The Politics Of Otherings And The Clientelist Nexus Of State And Society Relations

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Abstract: Politics is the art of controlling power and managing public affairs, often framing an enemy to unify a group. Democracy has shifted this focus toward ethical governance, recognizing citizens' equality, though it complicates the political process. Politicians frequently apply 'othering' to create distinctions between groups, thus reinforcing social hierarchies and power imbalances. Additionally, clientelism persists in many political systems, facilitating relationships with emerging groups while undermining democratic values. This study explores the interplay of 'othering' and 'clientelism' in state-society relations through various geopolitical case studies.

Keywords: Othering, Clientelism, Political Power, Inclusive Governance, State-Society relations, Political Power

I. INTRODUCTION

Modern democratic politics in various locations is increasingly marked by exclusionary identity constructs, polarised public dialogue, and the deterioration of institutional accountability. Political mobilisation, spanning South Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America, has grown intricately linked to practices that segregate societies into insiders and outsiders, while government increasingly relies on informal and personalised interactions rather than rule-based institutions. Two notions are important for comprehending these developments: othering, the symbolic and material creation of marginalised groups as dangers or outsiders, and clientelism, the exchange of political support for specific material advantages. Despite significant individual examination of both phenomena, their interdependence is inadequately theorised within comparative political research.

This paper contends that othering and clientelism form a mutually reinforcing relationship that progressively erodes democratic government. Othering offers the ideological and moral rationale for exclusion, allowing political elites to delineate "deserving" from "undeserving" communities. Clientelism institutionalises exclusion by allocating state resources via discretionary patron-client networks instead of universalistic laws. Collectively, these processes convert citizenship from a rights-based status into a conditional relationship reliant on identification and political allegiance. Instead of only reflecting transient distortions of democracy, othering and clientelism serve as persistent governing mechanisms in environments characterised by inequality, fragile institutions, and competitive electoral dynamics.

The article contextualises this idea within extensive discussions on identity politics, political economics, and state-society interactions. Utilising concepts from social identity theory, postcolonial political analysis, and clientelism theories, it frames exclusion not only as a cultural phenomenon but as a governance tactic ingrained in institutional practices. The paper employs comparative analogies from India, Latin America, and

Africa to illustrate how political elites exploit identity-based divisions to justify selective welfare distribution, undermine accountability mechanisms, and consolidate power.

This study analytically connects othering with clientelism, so enhancing the literature on democratic backsliding and governance failure. It redirects attention from individual agents or governments to systemic forces that perpetuate inequality and exclusion within ostensibly democratic frameworks. The paper provides a paradigm for comprehending the coexistence of democratic institutions with ongoing marginalisation and elucidates why policy improvements are inadequate without confronting the underlying political dynamics of exclusion.

II. Understanding the Concept of 'Othering'

The literature on *othering*, identity construction, and exclusionary politics provides a robust theoretical and empirical foundation for the present study. Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978)[i] remains foundational in understanding othering as a discursive practice through which power is exercised by constructing hierarchical binaries between the "self" and the "other." Said demonstrates how Western knowledge systems produced the Orient as inferior and exotic, thereby legitimizing domination. Building on this, Tajfel and Turner's (1979)[ii] social identity theory explains how individuals derive a sense of belonging from group identities, often leading to in-group favouritism and out-group discrimination. This psychological mechanism is crucial for understanding how political actors mobilize identity differences into durable forms of exclusion and conflict. Subsequent scholarship has extended these insights into contemporary political contexts. Mudde's (2007)[iii] analysis of populist radical right parties in Europe illustrates how othering is strategically deployed to consolidate political support by portraying minorities and migrants as threats to national identity. Similarly, Wodak and Meyer's (2009)[iv] work on critical discourse analysis provides methodological tools to examine how language, narratives, and symbols normalize exclusion and legitimize unequal power relations.

In the Global South and postcolonial contexts, scholars have highlighted how othering intersects with nationalism, sovereignty, and governance. Gupta (2019)[v] documents the rise of ethno-nationalism in India, demonstrating how religious and cultural identities are politicized to marginalize minority communities, particularly Muslims, within a majoritarian framework. Cohen (2012)[vi] situates these processes within globalization, arguing that anxieties over sovereignty and legitimacy often intensify the political use of othering. From a conflict and violence perspective, Fearon and Laitin (2000)[vii] emphasize that ethnic identities are not primordial but socially constructed, often through political violence that hardens boundaries between groups. Brubaker (2004)[viii] further cautions against reifying ethnic groups, instead urging scholars to focus on processes—such as othering—through which "groupness" is produced and sustained. Psychological approaches, notably Staub's (2011)[ix] work on genocide and mass violence, underline how sustained othering dehumanizes populations and enables large-scale atrocities. Finally, Jaffrelot's (2015)[x] study of Pakistan demonstrates how exclusionary identity politics shape state–society relations and institutional instability in South Asia. Collectively, this body of literature informs the present study's framework by conceptualizing othering not merely as a cultural or discursive phenomenon, but as a political process deeply embedded in governance, power, and democratic erosion—providing the analytical lens through which this research examines contemporary patterns of exclusion and clientelism.

Othering is a core social and psychological process employed to establish distinctions between groups, so generating a dichotomy of "us" vs "them." This method aims to stigmatise or condemn a specific group, creating distinct boundaries that strengthen the unity inside the group while marginalising those outside of it. The concept of othering functions through two main mechanisms: demonization and consolidation. The act of demonising or portraying someone or something as evil or wicked. Demonization entails portraying the specific group in extremely unfavourable and frequently exaggerated terms. This depiction categorises the group as a substantial menace to societal standards, security, or principles. The dominant group might justify exclusionary actions and policies by emphasising perceived disparities and ascribing undesirable traits to the out-group. This approach frequently entails the spreading of stereotypes, false information, and propaganda to foster feelings of fear and animosity towards the out-group. During times of heightened political strife, leaders may characterise opposing forces as inherently immoral, perilous, or subversive, in order to mobilise support from their own supporters by invoking a shared adversary.

Quite contrary, demonising an out-group helps to strengthen the cohesion of the in-group. Leaders and dominating groups can cultivate a sense of togetherness and shared purpose among their followers by fabricating an apparent external danger. The consolidation process entails uniting the majority based on common values, identities, or interests that are sharply different from those of the demonised group. The dichotomy between "us" and "them" serves to enhance group cohesion and allegiance, facilitating leaders' ability to rally backing and uphold authority. This phenomenon is seen in nationalist movements, when the depiction of foreign entities or internal minorities as threats mobilises the majority populace into a united and supportive foundation.

Psychological and social consequences

The processes of othering have significant psychological and social effects on both the marginalised minority and the dominant group. Demonising the marginalised group can result in stigmatisation, discrimination, and social exclusion, which in turn hinders their ability to access resources, opportunities, and social acceptance. Consolidation among the dominant group promotes a feeling of superiority and entitlement, which strengthens social hierarchies and provides justification for unequal power relations. Examples from both the past and present
The act of othering is not limited to any certain time period or geographical area; it is a widespread tactic used in different cultures and political structures.

Illustration from the past and Present

The Cold War- Throughout the Cold War, the United States and its allies frequently vilified communism and the Soviet Union, depicting them as imminent dangers to freedom and democracy. This narrative played a crucial role in uniting Western countries against a shared adversary, which in turn facilitated the establishment of robust military alliances such as NATO and justified substantial investments in defence.

Immigration and Nationalism in Europe- Over the past few years, a number of European nations have witnessed an increase in nationalist movements that employ the strategy of othering to achieve political influence. Immigrants, especially those from non-European nations, are frequently portrayed as posing risks to national security, cultural identity, and economic stability. This depiction has been employed to rationalise stringent immigration restrictions and has facilitated the consolidation of support for nationalist parties among indigenous people who perceive themselves as being endangered by demographic shifts.

The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India- In India, the emergence of Hindu nationalism has led to the marginalisation of Muslim populations, who are depicted as posing a danger to the unity of the nation and its cultural heritage. This narrative has been employed to solidify Hindu majorities, cultivating a sense of cohesion and shared objective in response to a perceived foreign and internal menace. Through comprehending the mechanisms of othering, scholars and policymakers can more effectively identify the patterns and consequences of this behaviour in different political contexts. Understanding this concept is essential for formulating tactics to mitigate the divisive consequences of alienation and foster a more comprehensive and fair system of government.

III. The Consequences of Clientelism

Clientelism refers to a mode of political exchange in which material benefits are distributed in return for political loyalty or electoral support. Rather than being mediated through universalistic policies or programmatic commitments, this system operates through personalized and contingent relationships between patrons and clients (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007)[xi]. Politicians or political parties provide tangible incentives; such as cash transfers, public sector employment, access to welfare schemes, or infrastructure projects, in exchange for votes and political allegiance. This reciprocal arrangement is particularly prevalent in contexts marked by weak institutional capacity, high levels of poverty, and socio-economic inequality, where citizens are more dependent on immediate material support than on abstract promises of policy reform (Robinson & Verdier, 2013)[xii]. As a result, clientelism substitutes rights-based citizenship with transactional politics, eroding the foundations of democratic accountability.

In clientelist systems, political actors tend to prioritize short-term electoral gains over long-term developmental planning. Resource allocation becomes a tool for political survival rather than public welfare, leading to a cycle of dependency in which voters expect selective benefits and politicians deliver them to maintain power (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007)[xiii]. This dynamic weakens programmatic political competition and discourages investments in institutional reforms that could enhance transparency and accountability. Over time, clientelism normalizes corruption and inefficiency, as public resources are diverted toward maintaining patronage networks instead of addressing structural socio-economic challenges (Robinson & Verdier, 2013)[xiv].

Empirical studies from Latin America illustrate how clientelism has shaped electoral behaviour and governance outcomes. In Brazil, extensive research has documented practices of vote-buying, where politicians distribute material incentives in exchange for electoral support, particularly among economically vulnerable populations (Hilgers, 2012)[xv]. Similarly, in Argentina, partisan targeting of welfare benefits has been shown to influence voting behaviour, reinforcing political loyalty rather than empowering citizens as rights-bearing individuals (Calvo & Murillo, 2004)[xvi]. In Mexico, large-scale social assistance programs such as *Progresa*, later renamed *Oportunidades* and *Prospera*, have been criticized for their susceptibility to political manipulation, with benefits often strategically distributed to consolidate ruling-party dominance in key constituencies. These cases demonstrate how clientelism thrives in environments where inequality and informality heighten citizens' vulnerability to short-term inducements.

Clientelism is equally entrenched in many African political systems, where it often intersects with ethnic and regional divisions. show that in several African states, political loyalty is secured through patronage networks that distribute state resources along ethnic or regional lines. In Nigeria, for instance, political elites have historically allocated oil revenues and public offices to maintain the allegiance of powerful regional and ethnic constituencies, reinforcing competition over state resources rather than promoting inclusive national development. Similarly, Wantchekon's (2003)[xvii] experimental study in Benin provides empirical evidence that voters are more likely to support candidates who offer targeted material benefits, even when such practices undermine collective welfare and democratic norms. In Kenya and comparable contexts, patronage-based politics has led to systematic favouritism in public employment and development projects, entrenching inequalities and deepening intergroup tensions (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997)[xviii].

The consequences of clientelism for democratic governance are profound and far-reaching. By privileging selective distribution over universal provision, clientelism exacerbates socio-economic inequalities and restricts upward social mobility, particularly for groups excluded from dominant patronage networks (Robinson & Verdier, 2013). Marginalized or opposition-aligned communities are often denied access to essential resources, reinforcing cycles of poverty and political dependence. Moreover, clientelism undermines the development of strong democratic institutions by reducing incentives for political elites to invest in rule-based governance, transparency, and accountability. As public office becomes a means of private or partisan gain, democratic systems grow increasingly vulnerable to corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and legitimacy crises.

Therefore, it is evident that clientelism constitutes a significant obstacle to democratic consolidation and equitable development. The comparative evidence from Asia, Africa and Latin America demonstrates that clientelist practices not only distort electoral competition but also weaken state institutions and erode citizenship.

IV. **Theoretical Framework: The Nexus of Othering and Clientelism**

The intersection of othering and clientelism constitutes a mutually reinforcing nexus that sustains unequal power relations and systematically weakens democratic governance. Othering, as a political and social process, involves the construction of internal enemies through symbolic exclusion, stigmatization, and the portrayal of certain communities as threats to national unity, culture, or security. This process does not merely marginalize groups socially but also repositions them politically, rendering them vulnerable to selective inclusion through patronage rather than universal citizenship (Varshney, 2002[xix]; Chhibber & Verma, 2018)[xx]. Clientelism capitalizes on this vulnerability by transforming political participation into a transactional exchange, wherein access to state resources is contingent upon loyalty to dominant political actors. Together, these processes create a cycle of exclusion and dependence that political elites strategically exploit to consolidate authority.

From a governance perspective, othering performs a crucial legitimizing function for clientelism. By demarcating "deserving" and "undeserving" populations, political elites justify the selective allocation of welfare, employment, and infrastructure to preferred groups while excluding those marked as outsiders. This dynamic undermines the principles of inclusion, equality, and impartiality that form the normative foundations of democratic administration (Jayasuriya, 2004)[xxi]. Rather than addressing structural inequalities, governance becomes oriented toward maintaining patronage networks, reinforcing social hierarchies, and managing dissent. As a result, citizenship is redefined not as a set of universal rights but as conditional membership dependent on political allegiance and identity alignment.

The practical consequences of this nexus are visible across multiple dimensions of governance. First, exclusion emerges as a structural outcome. Marginalized communities—often defined along ethnic, religious, or regional lines—are systematically denied access to public goods and state protection. This exclusion entrenches socio-economic inequalities by limiting access to education, healthcare, employment, and legal redress, thereby reproducing cycles of poverty and political dependency (Uyangoda's, 2010)[xxii]. Over time, such patterns strengthen elite dominance, as excluded groups remain reliant on discretionary favours rather than empowered through institutional guarantees.

Second, the quality of governance deteriorates under clientelist dominance. When political survival depends on sustaining patronage networks, institutional performance and public service delivery become secondary concerns. Resources that could enhance infrastructure, healthcare, or education are instead diverted to reward loyal constituencies, leading to inefficiency, corruption, and administrative decay (Devine, 2017)[xxiii]. Accountability mechanisms weaken as institutions are subordinated to partisan interests, and governance increasingly operates through informal networks rather than rule-based systems.

Third, policy-making itself becomes distorted. Development strategies are frequently designed to serve politically aligned groups rather than addressing broader societal needs. This results in policies driven by short-term electoral calculations rather than long-term developmental objectives, thereby perpetuating structural disparities and deepening social fragmentation (Singh, 2011)[xxiv]. In such contexts, even progressive policy frameworks fail to achieve transformative outcomes because their implementation is filtered through clientelist and exclusionary logics.

Empirical illustrations from different national contexts demonstrate the operation of this nexus. In India, scholars have noted how identity-based mobilization intersects with patronage politics to shape state–society relations. The political consolidation of majoritarian narratives has been accompanied by selective welfare distribution and institutional bias, raising concerns about the erosion of democratic pluralism and minority rights (Siddiqi, 2018)[xxv]. While welfare schemes are formally universal, their implementation often reflects political alignment, reinforcing both othering and clientelist dependence. In Brazil, longstanding traditions of patronage politics have similarly prioritized immediate political gain over inclusive development. Clientelist allocation of public resources has contributed to persistent inequality, uneven regional development, and declining public trust in democratic institutions (Devine, 2017)[xxvi]. Infrastructure projects and social programs frequently favour politically supportive regions, leaving marginalized communities systematically underserved.

In conflict-affected and postcolonial contexts, such as Sri Lanka and Afghanistan, the nexus of othering and clientelism has further destabilized governance. Studies highlight how ethnic exclusion combined with patronage-based statecraft has undermined post-conflict reconciliation and institutional legitimacy (Höglund & Orjuela, 2011[xxvii]; Marsden & Hopkins, 2012[xxviii]). Similarly, international responses to crises—such as the Rohingya displacement—illustrate how exclusionary identity politics intersect with selective governance to exacerbate humanitarian vulnerabilities (UNHCR, 2020)[xxix].

The intersection of othering and clientelism poses a significant threat to democratic government and inclusive development. This connection exacerbates power imbalances and sustains socio-economic inequality, hence diminishing institutional capacity, compromising policy efficacy, and undermining democratic legitimacy. Confronting these difficulties necessitates a multifaceted strategy that fortifies democratic institutions, advocates for inclusive and rights-oriented policies, improves civic education, and harmonises domestic governance with international standards of transparency and equality. Societies may only progress towards more egalitarian, responsible, and inclusive political systems by eliminating the structural roots of othering and clientelism.

V. Methods of Prevention: Strengthening Democratic Resilience

Confronting the interconnected issues of othering and clientelism necessitates a comprehensive approach focused on strengthening democratic institutions, fostering inclusive governance, elevating civic awareness, and utilising global normative frameworks. At the institutional level, enhancing the autonomy and credibility of democratic entities—especially the courts and electoral bodies—is crucial to mitigate the detrimental impacts of exclusionary politics and patronage-driven governance. Autonomous institutions that function transparently and without political involvement can serve as protections against majoritarian excesses and discriminatory behaviours. The court in India has been essential in preserving constitutional principles and safeguarding marginalised groups. A notable instance is the Supreme Court's ruling in Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India (2018), which decriminalised consensual same-sex interactions and reinforced the judiciary's duty to protect minority rights from the oppression of the majority. These initiatives highlight how institutional autonomy can confront established norms of exclusion and bolster democratic legitimacy (Supreme Court of India, 2018)[xxx].

In addition to institutional safeguards, promoting inclusive governance is essential for alleviating the divisive effects of othering. Inclusive governance involves the development and execution of policies that provide fair access to resources, opportunities, and representation for all social groups, especially those historically disadvantaged. The post-apartheid experience of South Africa provides a valuable case study. The South African government implemented affirmative action and the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) initiative to rectify structural imbalances resulting from decades of racial exclusion. Despite the contentious nature of BEE outcomes, the project signifies a purposeful effort to enhance economic and political inclusion by integrating equity principles into governance structures (South African Government, 2003)[xxxi]. These initiatives demonstrate how states might progress beyond mere symbolic inclusion to more meaningful rectification of historical injustices.

Civic education serves as a vital foundation in averting the normalisation of othering and clientelism. Civic education can diminish the allure of polarising narratives and transactional political practices by promoting understanding of democratic values, social variety, and the enduring detriments of exclusionary politics. Post-genocide Rwanda exemplifies this methodology effectively. Subsequent to the 1994 genocide, the Rwandan government made substantial investments in civic education initiatives via organisations like the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC). These activities underscore historical consciousness, national cohesion, and the perils of fragmentation, with the objective of restoring societal trust and fostering a collective civic identity (Government of Rwanda, 2007)[xxxii]. Although the greater political background of Rwanda is contentious, its focus on civic education underscores the efficacy of educational initiatives in mitigating entrenched societal divisions.

Ultimately, global involvement and compliance with international standards significantly restrain exclusionary governance approaches. International institutions and human rights procedures can apply normative and diplomatic pressure on states to implement more open, accountable, and inclusive policies. The global reaction to the Rohingya issue in Myanmar illustrates this aspect. United Nations investigations, reports, and coordinated international pressure have highlighted the systematic exclusion and persecution of the Rohingya minority, compelling the Myanmar government to address international scrutiny and accountability demands (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018)[xxxiii]. Despite inherent limits, such interventions illustrate how global governance frameworks can elevate marginalised voices and contest domestic practices of othering.

Collectively, these tactics demonstrate that averting the entrenchment of othering and clientelism necessitates persistent endeavours across institutional, societal, and international dimensions. Fortifying democratic institutions, instilling inclusive governing practices, advancing civic education, and utilising global standards can collectively alleviate the detrimental impacts of exclusionary politics. By implementing a comprehensive strategy, societies can progress towards more inclusive, responsible, and robust democratic systems that can withstand the cyclical perpetuation of marginalisation and patronage.

VI. Conclusion

This study aims to illustrate that othering and clientelism are not merely parallel or incidental aspects of modern politics, but rather mutually constitutive processes that collectively transform democratic government. By establishing social borders between insiders and outsiders, othering legitimises selective inclusion and exclusion, whereas clientelism implements these distinctions through the discretionary allocation of state resources. The resultant nexus converts democratic engagement into a transactional connection, undermining the universal principles of citizenship, accountability, and equality.

The comparative research highlights that these processes are not limited to any certain region or political system. In majoritarian democracies, postcolonial governments, and conflict-affected countries, the amalgamation of identity-based exclusion and patronage politics has analogous results; diminished institutions, skewed policy goals, and the perpetuation of socio-economic disparities. The enduring nature of these patterns indicates that democratic decay cannot be attributed exclusively to leadership deficiencies or institutional design shortcomings. Rather, it signifies underlying structural dynamics wherein political authority is maintained through the regulation of diversity and dependency.

The study theoretically contributes to discussions on governance and democratic theory by reconceptualising othering as an institutionalised political strategy rather than merely a discursive or cultural occurrence. By synthesising insights from identity theory and political economics, it elucidates how exclusionary narratives get ingrained in routine governing processes. This viewpoint elucidates why changes concentrated solely on elections, welfare enhancement, or administrative efficiency frequently fail to yield inclusive results when fundamental clientelist motivations persist.

The findings indicate that addressing democratic decline necessitates approaches beyond mere technocratic remedies. Enhancing institutional autonomy, fostering inclusive governance frameworks, broadening civic education, and aligning domestic practices with international standards are essential yet inadequate without initiatives to dismantle the structural incentives that perpetuate othering and clientelism. Addressing these interconnected processes is crucial for rejuvenating democratic legitimacy and promoting more egalitarian and accountable governing systems.

To conclude, comprehending the politics of othering and clientelism as a cohesive analytical framework offers essential insight into the current democratic crises. Here study elucidates the reciprocal reinforcement of exclusion and patronage, providing a foundation for reevaluating academic perspectives on governance and practical methods for democratic revitalisation.

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