parliamentary cycle of 2018–2022, only a single MP was born in such a village, based on public résumés uploaded to the website of the National Assembly.

Following the vignette, respondents were asked using 5-point scales how likely they would vote for this politician, were this candidate to run for seat in their SMDs for real; how likely this candidate would secure central funds and realize infrastructural developments in their hometowns; to what extent they believe this candidate would engage in practices such as distributing money, food, or wood before the election.

Candidate profiles

Survey respondents were confronted with the vignette described below. It did *not* include information on partisanship; this way even if some manifestations of behavioral localism are perceived negatively by respondents, we avoid formulating beliefs about *likely behavior* based on perceived beliefs about *partisanship*. Consequently, policy

focus of the candidate was designed in a way to serve as a general heuristic; unlike migration or environmentalism, economic and cultural policy is not a policy domain associated with any major parties particular. Inspired by Campbell et al. (2019), unobjectionable attributes were added to create a more realistic context, such as information about what leisure activities the candidate prefers and his intra-party political experience. Finally, socio-demographic attributes were chosen in a way to depict an “average” parliamentary candidate in Hungary: we picked the average age of MPs (Ilonszki and Kurtán, 2011), described him as male, as the share of female parliamentarians is around 10% (Kovarek and Littvay, 2019: 576), being married and a father (Kristóf, 2013: 98).

The politician is 47 years old, married, father of one. Was born and lives at [respondent’s hometown/another settlement]. He was previously elected to a county-level leadership position in his party. The politician has a university degree. Once elected, he would like to work in the Economic and Cultural committees of the National Assembly; he would likely propose a couple of amendments in the Parliament on those subjects, too. In his free time, the politician likes jogging and reading.

Hypotheses and models

Hypotheses for friends-and-neighbors voting, as well as pork barrel politics and clientelism being manifestations of behavioral localism can be formalized as follows.

Hypothesis 1: [H_1] Respondents in the treatment group will be more likely to vote for the candidate compared to those in the control group.

Hypothesis 2: [H_2] Respondents in the treatment group will be more likely to believe that the candidate will realize infrastructural development projects in their settlement, via obtaining central funds, once he is elected, compared to respondents in the control group.

Hypothesis 3: [H_3] Respondents in the treatment group will be more likely to believe that the candidate gave away money, food, or wood among his voters shortly before the elections than those in the control group.

The equations below describe the analytical approach taken for testing these hypotheses, where $D_{treatment}$ indicates whether the respondent was shown the vignette with the local roots treatment. Dependent variables capture respondents’ likelihood of voting for the candidate, as well as beliefs about the candidate engaging in clientelistic exchanges and securing earmarked funds for the interviewee’s settlement, respectively.

$$Y_{vote} \sim \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_{treatment} + \epsilon \quad (1)$$

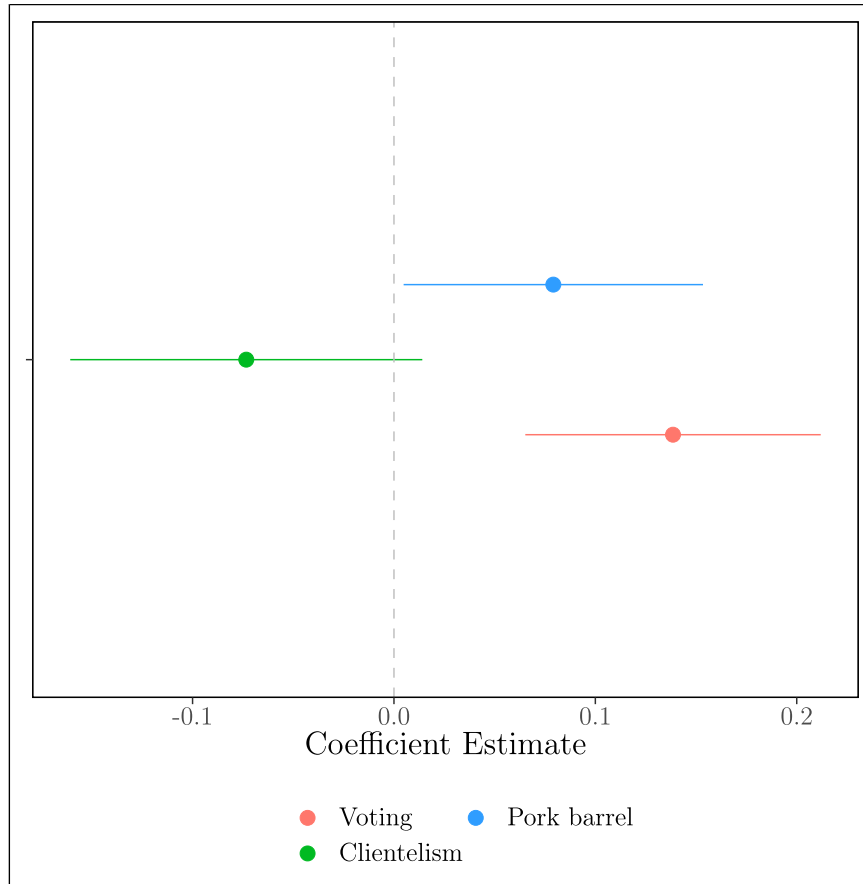


Figure 1. Differences between treatment and control groups in likelihood of voting for the candidate, beliefs about clientelistic behavior and pork delivery.

$$Y_{clientelism} \sim \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_{treatment} + \epsilon \quad (2)$$

$$Y_{pork} \sim \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_{treatment} + \epsilon \quad (3)$$

Equation (1) simply captures the local candidate effect: should one see a positive and significant relationship for $D_{treatment}$, it would signal the existence of friends-and-neighbors voting in Hungary. Equations (2) and (3) test the main hypotheses of the paper, namely, that politicians' local roots serve as heuristics for distributive politics, as we expect the treatment group indicator to be positive and significant, if voters believe local candidates are more likely to obtain central funds or engage in vote buying than non-locals.³

Analysis

This survey experiment provides the first empirical test of the relationship between localness and vote choice in the Hungarian context. Results confirm that Hungarians prefer politicians with local roots, that is, sharing the same settlement as hometowns with respondents as place of birth

and residence, over parachutist ones.⁴ As shown on Figure 1, the estimate for treatment group is positive and statistically significantly different from zero.⁵ The same can be said about the questionnaire item capturing pork delivery: those in the treatment group, who were told the politician is someone from “their own stock,” were more likely to believe he will channel government funds to realize large-scale infrastructural developments than those shown a carpetbagger candidate. Contrarily, the difference between control and treatment group is neither significant with respect to beliefs elicited about clientelism, nor does have the sign in the expected direction.

This suggests, that out of the two forms of distributive politics tested in this paper, pork barrel politics is indeed a form of behavioral localism: voters in Hungary perceive legislators' local roots as cues for pork delivery. Reasons for local roots not acting the same way for clientelism are potentially manifold. It could be that pork is simply more prevalent than vote buying: Mares and Young (2018: 1457) estimate that during the 2014 general election, 5–7 % of all Hungarians were targeted with mayor favors and vote buying. We lack comparable estimates for pork, but given

the incentives provided by the majoritarian electoral system, frequent omnibus laws and available EU funds, it is safe to assume that respondents generally expect MPs to allocate more *collective* than *individual* goods.

Alternatively, in-group bias (Munis, 2022, 2021), combined with disapproval of clientelistic exchanges could explain why vote buying is not a form of behavioral localism, expected by voters. If local candidates, described as born and living at the same municipality as survey respondents, are indeed associated with positive qualities, such as decency and integrity, local roots are hardly expected to signal future illicit behavior of homegrown politicians.

The vast majority of the literature uses categorical belongings when operationalizing (Fiva and Halse, 2016; Fiva and Smith, 2017; Tavits, 2010) whether a candidate is “local” or “non-local,” but one could hypothesize that cues about behavioral localism are a linear function of politicians’ (physical) closeness to voters. In the [Supplementary Materials](#), we obtain geo-coordinates for municipalities (respondents’ and parachutist candidates’ hometowns) and show that fitting the same three models, only with *distance* as predictor instead of $D_{treatment}$ yields relationships with directions that are consistent with previous models. [Supplementary Figure A1](#) suggests that clientelism is significantly and *negatively* related to distance. Nevertheless, as it is unreasonable to expect respondents to be familiar with all Hungarian municipalities, we should be cautious when interpreting these results: most settlement names might not act as heuristics for distance.

Conclusion

This article investigated the empirical basis of assumptions about local roots serving as heuristics for distributive politics (Górecki and Marsh, 2014; Hirano, 2006; McAllister, 2015) by utilizing a vignette study to compare respondents’ expectations about politicians’ future clientelistic and pork barrel behavior. Fielding a population-based, representative online survey ($N = 2000$) in Hungary, respondents were shown a fictive candidate profile, running for mandate in their SMD, and subsequently asked whether they would vote for him, whether they believe the politician is likely to obtain government funds for their settlement or to engage in vote buying and other clientelistic practices. Treatment and control group respondents only differed in being told that the candidate’s hometown is the same municipality as their place of residence—or another, randomly selected Hungarian settlement.

The results suggest that pork barrel politics is indeed a form of *behavioral localism* (Campbell et al., 2019); that is, voters support politicians with local PVEAs (Shugart et al., 2005) in the hopes of politicians’ future proclivity for obtaining government funds for their hometowns. Although

unusual, no similar relationship characterizes clientelistic behavior. Alternative models in the Appendix offer some weak evidence to distance between respondents’ and candidates’ hometowns being *inversely* related to beliefs about clientelistic behavior. However, we would need a better understanding of respondents’ familiarity with geography to credibly argue that the *absence* of local roots indeed serves as heuristic for vote buying. Further research should test the potential trade-offs between localness and various types of electoral linkages.

How to generalize the argument of this paper beyond the Hungarian case? We argue that alternative operationalizations of distributive politics (pork delivery vs. clientelism) offer a good starting point for future studies. Whether countries be more characterized by constituency-favoring legislations (Braidwood, 2015) or vote buying, material gifts and personal favors (Carlson, 2018), politicians’ local ties, especially in personalized electoral settings, likely function as some sort of cue for future distributive behavior of elected representatives.

This vignette survey provides the first test of the relationship between localness and vote choice in the Hungarian context. Previously, candidate localness was operationalized as possessing relevant political experience, such as local assembly member or mayor, and its effect on electoral support was never measured experimentally. This study may be viewed as offering some empirical evidence for Hungarians preferring homegrown politicians over parachutists ones.

Whereas this paper has demonstrated causally that expectations of receiving distributive benefits are formulated conditionally on candidates’ local roots, less instrumental considerations might also explain friends-and-neighbors voting. Arguments such as a “shared sense of identity,” “symbolically charged geographies” as forms of social identity, and “latent place identities” modifying individuals’ voting calculus are common, although somewhat less frequently proposed explanations for home area advantage in the literature (Devine and Kopko, 2016: 176; Munis, 2021: 4; Panagopoulos et al., 2017: 870).

Using survey data from the USA, Munis (2021) finds that place identity is a significant predictor of perceived importance of candidates’ local roots, irrespective whether respondents live in an urban or a rural setting. Our research design does not allow for testing of the potential impact of place identity on local candidate effect; but as settlements are expected to serve as primary sources of attachment (as opposed to regions or gerrymandered SMDs), this remains a plausible mechanism. Future studies can look into ways of contrasting the explanatory power of intrinsic and instrumental considerations behind friends-and-neighbors voting.

In relation to the literature on measuring local ties (Arzheimer and Evans, 2012; Gimpel et al., 2008), the findings above also stress the importance of careful

operationalization of localness. Whereas benefitting from pork is clearly linked to a categorical membership in a territorial unit, the potential of clientelism to offset the absence of PVEAs might be more fittingly measured on continuous scale. Further research should evaluate the degree to which inferences about candidates' likely actions in office are a function of how (shared) local roots are operationalized.

Acknowledgments

The author is grateful to Levente Littvay, Gabor Simonovits, Cristina Corduneanu-Huci and conference participants at Corvinus University of Budapest and the Annual Conference of the Hungarian Political Science Association for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research supporting this article was partly sponsored by Central European University Foundation of Budapest (CEUBPF). The theses explained herein represent the ideas of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of CEUBPF.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Another, relatively nascent branch of literature focused on how place identities and in-group considerations can become politically salient and subsequently act as drivers of political participation and vote choice, boosting homegrown candidates' electoral chances (Munis, 2022, 2021; Panagopoulos et al., 2017; Panagopoulos and Bailey, 2019)
2. The pre-registration can be found here: https://osf.io/d2qvz/?view_only=e233a42789bc4205915b95e8953afb06
3. As indicated in the PAP, I also tested whether local roots are cues for ideological congruence (Campbell et al., 2019), formalized as $Y_{ideology} \sim \beta_0 + \beta_1 D_{treatment} + \beta_2 I_{self} + \beta_3 (D_{treatment} \times I_{self}) + \epsilon$, where I_{self} is respondents' liberal/conservative self-positioning on a 5-point scale. Slopes capturing the marginal effect of self-positioning were positive for treatment and control group respondents alike, with respective CIs overlapping, suggesting the lack of enough evidence to reject H_0 . Being

unrelated to distributive politics, further discussion of this mechanism is omitted.

4. Using a combination of birthplace and residence was motivated by questions raised recently in the localism literature about different types of place cues (Munis, 2021: 9–10; Tavits, 2010: 226).
5. The effect size is rather small, corresponding to about 0.2 standard deviations in Y_{vote} . Studying other European contexts, some have reported larger effect sizes for local cues: for instance, Fiva and Smith (2017) found that in two-round elections in Norway, when local candidates withdraw from race, voter support for the relevant bloc declines in such candidates' hometowns by about 1.4 standard deviations.

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