Mediterranean Politics

ISSN: 1362-9395 (Print) 1743-9418 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fmed20

Winning hearts and votes: Social services and the Islamist political advantage

by Steven Brooke, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2019, 234 pp., $39.95 (hardcover), ISBN-10: 1501730622

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To cite this article: Michael Hoffman (2020): Winning hearts and votes: Social services and the Islamist political advantage, Mediterranean Politics, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2020.1731116

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1731116

Published online: 20 Feb 2020.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

Winning hearts and votes: Social services and the Islamist political advantage, by Steven Brooke, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2019, 234 pp., $39.95 (hardcover), ISBN-10: 1501730622

Steven Brooke's *Winning Hearts and Votes* represents a major step forward in the systematic study of political Islam, social service provision, and clientelism. In contrast to many of the traditional accounts of patronage politics, Brooke demonstrates that a focus on poor voters may not yield substantial payoffs for vote-seeking organizations. Rather, an emphasis on the middle class – through non-politicized, high-quality and, importantly, *paid* transactions – allows these organizations to build reputations for competence and integrity that pay larger dividends than could be achieved through simple vote-buying. His analysis focuses on the Islamic Medical Association (IMA), the largest social service branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

Brooke's argument begins with the puzzle that otherwise oppressive regimes often allow opposition organizations to provide social services that could drive recipients to mobilize against the regime. He points to the role of economic crises and delayed consequences: regimes allow organizations to step in when the state cannot afford to provide services, temporarily easing social tensions but ultimately creating long-term conditions that may increase support for opposition movements. In the case of the IMA, the Egyptian economic crisis of 1977 led to Anwar al-Sadat's cultivation of non-state social service providers, allowing for the Muslim Brotherhood to establish a sizable and visible presence in the healthcare sector, among others.

The IMA's success, Brooke argues, results largely from its unique and – at least from the perspective of much of the classic literature on patronage politics – counterintuitive strategies. Despite extensive monitoring by the regime, Brooke notes that, rather than being clandestine, 'little about the Islamist social service enterprise took place away from the eyes of the state' (p. 55). Several features of the IMA's approach to service provision account for its success. First, the organization targeted middle-class Egyptians, those who sought to avoid the pain and frustration inevitable in visits to public hospitals and clinics but who could not afford to pay for care from expensive private sources. This middle-class audience is much more likely to defect from the regime and support the opposition at the ballot box than the poor, who are more dependent on the largesse of the regime, which almost always possesses a material advantage over the opposition. Second, and relatedly, IMA clients *paid* for their services. This arrangement results directly from the middle-class character of its clientele, and allows the IMA to distinguish itself from other politically-oriented social service providers for whom service

provision is openly transactional. Third, because the IMA charges patients for its services, it is able to provide higher-quality care than its counterparts relying on donations and volunteer services alone. This higher quality care in turn allows the organization (and the Brotherhood more broadly) to create an image of competence and professionalism that had useful downstream political effects. Finally, the IMA's relationship with its clients is decidedly de-politicized; Brooke even notes instances where employees were reprimanded for mixing politics with service provision. All of these practices enhance the IMA's brand as honest, competent, and high-quality. Such valence issues are particularly appealing to middle-class voters, who tend to have greater opportunities for 'sincere' voting than the poor voters whose instrumental loyalty to the regime prevents them from defecting.

Brooke brings an astonishing variety of evidence to support his claims. At one point or another, he uses virtually all of the most common methods in contemporary comparative politics, including, among others, quantitative, ethnographic, survey, archival, interview, experimental, and spatial methods. Each of these techniques serves to illustrate one part of his story. Interviews, historical sources, and archival data trace the development of the IMA as an organization, including the enactment of its early strategies. Visits to IMA clinics and hospitals describe in vivid detail the way that these providers present themselves to patients. Quantitative and spatial data show that Brotherhood candidates clustered in middle-class districts in which the IMA established facilities, where their candidates were thus more competitive. Survey and experimental methods demonstrate that individual Egyptians use perceptions of the quality and honesty of care providers to make judgements about political candidates associated with them. Each of these pieces plays a crucial part in both illustrating and supporting the causal logic of Brooke's theory.

The evidence Brooke musters in support of these claims is, on the whole, quite persuasive. He rightfully notes that none of the evidence is perfect, but that its volume and diversity should create a great deal of confidence in his conclusions (p. 16). The only area that seems (somewhat) underdeveloped has to do with the psychological processes by which individuals make inferences about the quality and character of organizations and translate them into beliefs about candidates. Brooke argues that the Brotherhood generally shies away from 'taking credit' for its service provision, but a certain about of credit-taking is not only inevitable but probably necessary for the logic of his theory to operate. If parties cannot, through some form of credit-taking, create a clear link between their social service wings and their political organizations, it is unlikely that clients – particularly, paying customers – will develop the kinds of attachments to the party that Brooke identifies empirically. Moreover, it is not entirely clear why other opposition groups have failed (and rarely seem to have even *tried*) to establish similar practices; if the businesslike model of the IMA has such a strong effect on electoral support for the Muslim Brotherhood, it is surprising that other opposition organizations have not followed suit.

Neither of these suggestions makes the book any less impressive or valuable. It represents a remarkable contribution to several different literatures, including those related to Middle East politics, patronage politics, and political parties. Readers both within and outside of these traditions will learn a great deal from its insights.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1731116