


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Participatory clientelism: A socio-spatial approach to popular politics in Buenos Aires

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(Received 27 November 2023; revised 2 May 2024; accepted 2 May 2024; first published online 19 September 2024)

## Abstract

What is the relationship between clientelism and political participation in popular urban neighborhoods? This article addresses the question based on qualitative research in two popular neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, drawing on participant observation and interviews with residents, activists, and party brokers. Adding to a growing literature on “participatory clientelism,” we argue for greater attention to the urban context through which this unfolds. To date, research into participatory clientelism has predominantly considered specific practices—participatory innovations or contentious politics—and been limited to the survival of the urban poor and the demand for political support by party brokers. While these are crucial practices, they are not exhaustive of the relations that sustain participatory clientelism, particularly in contexts of territorialized politics. Based on the socio-spatial approach of Henri Lefebvre, influential in urban studies, we define three interconnected dimensions of participatory clientelism and identify them in the cases under study.

**Keywords:** Clientelism; participation; popular politics; brokers; Buenos Aires

## Introduction

Barrio Saldías is a small informal settlement in the north of Buenos Aires, whose residents have long demanded the upgrading of their infrastructure, engaging in diverse forms of political participation. For years little happened until the election of local councilors (*comuneros*) in 2011, following the creation of a new intra-urban scale of political representation, changed this. Suddenly, the popular participation of residents was facilitated by party brokers, leading to numerous transformations such as the arrival of drinking water. On the other side of the city, in *Comuna 8*, residents had long demanded the construction of a public hospital. Once again, popular participation was supported by political parties as activists worked closely with party brokers to leverage their demands across different scales of representation. In both cases, the successes and limitations of popular participation have been conditioned by the role of party brokers. What do these experiences tell us about the relationship between political participation and clientelism in popular urban neighborhoods? And what insights do they provide on local democracy in Latin American cities?

This article adds to a growing body of scholarship that examines the close relationship between participation and clientelism, what is occasionally termed “participatory clientelism” (Hetland 2023; Goldfrank 2011), by arguing for greater attention to the urban context through which this unfolds. Although some literature maintains an understanding of clientelism as the opposite of popular participation, defining it as a non-programmatic partisan strategy where the distribution

of material benefits by party brokers to individualized poor citizens is conditioned to (monitored) political support (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Stokes 2011; Stokes et al. 2013; Nichter 2018), there is increasing recognition that clientelism is a relational and participatory process that exceeds electoral cycles (Mueller 2018; Nichter 2018), involves collective identities and demands (Auyero et al. 2009; Auyero 2013; Holzner 2023), frequently supports participation in both contentious politics and participatory institutional fora (Hetland 2023; Goldfrank 2011) and may have a positive effect on democracy (Hilgers 2012). Nevertheless, scholarship into the relationship between participation and clientelism remains confined to the exchange of material goods for political support in which each side (the broker and the client) have a well-defined benefit. Given the embeddedness of both clientelism and participation in urban territory (Hagene 2015; Montambeault and Goirand 2016), there is a need to pay greater attention to the spatial context, and the wider set of practices, identities, and representations that inform participatory clientelism. This article thus builds on a growing literature into the relationship between participation and clientelism, further expanding our analytical vantage points that allow for a greater appreciation of the diverse relations and practices that bring together party brokers with urban citizens.

The article's theoretical contribution is to draw on a well-established approach in urban studies based on the work of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991, 1996) in order to propose a novel *socio-spatial framework* for analyzing participatory clientelism. Doing so draws attention to the multiple urban dimensions that inform the relationship between participation and clientelism, generating insights into how and why they come together in practice and the implications this may have on democracy in the city. Most centrally, we argue that a socio-spatial approach highlights how party brokers and residents from popular neighborhoods work towards the shared objective of transforming urban space. In so doing their exchange exceeds the realm of everyday survival and involves a collective effort to shape the multiple dimensions of urban space. The article thus engages Lefebvre's (1991) seminal conceptual triad of urban space: everyday spatial practices or "perceived space" (e.g., material transformation in urban space); representations of space or "conceived space" (e.g., urban planning, media, or political institutions); and representational spaces or "lived space" (the dreams and desires of residents that include their shared "spatial biographies," Soja 1996). Applying this socio-spatial approach to an analysis of the role of party brokers in conflicts across two popular neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, the article provides an expanded understanding of participatory clientelism that captures the diversity, or totality, of relations that hold together participation and clientelism. In participatory clientelism, different political actors (residents, party brokers, and so on) are brought together through a shared desire to transform urban space, responding to a contingent and geographically embedded set of conditions (Bénit-Gbaffou 2011; Gay 1999; Mitlin 2014).

The article is organized as follows. We start by discussing the concept of participatory clientelism before developing it through a socio-spatial approach. The following section describes the methodology and introduces the empirical context, focused on two urban demands: first, the demand for the construction of a public hospital in *Comuna 8*, a large and poor council located in the south-west of the city and second, the demand for slum infrastructure upgrading in *Barrio Saldías*, a small informal settlement located on the edge of the wealthy *Comuna 2* in the north of the city. The remainder of the article deploys a socio-spatial analysis of participatory clientelism in these popular neighborhoods. The final section takes stock of the wider significance of the analysis for understandings of clientelism and urban democracy.

## Participatory Clientelism

For the purposes of the article, we start from broad yet established definitions. Political participation is understood by Brady (1999) as any voluntary attempt by ordinary citizens to inform the outcomes of political institutions. This definition allows us to look for participatory

practices beyond disciplinary boundaries and particular social spheres—i.e., institutional/non-institutional, collective/individual, formal/informal participation (Giugni and Grasso 2022). Rather than an outcome or an end in itself, participation is a means of having something done. Moreover, participation must be a voluntary practice, but that does not mean that it must be performed independently of state institutions, social organizations, or political parties. In terms of clientelism, we start from a widespread definition in which “political clientelism is an asymmetrical relationship that is voluntary, reciprocal, personal, and affective; it plays out involving exchange of goods and services for political support, to mutual benefit” (Roniger 1990, 2–4, cited in Hilgers 2008, 125) (Hagene 2015, 14). Central to this definition is the role of party brokers who are uniquely positioned with regards their access to institutions and resources and their embeddedness in the lifeworlds of citizens (Hagene and González-Fuente 2016).

Although some literature identifies clientelism as a threat to popular participation (Hagopian 1996; O'Donnell 1994; Lapegna 2013), this has been contested and updated through wide-ranging studies, particularly ethnographies of the urban margins in Latin America (Auyero et al. 2009; Burgwald 1996; Gay 1998; Hilgers 2012; Poma 2020), which demonstrate that clientelism cannot be reduced to vote buying; there is a wide range of non-electoral clientelist practices. First, some scholars have found that clientelism is a long-term relationship, where the material exchange is supported by collective identities (Auyero 1999; Bénit-Gbaffou 2011; Montambeault 2011). Second, poor citizens' linkage to party brokers is part of a wider set of survival strategies, such as: (a) switching between vote buying and contentious mobilization (Auyero et al. 2009; Auyero 2013; Holzner, 2023), and (b) taking advantage of the competition among party brokers working in the same territory (Hilgers 2012; Rivadulla 2012; Zarazaga 2014). These practices show a degree of agency of the urban poor which contests the hierarchical logic of clientelism. Indeed, clientelism does not always erode democracy; it can accompany or even supplement democracy (Anciano 2018; Hilgers 2012; Combes and Vommaro 2015).

Following this approach, some scholars have focused explicitly on the relationship between participation and clientelism. On the one hand, clientelism is understood to be an important factor in building and sustaining urban mobilization and contentious politics. The strong-tie place-based relations of clientelist networks are instrumental in mobilizing collective action, while also providing political experience that encourages participation in public affairs (Holzner 2023; Dosek 2023). Studies in cities such as Buenos Aires, Recife, and Montevideo all point towards a mutually supporting relationship between contentious mobilization and clientelism, sustained through territorial networks (Auyero et al. 2009; Canel 2011; Montambeault and Giorand 2016).

On the other hand, scholars have examined the intersection of clientelism with participatory innovations such as participatory budgeting (Montambeault 2011; Hetland 2023; Goldfrank 2011), showing that new kinds of clientelist practices appear in response to participatory institutions. Goldfrank (2011) coined the term *participatory clientelism* to describe experiences in Venezuela in the early twenty-first century. According to a later study:

*Chavismo* combined features associated with participatory democracy, such as collective mobilization and deliberation, and clientelism, i.e. making access to state resources contingent on political support. (Hetland 2023, 34)

Studies on other Latin American cities have reached similar conclusions (Montambeault 2011), bridging the literature on urban clientelism with scholarship on participatory urban governance (e.g., Abers 1998) demonstrating that clientelism and participation cannot be so easily distinguished in empirical observation (Montambeault and Giorand 2016).

While scholarship has helpfully established the relationship between participation and clientelism they remain confined to specific practices—participatory innovations or contentious politics—and limited to the survival practices of the urban poor (Auyero et al. 2022) and the demand for political support by party brokers. While these are crucial practices, they are not

exhaustive of the relations that sustain participatory clientelism, particularly in a context of territorialized politics in cities such as Buenos Aires whereby both citizens and party brokers respond to a shared geographical context. In order to provide a fresh means of grappling with clientelism-participation relations we turn to an influential approach from urban studies that precisely aims at getting at the totality of relations that sustain urban politics across different dimensions. Expanding our approach to participatory clientelism in this way has the advantage of making our analysis more attuned to the diverse sets of practices, identities, and representations that motivate and sustain the role of party brokers in popular urban participation. In other words, it provides an alternative analytical vantage point to approach participatory clientelism that may productively uncover key opportunities and challenges to Latin American democracy today.

### A Socio-spatial Approach

We argue that the relationship between participation—grassroots attempts to inform institutional outcomes—and clientelism—the exchange of political support for material goods—is contingent on geographical context and constituted by socio-spatial relations. Spatiality is a latent component to existing theorizing on clientelism, occasionally coming to the fore. For example, Luna (2010) emphasizes how linkage strategies, including clientelism, may be segmented due to geographical difference. Hilgers (2012) further situates the “microsociological” process of clientelism, based on “longevity, diffuseness, face-to-face contact, and inequality,” within what she terms “mesosociological” and “macrosociological” processes, paving way to appreciate how localized exchanges cannot be explained without wider sets of relations and contexts. Koster’s (2014) work into brokers in northeast Brazil draws attention to material spaces (such as offices) that act as boundary sites that translate meaning and life worlds, thus providing a relational setting through which socio-spatial relations of clientelism are forged. Coates and Nygren (2020) deploy an ethnography of urban spaces susceptible to floods and landslides in Mexico and Brazil to ground clientelism in the political ecology of the city, incorporating a socio-spatial analysis of the contradictions of urban governance and neoliberal urbanization. Together, these studies indicate that the *spaces* of clientelism matter not merely as a backdrop but as constitutive of a wider set of socio-spatial relations through which urban citizens participate in urban politics. In order to further conceptualize how space matters for participatory clientelism, we draw on the theory of French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Lefebvre became a central figure in urban studies based on a series of influential texts penned in the late 1960s and early 1970s that sought to understand the role of urban space in both the survival of capitalism as mode of production (Lefebvre 1976) as well as the possibilities for political strategies to intervene in and transform a rapidly urbanizing world (Lefebvre 2003). His magnum opus *The Production of Space* sought to develop a “unitary theory” that brought together different disciplinary approaches to understanding space in order to grapple with what is at stake in putting space as the central locus of struggle and antagonism in contemporary society. Far from pursuing an environmental determinism that locates spatiality above or outside the imminence of social change, Lefebvre (1991) argued that space and society co-produce each other. A detailed discussion of his work is beyond the scope of this article and as such we draw attention to his most famous analytical device as it provides a means of grasping the “totality” of socio-spatial relations through which urban strategy unfolds. Acknowledging that both clientelism and participation are brought together through a shared commitment to transforming urban space, this schema is productive for scholars of clientelism for drawing their attention to new vantage points.

For Lefebvre (1991), space and society are co-constituted across three dialectically related moments, or dimensions, summarized as: (i) *Perceived* space: including material spatial practices and the everyday experience in the urban environment. In the poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, this could refer to deficient infrastructure such as potholes in the street, transport

inefficiency, high costs of housing, etc. (ii) *Conceived* space: the symbolic and planned representation of the city, created by dominant actors across different spheres, such as scientists (architects and urbanists specialized in city planning), journalists and media professionals, and state decision makers (who are, in fact, party members in office). This may operate across multiple geographical scales (from local to global). (iii) *Lived* space: the realm of dreams, desires, and affects that often sustain collective action. It is the outcome of the activity of inhabitants mobilizing new possibilities for their spatial reality and includes the “spatial biographies” of activists and citizens (Soja, 1996).

We refer to the three elements of Lefebvre’s conceptual triad as “dimensions,” as dialectical vantage points that allow the analyst to abstract from given experiences in order to incorporate the *relations* that are constitutive of any given moment or action. These dimensions are not autonomous but are deeply inter-related and implicated in each other. Presenting them in this way is intended as a heuristic device that allows the researcher to take into account a broader set of socio-spatial relations than those which may normally be included.

On the whole, literature on clientelism has tended to privilege the dimension of perceived space at the expense of conceived and lived. Although conceived space appears when the broker looks for resources in political institutions, and lived space emerges in recognition of clients’ collective identities (e.g., through the imagery of Evita in Auyero’s, 2000, classic work), they tend to be subordinated to everyday, material spatial practices of survival in the realm of perceived space (Auyero et al. 2022; Zarazaga 2014). A pothole in the street, access to regular services (such as water supply or health care), material needs created by insufficient income, criminality, or violence in the streets are issues of everyday life in popular neighborhoods and party brokers help in finding provisional solutions. Yet when party brokers support and sustain the participation of residents through a shared desire to transform their neighborhood, they become co-implicated in the attempt to produce space not only as perceived but as conceived and lived.

Brokers and residents aim to construct alternative representations of space based on shared demands and identities while working in and through political institutions at different levels. The dimension of conceived space may include institutions such as the media or architecture but also, crucially, involves political institutions such as local councils, city mayors, or national governments. Party brokers seek to translate demands across different scales and sites of politics, informing the dominant representations of popular neighborhoods. As Lindquist (2015) discusses, brokers are unique in having a dynamic view of scale due to their privileged position within institutional structures, allowing them to shift relations across different levels (see also Koster and Eiró 2022). Participatory clientelism not only exists when clientelism meets a well institutionalized framework for local participatory democracy. As Hetland (2023) notes, it refers to a broader set of relations in which clientelist networks intersect and support popular demands as they are represented at different scales of government.

Moreover, and building on this, the strategies and broader political goals and ambitions of both residents and political party brokers seek to articulate the lived space of desires and affects. Latin American research has increasingly acknowledged how territory, the political organization and control of space, is central to the political subjectivities, institutional forms, and values of urban social movements (Halvorsen et al. 2019; Rossi 2017; Zibechi 2012). Lived space is typically the dimension that is dominated or suppressed in political struggle, and often appears through art or clandestine political action (Lefebvre 1991). Yet if party brokers wish to sustain and form part of popular participation it is crucial that their strategies resonate with this emotional and affective dimension, not only due to the symbolic importance it holds for popular neighborhoods (see Auyero 2000) but also due to its centrality in the demands for urban transformation. Popular neighborhoods are not only seeking material transformations in their perceived space, but they are also “demanding” a right for their lived space to exist in the modern city (Lefebvre 1996).

We suggest that an analytical approach that is attentive to these multi socio-spatial dimensions of urban transformation is productive for expanding our focus to the diverse relations between

party brokers and residents of popular neighborhoods in the shared aim of transforming urban space. This is best demonstrated through our analysis of two struggles in Buenos Aires.

## Methodology and Geographical Context

The article draws from a larger research project into the relationship between participation and socio-spatial inequality in Buenos Aires, from which a particular focus on participation in popular neighborhoods emerged, posing the research question of the relationship between clientelism and popular participation in the city. Two popular neighborhoods were selected, each containing a prominent territorial conflict that involved party brokers and residents, in order to qualitatively assess this relationship. Buenos Aires is an unequal city. While it is one of the richest districts of Argentina, around 1 in 4 inhabitants fall under the poverty line and 1 in 10 live in informal settlements. The methodology comprised 12 months' participant observation in Comuna 8 (throughout 2022), and six months in person (alongside online participation when not in the field) of participant observation carried out in Barrio Saldías across three years during 2021, 2022 and 2023. This was accompanied by a series of in-depth interviews with residents, local party leaders, and politicians in multiple political institutions in the city (total of 108 interviews) as well as extensive analysis of historical documents from multiple sources (media, legal, institutional) regarding the two conflicts. Each conflict was chosen due to their prominence in their territories, allowing us to understand the inter-relation between multiple political actors.

In 1996 Buenos Aires became an autonomous city (the autonomous city of Buenos Aires, hereafter CABA), with its own elected government, legislature, and judiciary. Since 2011, it has been formally decentralized into 15 neighborhood-based councils, each of them containing a representative organ, the Council Board (of seven members elected by partisan list every four years, along with the city mayor), and a participatory organ, the Advisory Council (composed of voluntary neighbors that attend its monthly meetings). This design, in the context of the Argentine bipartisan system, allows for a variety of multilevel partisan alignments. The research fell within the electoral period when Peronism was the national incumbent, under President Alberto Fernández, and the center-right *Juntos por el Cambio* coalition was the city incumbent, under mayor Horacio Rodríguez Larreta. The Peronist-non-Peronist division was replicated inside CABA, with Comuna 8 Council Board being run by a Peronist leader and Comuna 2 by *Juntos por el Cambio*. Yet these scalar political (dis)alignments were fickle, and research into the historical process of popular participation in each neighborhood spans a longer period marked by hegemony of the center-right in CABA (who have ruled since 2007), and alternating Peronist (2003–15), non-Peronist (2015–19) and Peronist (2019–23) governments at the national level.

The arrival of elected political authorities at the intra-urban level (Comunas) marked a crucial historical moment in which local party brokers, long responsible for their party branches, now had direct access to the electoral arena, facilitating their capacity to both act as clientelist brokers and also mobilize popular participation. Given the fact that Council Boards have little budget and authority over limited subjects, their elected members are forced to carry out informal political activities to maintain their legitimacy in the neighborhood (Noya Iglesias 2018). Although clientelism is not restricted to Peronist brokers (Combes and Vommaro 2015), our research focused on them due to their historical role mobilizing this political strategy.

Peronism has a strong historical presence in the city, particularly at a grassroots level, despite consistently failing to win city elections (Halvorsen and Torres 2022; Mauro 2022). In the 1990s the city, alongside the surrounding Buenos Aires province, saw dense territorial networks grow as the Peronist party sought to rebuild itself in the wake of de-industrialization and a military dictatorship that had eroded many of its traditional, corporatist structures (Levitsky 2003). In its place, the Peronists looked to urban territory and sought to establish networks of support that would help popular sectors survive, through distributing local resources, usually understood as a

form of clientelism (Auyero 2000; Zarazaga 2014). The current Peronist infrastructure in both neighborhoods can be dated back to the neoliberal 1990s when these networks rapidly expanded within popular sectors.

### Comuna 8: The Struggle for a Public Hospital

Comuna 8 is the largest council in the city with the lowest social indicators: its average income is less than half of that of the city (EPH-INDEC 2023). Given that floodable land forms a major part of the council's extent, it was the last area of the city to be populated. Therefore, large available areas of land were the object of contrasting urban interventions. On the one hand, land invasion has been the main strategy for poor people settling there since the 1940s (Cravino et al. 2014): of all the Buenos Aires inhabitants living in informal settlements, 43% are located in this comuna (RENABAP 2022). On the other hand, the city government has used the territory for large urban infrastructure developments, materially or socially non-viable in other neighborhoods—such as a waste dump, car racing, and sports club facilities. The clash between these opposing types of urban intervention—land invasions from below and big urban projects from above—has produced a fragmented and uneven territory, with large-scale housing complexes, informal settlements, and isolated big urban facilities.

In addition, the council lacks public services. Notably, the only health care service for its over 200,000 inhabitants are three small primary care facilities (GCABA 2022). Several attempts to build a public hospital were made in the twentieth century, yet the city government prioritized other neighborhoods and issues. Gradually, a pro-hospital social movement was born in the 1990s. The movement is sustained by activists involved in social organizations emerging from a variety of layers of local contentious history: unions, social movements (such as *villero*, *piquetero*, *asambleario*, etc.), NGOs (such as the Catholic Church and other social oriented organizations), and from the outset included local party brokers (Di Virgilio et al. 2010; Arqueros Mejica 2018).

Regarding its composition and objectives, the pro-hospital movement shows features consistent with the dimensions of participatory clientelism. First, party brokers and social activists assembled to deal with problems originating in perceived space (the lack of health care services). Second, the movement's goals require access to the spaces of representation, in order to intervene in city planning. Finally, the movement has been, from its very beginning, a condensation of the rich history of local contention, exhibiting the density of the lived space. In this section, we describe how these dimensions have been present during the history of the hospital conflict and across the democratic institutions created in the last 30 years.

### *Party brokers and lived space during the democratization of the city*

Following the democratization of the city's political institutions in 1996, local party organizations increasingly supported the pro-hospital mobilization and mobilized to incorporate the issue in their party's program for city elections, thus bridging the conceived and lived space of the demand. For example, party brokers managed to include the issue in the 1996 electoral campaign of one of the main candidates for city government, collecting more than 10,000 signatures, demonstrating a commitment to longstanding issue of neighborhood identity. However, the candidate dropped the issue after being defeated, and did not resume it even when he won the next electoral round (ANRED 2005).

A few years later, in 2003, the pro-hospital movement collected 13,000 supporters and forced the city government to conduct public hearings on the subject. Even though the campaign did not succeed, that was the first and only time in the history of the city when public hearings were conducted at citizens' request (Eberhardt 2013; Noticias Urbanas 2003a, 2003b; GCABA 2016).

### ***Party brokers and conceived space: A window of opportunity***

For almost 10 years, the movement succeeded in making the issue visible but failed in getting the initiative passed by the government. The opportunity for stepping up the hospital cause came accidentally with a city government policy unrelated to the local demands or the lived space of residents. In 2004, the center-left city government announced its intention to grant public lands to pharmaceutical industries next to the Villa 20 settlement—the biggest and the oldest in Comuna 8, holding 15% of its population (GCABA 2016). Once again, the city government deployed a policy based on considering the council as “empty space,” ignoring the historical demands of the local residents and their spatial biographies, thus dislocating their different spatial dimensions.

The project was widely opposed by local civil society (Arqueros Mejica 2018). The pro-hospital movement took the opportunity to combine both demands—against the pharmaceutical district and for the hospital—leading demonstrations and bringing a legal action. Pro-hospital party brokers supported the legal strategy by organizing protests, thus reclaiming the protagonism in conceived space. The situation reached an impasse that the city government and the Comuna 8 residents were unable to resolve. In this context, the pro-hospital party brokers acted as double agents, bridging the gap between contentious activity at the neighborhood level and the political institutions at the city level.

On the one hand, they represented local civil society demands in the city’s political institutions, intervening in conceived space. Miguel “Mope” Eviner, a longstanding Peronist leader in the comuna, contacted city legislators, including the Peronist leader in the city legislature, to build interest in the conflict, facilitating a compromise to resolve the standoff. This led to new pieces of legislation being passed in the legislature in 2005—addressing the pharmaceutical district, the hospital, and the upgrading of Villa 20 at the same time—co-written with Mope himself. Indeed, key party activists credited Mope for promoting local demands in the city’s democratic institutions.

There is a historical claim that we are also part of. Mope took part in the draft writing of the law in 2005. (Nayla, Council Board member from Peronism, February 23, 2021)

I especially want to thank Miguel ‘Mope’ Eviner for helping me understand the problem and for being the one who promoted the urbanization of Villa 20. He has once again shown me through his activism what is the path to take. (Diego Kravetz, chief of the Peronist party in the city legislature, during the discussion of the hospital bill)

Mope and other party brokers presented these pieces of legislation as a victory of their struggle, helping to legitimize the city government in territories. While this successfully reclaimed the role of local demands in dominant representations of space it risked downplaying the centrality of perceived space in the conflict.

### ***Perceived space and the long struggle for completing the hospital***

The bills passed in 2005 settled the struggle just momentarily. Construction work eventually started in 2009, under a center-right city government, yet as of the time of writing it remains far from complete and only offers a few outpatient services. In other words, despite entering the conceived space of city government the perceived space of residents remained little modified and historical demands unanswered. The pro-hospital movement has since demanded the completion of the construction work. Organized through weekly meetings, the movement has combined legal activism, advocacy, and social protest—such as roadblocks and demonstrations.

The democratic institutions of the comunas, created in 2011, have provided a new framework for struggle, and for integrating the three urban dimensions of participatory clientelism. Indeed,

this new scalar institutionality provided a political opportunity for the pro-hospital movement. On the one hand, social activists—who, since 2008, have organized meetings around the *Espacio de los jueves/Thursday group*—have been the main players in the local participatory mechanism, the Communal Advisory Council, seeking to appropriate a mechanism of participatory decentralization. On the other hand, party brokers have stood for seats on the council, several of them being elected, taking forward the demand in conceived space.

As mentioned, the intervention of party brokers in the production of perceived space is the most common feature of clientelism. Therefore, once legitimized as elected local officials, pro-hospital party brokers took their everyday production of perceived space to the Council Board. In the words of two party brokers serving as Council Board members:

... I have my office in the Council, but I owe more to the street. I'm a guy from the territory, I'm not meant to be tied behind a desk ... I am working on upgrading the sidewalks, working directly with the city government. (Hugo, Council Board member from *Juntos por el Cambio*)

Our Council Board is very active. It is a board that goes to the streets. It is not a board that waits for problems to come ... Everything is done in an artisanal way, with dedication, personal effort and will. (Mope, Peronist Council Board President)

In the case of the hospital, however, brokers were frustrated and unable to make significant advances due to a lack of resources or support from the city government. Instead, they relied on particular opportunities to intervene in the perceived space, such as in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic when party brokers used their contacts in city and national government to mitigate the absence of a public hospital in the comuna, obtaining the temporary installation of testing facilities and vaccination campaigns. Council brokers also granted access to national and city social programs such as food aid, education, and internet connectivity.

In parallel, party brokers in the Council Board have promoted contentious mobilization demanding the completion of the hospital, keeping alive the lived space of demands and longstanding spatial biographies of activists, something that Mope himself embodies.

I am not a *villero* [slum resident], but I learned from *villeros*. In 1993 the city government widened a street in a settlement, and a fellow activist living there was very excited. I didn't understand why. When my partner explained to me that years ago his youngest son died in an emergency because the ambulance could not access the settlement (due to how narrow the hallways are) I understood his emotion. I will never forget that emotion, and that is why I am very harsh when I negotiate with officials from my own party. Because the officials, regardless of the party, speak the same language, all of them have the same vision of the poor. The poor do not need resources, they need their voice to be understood. (Mope, Peronist Council Board President)

This quote emphasizes the historical embeddedness of Mope in the lived space of the comuna and its residents and represents a key motivation for his commitment to the hospital cause. Since 2019, Mope has led three large demonstrations, including setting up a roadblock in one of the city's largest highways, and other gatherings linked to the hospital cause. This mobilizational strategy was successful in forcing the city government to further the construction work and maintain a working group with other state agencies. For the pro-hospital Peronist brokers, mobilization is the main form of participation, given that this is the way in which local residents can make their own voice heard. According to their approach to participatory clientelism, brokerage must follow what residents consider the main issues in the territory. In the words of a Peronist activist and member of the Council Board

The best form of participation is the conflicts that the neighbors create, and we [party brokers] have to be there, trying to build a channel to resolve the situation. (Mope, Peronist Council Board President, May 5, 2021)

Through our mobilization, we [the Council Board] managed to generate a monthly working group for the hospital, in which we work with the people of the City Ministry of Health, the Ombudsman's Offices and the primary health care centers to advance in what we understand a hospital has to be. (Nayla, Peronist Council Board member, February 23, 2021)

Finally, the pro-hospital movement has maintained its intervention in the city's democratic institutions, trying to intervene in the production of conceived space. The Advisory Council used its institutional tools strategically to demand the completion of the hospital while demanding immediate improvements in health care services. In addition, party brokers in the council authority have been able to keep local demands visible in the city legislature. Their work has been channeled to the city government by the party brokers on the Council Board, getting incremental results but failing in getting the hospital completed for the moment.

### **Barrio Saldías: The Struggle for Upgrading Urban Infrastructure**

Barrio Saldías is a small informal settlement that has long strived to overcome its marginal positionality in Buenos Aires. Named after the train station next to which the settlement grew, it is formally located in Recoleta, CABA's most exclusive neighborhood. It is also situated close to the Villa 31, the city's most prominent informal settlement that has undergone the largest slum upgrading program in recent years. A small neighborhood, with a population estimated at 528 people and 176 households, Saldías' existence on the *margins* has heightened its longstanding lack of representation in the city where it has been denied any meaningful place in its cultural or political landscape. This has presented a barrier to the neighborhood's participation in CABA government's recent shift towards "urbanization," understood as a set of public policies oriented towards the upgrading of infrastructure in the city's *villas* (slums or shanty towns).

For a moment in 2016 Saldías was under the spotlight as Mayor Rodríguez Larreta (*Juntos por el Cambio*) appeared in the neighborhood to announce its imminent urbanization (*when Juntos por el Cambio* also held the national presidency). Yet this promise has only been partially realized at the time of writing. Instead, it has been down to the ongoing mobilization of residents to keep the demand alive by participating in any institutional space available. Crucially, this participation has depended heavily on local party brokers in order to mobilize between the everyday life of residents, their ongoing demands, and the realm of representative politics in the city. Over the last decade, Saldías has made important infrastructural advances, notably: drinking water; a public square; and most recently, electricity. Key remaining demands include: gas pipes, sewage, the paving of a road inside the settlement, and land-tenure security. One of the main historical challenges for residents has been to generate political attention. Yet recently the territory of Saldías has fostered the participation of residents, political parties, city government and locally elected officials at an intensity that is disproportionate to its small size (equivalent to one block in the densely inhabited *Recoleta* neighborhood). On several occasions a draft law for urbanization has been proposed to the city legislature, led by Peronist leaders who have the longest-standing presence in the neighborhood dating back to the 1990s. To date, however, its central demands remain unmet, although popular participation with party brokers remains ongoing.

### **Decentralization and conceived space**

The arrival of the first cohort of local councilors in 2011 (at a time when Peronists held the national government) provided a political opportunity for demands over infrastructure upgrading

to be taken up by local representatives. Most notably, Saldías attracted the only Peronist councilor, opposed to the right-wing city majority, Gabriela Castillo, who supported the residents' ongoing struggle for infrastructure upgrading, which led to the installation of running water by the end of her term. It also paved the way for the establishment of a branch of her organization, the Evita Movement, widely known for its practice of distributing welfare plans and jobs (*planes sociales*) through their dense territorial networks in popular urban neighborhoods (Longa 2019). This relied on what Castillo terms as an "artisan" strategy in which she obtained financial resources and political support from a range of institutions, including the state agency AySA (Argentine Water and Sanitation), the president of the council, the national ministry of security, and the city legislature.

Castillo's brokerage can be understood as the practice of participatory clientelism that centered on the everyday spatial practices of residents and a shared commitment to transforming the perceived space of their territory. As she told us:

We arrived and really stayed in the neighborhood, we didn't just come for the campaign, there were four years in which I dedicated myself to working in the neighborhood, every day, we arrived to actually do some work and govern (*gestión*)... we came to improve the neighborhood.

The relations that she built exceeded the electoral cycle and cannot be reduced to a mere exchange of votes for material goods (Dosek 2023; Nichter 2018). Moreover, the relations that she forged with residents were centered on the shared strategy of transforming the neighborhood. Rather than attempting to pass a legislative bill or promote Saldías through public channels, Castillo instead focused on assembling necessary resources, including funding to train residents to carry out the upgrading work themselves.

By the time Castillo left office she had built roots for her party in the neighborhood, which would go on to open a branch in the house of one resident and distribute some jobs through a recycling center and allotment, as well as providing some handouts (food and T-shirts), with an expectation that residents would attend the occasional rally and support certain projects. Yet this was based on, and sustained by, the linkages that Castillo forged in and through the neighborhood and a wider commitment to transforming territory. Doing so also implied forging relations with residents she knew to be hostile to her political offering. As she told us: "to construct something in the neighborhood you have to do it with the participation of everyone, otherwise it is impossible." One of the key informal leaders from the neighborhood was a longstanding resident who was affiliated to her political opposition; bringing him on board was key to the success of the project.

Castillo's experience was also significant in increasing the participation of residents in neighborhood politics by demonstrating that, through strategic brokerage, territorial transformation was possible. During interviews with residents in 2022 several described this as a tipping point for them getting more involved in politics:

things like that water project, when that gets done, that is why we participate. We have milestones like that. Things take time but we can achieve them. (Personal interview with a resident 1, 2022)

I think the whole neighborhood remembers her, and I think no one will forget her, because that project took many years, and they had always come before at election time making promises, but she actually did it, she achieved it... with the participation of the neighbors who were involved. (Personal interview with resident 2, 2022)

Participatory clientelism here involves a shared commitment to transforming territory through building lasting socio-spatial relations with residents in their perceived space. Although one

outcome of this may be the building of party roots in a neighborhood, which in turn provides opportunities to exchange support for material goods, it may also lead to an increase in popular participation when brokers are able to take forward demands into a complex institutional landscape.

### ***Conceived space and the legislature***

Since 2011 Saldías saw a rapid growth in the presence of political parties in the neighborhood, which increased residents' capacity to participate in political institutions in the city. Previously, the only lasting presence of political parties was through the *comedor* (food hall), which had been set up by the Peronist party (PJ) in the late 1990s in a context of growing poverty and rapid inflation. This Peronist institution remains active today but is now accompanied by other Peronist factions that have branches in the neighborhood. The main parties provide some material support to residents, from social plans, food, T-shirts, after-school literacy clubs, as well as a range of more ad hoc support to residents. However, in recent years the popular demand for upgrading has seen a strong convergence of interest across the leadership of residents and party brokers. Together there has been a concerted effort to better represent this relatively invisible *barrio* in political institutions at different scales, which has in turn brought about tensions and barriers to their aims.

In recent years, based on an articulation between residents, the Peronist party (in the *comedor*) and the Evita Movement, there has been an attempt to promote the plight of Saldías through CABA's legislature. In 2021 Peronist city legislator María Rosa Muiños presented a new bill for legislation on the urbanization of Saldías. The development of the proposal unfolded through regular participatory workshops hosted in the *comedor*. Residents were given an opportunity to formally participate in the design of the proposed law and express any concerns. To accompany the law, a petition was put together and signed by residents and handed into the legislature. Yet this strategy failed to mobilize widespread participation among residents. While Peronist party brokers sustained participation in their project among their own activists in the neighborhood they struggled to engage with many who were skeptical of the likelihood of the bill passing and cautious of what change might come from those in power, following the bitter experience with the city mayor. One longstanding resident, María, commented to me:

This is not the first time a party has announced a new urbanization project, this has happened before, even with Larreta, and we don't want to be let down again... I'm afraid they are going to raise expectations, and this won't make any difference to the neighborhood... (Personal interview with María, 2022)

Despite limited engagement from residents, the Peronist leadership was successful in reaching across party divisions in the legislature by working with a party broker from the ruling Juntos por el Cambio coalition, specifically local councilor Mariana Raynello. While the bill has yet to move forward in the legislative agenda, as the Peronist opposition lacks a majority, the cross-party support signaled an advance for the popular demand in the city's political intuitions. Nevertheless, by prioritizing negotiations within conceived space there was a failure to articulate the lived space of residents, taking into account their historical frustrations and ongoing expectations.

### ***Lived space of residents***

Participatory clientelism in Saldías has operated primarily through a dual strategy of, on the one hand, articulating popular demands through the multi-scalar democratic institutions in CABA, relying on party brokers to bridge party differences based on selected participation of grassroots activists. On the other hand, there have been artisan strategies of channeling resources towards material improvement in everyday life. The former has focused strategic attention on Saldías'

conceived while the latter has been oriented towards everyday perceived space, in both cases marginalizing the lived space of residents. This was expressed to be by María, when reflecting on the growing role of party brokers in the neighborhood:

The parties have been involved, they have done things, but we [residents] sometimes get lost in the party politics . . . things could have been done much better, that's why we have to put the neighborhood first and be united, as neighbors . . . there is not much left that needs to be done to urbanize the neighborhood . . . we just need a bit of recognition, that we exist, that we are part of the city. (Personal interview with María, 2022)

This marginalization of residents' lived space has required attention by party brokers, as can be seen through a brief example of a contentious episode in early 2022. Following the announcement that a new sports complex was to be constructed in the neighborhood, there was indignance among residents for two reasons: it was to be named after the neighborhood Villa 31, provoking fears that they would lose their own identity and spatial biographies as a railway worker neighborhood, and it emerged that residents had not been invited to the inauguration, which prioritized party brokers and their colleagues. Enraged, a group of neighbors decided to block the road leading into the neighborhood, setting a tire on fire to maximize public attention. Peronist councilor and well-known party broker Laureano Bielsa, elected in 2015 following the stepping down of Castillo for personal reasons, was the first to attend, immediately taking up the role of establishing their demands and responding to their grievances. Together, they agreed to demobilize on the condition that a health center would be installed in the complex and that residents would have free access—both of which were soon agreed by government ministers via a phone call from Bielsa.

There was a concerted effort following this incident to take seriously the desires of residents, rather than presume that a change in the perceived space of the neighborhood would be beneficial to all. Indeed Bielsa had dedicated significant resources building his party organization in the neighborhood on the back of articulations with cultural sectors, responding to residents' demand for greater visibility in the city. In 2022–23 he worked with a local museum, with a specific interest in railway history, in order to build and promote an exhibition that featured the history of neighborhoods. The exhibition centered on the railway identity of residents, promoting their desire to not be labeled as a slum (like their neighboring Villa 31) but as a working *barrio* full of national identity and history. The exhibition, which ran in 2023, was described by a resident as “one of our proudest moments in our popular history and identity . . . we have finally been recognized in Recoleta as part of their city.”

### Participatory Clientelism and Urban Democracy

In Buenos Aires participatory clientelism is a strategy of popular politics widely accepted by residents, activists, and party brokers. Participatory clientelism provides one means for transforming urban space based on the acknowledgment that party brokers are uniquely positioned to navigate a multi-scalar institutional landscape from which resources can be leveraged. Although authors sometimes view participatory clientelism in a negative light, based on the specific empirical readings (Goldfrank 2011; Hetland 2023), we hold more of an *agnosticism* towards its democratic qualities, following Baiocchi and Ganuza's (2017, 15) approach to urban participation.

From the perspective of popular sectors, the marginality of their demands, that are often rendered invisible in dominant conceived spaces of urban politics, favors the strategy of using party brokers and their networks to achieve their goals. Party brokers are key to scaling up local demands, using informal negotiations with city and national authorities from their own party to

**Table 1.** The Totality of Socio-spatial Relations in Participatory Clientelism

Dimension	Barrio Saldías Conflict	Hospital Conflict
Perceived space	Upgrading of infrastructure, such as installing of potable water.	Health aid to supplement the lack of proper health care services, particularly during pandemic. Yet remains marginalized.
Conceived space	Representing Saldías in political institutions, creating bills for the legislature.	Negotiating with city legislators new pieces of legislation for public use of land in Comuna 8.
Lived space	Acknowledging the spatial biographies of residents, their affective desires and their lifeworlds.	Support to civil society pro-hospital organizations ( <i>espacio de los jueves</i> ) and promotion of contentious strategies: campaigning, roadblocks, demonstrations.

obtain resources, as seen through the actions of both Gabriela Castillo and Mope, who used their contacts in national and local governments. Although this description fits the traditional image of clientelism, to reduce it to the moment of exchange is insufficient. We demonstrated how party brokers were also motivated to support popular participation via a shared goal to transform urban territory. Party brokers are not the only kind of participatory actor in urban territory, yet for popular neighborhoods they have a strategic benefit in their capacity to operate across scales.

Unlike cities where clientelism and participation grew in opposition, with the latter expected to confront the former (Abers 1998), Buenos Aires has seen clientelism and participation grow hand in hand over the last three decades. In particular, decentralization, via the implementation of local councils in 2011, led to a reinforcement of the close relationship between clientelism and participation, and local democracy responded not to its ideal form as presented in the city constitution but to its actually-existing practice in the city. In other words, participatory clientelism emerged as a democratic practice (or strategy) rather than an ideal and must be judged based on what it has and has not achieved on a case-by-case basis.

In Saldías, participatory clientelism shifted political attention and resources onto the perceived and conceived space of the neighborhood, facilitating specific projects of infrastructure upgrading while gaining attention in urban democratic institutions. Although this has created moments of deception with regards unfulfilled promises, it has provided a newfound confidence in the potential and, most centrally, the *need* for party brokers as allies in mobilizing their demand. Yet by prioritizing transformations in the spaces of representation and material spatial practice there has been a marginalization of residents’ lived space: the rich tapestry of spatial biographies whose identities and demands cannot be reduced to a mere exchange of support in the question of transforming reality. In contrast, in Comuna 8 a deep history of mobilizing for the hospital generated a lived space of participatory clientelism, with key actors such as the party broker Mope later mobilizing within conceived space (e.g., Mope becoming council leader in 2019 was a milestone). Yet, unlike Saldías, there were very limited advancements in the material spatial practices of the hospital, which remains far from completion at the time of writing.

In this sense the pragmatic reality of participatory clientelism, in both cases, came across limits as it was unable to absorb the totality of socio-spatial relations in a given urban territory (see Table 1). Indeed, future research may wish to consider more directly the contradictions and tensions that arise between different socio-spatial dimensions as the course of mobilizing participatory clientelism. We demonstrated that the activity of party brokers in both cases helped make the urban demands visible in conceived space. In fact, this was arguably the most successful dimension of participatory clientelism in both cases under study. Despite the differences between *Saldías* and *Comuna 8*, both territories lacked proper representation in the city’s political and social arena. *Saldías* because of its small scale is invisible within the upper-middle class *Comuna 2* or wrongly identified with their neighbors of *Villa 31*. In the case of *Comuna 8*, its geographical

location, urbanization history, and social class make it marginal for most *porteños*, and particularly for city elites. In both cases, party brokers were key players in presenting the demands to the city legislature, and getting bills passed. At the same time, the lived space of residents (in Saldías) and perceived space (in the hospital case) tended to be marginalized as less strategically central to participatory clientelism.

## Conclusion

This article has deployed the concept of participatory clientelism in order to better understand the entanglement of party brokers and popular participation in urban space. We developed a socio-spatial approach that followed urban demands in two popular neighborhoods of contemporary Buenos Aires: the upgrading of urban infrastructure in *Barrio Saldías* and the construction of a hospital in *Comuna 8*. In so doing we identified an expanded set of practices of participatory clientelism, which coalesce around a shared desire to transform urban space. At the same time, we identified several limitations and tensions within strategies of participatory clientelism that tended to privilege certain socio-spatial dimensions at the expense of others. Such an understanding reflects the dialectical method of Lefebvre's urban theory, highlighting internal contradictions rather than external clashes. Hence, rather than opposing clientelism and participation, this approach has provided a means for theorizing more deeply the entanglement of clientelism and participation through the specificity of popular urban neighborhoods. This could have implications for future research.

First, our approach to participatory clientelism moves the debate away from *if* the two concepts are related and instead oriented the discussion around *how*. Our approach is not normative and does not attempt to judge the democratic quality of participatory clientelism. Rather, it acknowledges it as a pervasive actually-existing practice in Buenos Aires that is mobilized as a political strategy of popular neighborhoods. In so doing it both rejects what was once an overly negative or stigmatizing understanding of poor people's politics in Buenos Aires (Lapegna 2013; Stokes et al. 2013) and departs from the more romanticized readings of participation that once dominated literatures on Latin American cities (see Chavez and Goldfrank 2004). Other cities will bring further insights into this reality that, together, may allow for a more substantial conclusion on how participatory clientelism is reshaping urban democracy into the twenty-first century.

Second, our approach highlights key tensions and contradictions that have implications for the relative success of popular politics in Latin American cities. While Saldías demonstrated success in leveraging their demands in conceived and perceived space, their lived space of residents and their rich spatial biographies were relegated, leading to issues that occasionally erupted as contentious activity that, in part, excluded party brokers. In contrast, the hospital struggle was oriented around the lived space of residents and local party brokers, advancing into the conceived space at the council and, to a lesser extent, city-wide, yet the perceived space of residents remained relatively unchanged despite decades of activism. These "failures" cannot simply be understood due to an incompatibility between resident demands and party broker requirements. Rather they reflect the internal contradictions when urban actors seek to transform the totality of space across all of its dimensions.

Future research on both clientelism and popular participation would benefit from acknowledging the relationality between these concepts in order to better understand how urban demands are achieved in practice. A socio-spatial approach, as developed here, is one attempt at providing a means of doing so, by highlighting the centrality of space as both means and ends of participatory clientelism. Moreover, such an approach is fruitful for bringing into dialogue two sets of scholarship—political science literature on clientelism and urban studies on participation—itself a generative act. We encourage relational comparative studies in other Latin American cities in order to further understand the shifting dynamics in the relationship between

clientelism and participation, responding to the multi-scalar geographical contexts of popular urban sectors across the region.

**Acknowledgments.** Thank you to Juan Pablo Luna, Alfred P. Montero, and four anonymous reviewers for your valuable comments that greatly improved the final version. The authors are also grateful to the following colleagues for their support and guidance at different stages of the research: Rocio Annunziata, Raffaele Bazurli, Leonela Infante, Eliana Persky, Viviana Werber, and Gonzalo Federico Zubia.

The authors acknowledge financial support from the British Academy, Grant No. TGC/200075.

**Competing interests.** The authors declare they have no competing interests.

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