

Redistribution, Voting and Clientelism: Evidence from the Italian Land Reform

Abstract

Many democracies around the world feature pervasive clientelist practices. Inequality is often considered a key determinant of these practices. By reducing inequality, redistributive policies may therefore undermine clientelism. However, by inducing gratitude and reciprocity among beneficiaries, redistribution may also initiate clientelist exchange. We study the long-term effects of a major redistribution policy: the 1950 Italian land reform. Using a panel spatial regression discontinuity and data for half a century, we show that the large-scale redistribution led to the emergence of a longlasting clientelist system characterized by political brokers, patronage and targeted benefits. Within this system, the Christian Democratic party, which promoted the reform, experienced persistent electoral benefits.

This paper is joint work with Lorenzo Casaburi and Miriam Venturini (University of Zurich)

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