



Political foundations of the resource curse: A simplification and a comment [☆]



James A. Robinson ^a, Ragnar Torvik ^{b,*}, Thierry Verdier ^c

^a Harvard University, Department of Government, IQSS, 1737 Cambridge St., N309, Cambridge, MA 02138, USA

^b Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Department of Economics, Dragvoll, N-7491 Trondheim, Norway

^c PSE, 48 Boulevard Jourdan, Paris 75014, France

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 November 2012

Received in revised form 23 August 2013

Accepted 8 September 2013

JEL classification:

D7

Q3

Keywords:

Natural resources

Political economy

Clientelism

ABSTRACT

In this note we show how a considerably simpler model than the one in our original JDE 2006 paper generates all the same results. We also acknowledge an error in the specification of a utility function in our previous paper.

© 2013 Published by Elsevier B.V.

1. Introduction

In the present note we present an alternative reduced-form version of the main model in Robinson et al. (2006) in which all real wages are exogenous. This greatly simplifies the analysis of our original paper while all the results and main intuitions remain valid. In addition we discuss the specification of the utility function in our original paper.

Section 2 presents the formal model and derives its main implications, before Section 3 discusses the utility function of the politician in the original 2006 contribution. Section 4 concludes. Some of the calculations are delegated to the Appendix A.

2. The formal model – a simpler version

Our model features an incumbent politician wishing to be re-elected, an alternative politician and a unit mass of voters. There are two periods with an election occurring at the end of the first period where the incumbent is challenged by the alternative politician. There is a stock of a non-renewable natural resource and all income from natural resources accrues directly to the government. Though this is not always

the case, most of the literature on the resource curse emphasizes that the major issue is that it is the government that owns the resource. However, we show that even in the case where all resource rents accrue to the government, resources may or may not be a curse, allowing us to capture Botswana and Venezuela within the same framework.

The incumbent must decide how much of the resources to extract in the first period and consequently how much will be left for the future. The more he extracts today, the less there is for the future. Resource income can be used in either of two ways; the incumbent can ‘consume’ the income or he can distribute it as patronage to influence the outcome of the election. After the election whichever politician wins takes power and consumes the remaining resource rents. For simplicity we assume that the government has no other sources of income apart from resource rents (i.e. no taxes).

We model patronage as the offer of employment in the public sector and we assume that the probability that the incumbent wins the election is an increasing function of the amount of public sector employment. Thus to increase the chance of remaining in power, the incumbent can hire more employees – more clients – though this is costly since it requires resources that otherwise the incumbent could have used for himself. Essentially we assume that when an individual works for the government, this increases the probability that they will vote for the incumbent. This probability may not be one because clients may be able to cheat – take employment and vote for some other politician. An individual who receives a job offer from the incumbent will accept it because public sector jobs pay more than private sector jobs. In our

[☆] We are grateful for feedback from students and in particular from Kirsten Rasmussen Grebstad. We are also grateful for the suggestions of an anonymous referee.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jrobinson@gov.harvard.edu (J.A. Robinson), ragnar.torvik@svt.ntnu.no (R. Torvik), tv@pse.ens.fr (T. Verdier).

2006 paper we showed one possible microfoundation for such a relationship between public employment and voting, and we showed that such a relationship may also hold in autocratic regimes.

The prices of the natural resource in the two periods are p_1 in period 1 and p_2 in period 2 which we assume are determined on world markets and taken as given by the country under consideration. The resource curse is normally understood as the effect of resource abundance rather than the result of short term price fluctuations. Thus our main interest is to study permanent resource booms, which we define as increased prices in both periods (this can also be interpreted as a resource discovery). But for completeness we shall also vary the price path to investigate the implications of temporary and future anticipated resource booms. The physical quantity of the resource extracted in the first period is denoted e . In the period after the election there is $R(e)$ left of the resource. We assume that R is a strictly decreasing and strictly concave function with $R' < 0$ and $R'' < 0$, where the primes denote first and second derivatives, respectively. These assumptions mean that the more resources are extracted in the first period, the less is left for the second period. Moreover, the assumption about the second derivative captures the idea that the total amount of resources that can be extracted depends on the time path of extraction. If too much is taken out today, the total stock over the two periods falls.¹

To influence the outcome of the election, the incumbent politician engages in clientelism and offers to employ voters in the public sector. We assume that an incumbent that offers such deals does not fire the workers after the election should he win. In Robinson et al. (2006) we provided microfoundations for this result by allowing politicians to internalize the utility of members of their own group. The re-election probability, denoted Π , is higher the more of the voters the incumbent employs in the public sector. Formally, we assume that Π is a strictly increasing function of G , $\Pi = \Pi(G)$ where $\Pi' > 0$, and where G is the number of voters employed in the public sector.² Hence $1 - G$ voters remain in the private sector. Private sector individuals have productivity H , while public sector workers have a lower productivity which we normalize to zero. Clearly, employing people in the public sector to influence their voting behavior will be socially inefficient because their productivity is lower than it would be in the private sector. Public sector workers receive a wage W . We assume here that $W > H$, so that a worker is better off if offered a job in the public sector. In Robinson et al. (2006) we provided microfoundations for this by allowing for bargaining over the wage, while Robinson and Verdier (2013) generate the same outcome via an efficiency wage model. The incumbent decides policy before the election; resource extraction e and public sector employment G .

Policy (e, G) is chosen by the incumbent so as to maximize his own (expected) consumption over the two periods:

$$\max_{e, G} p_1 e - WG + \Pi(G)[p_2 R(e) - WG]. \quad (1)$$

The first term in Eq. (1), $p_1 e - WG$ is the consumption of the incumbent politician before the election which consists of income from resources minus the wage bill of public sector workers. The second term, $\Pi(G)[p_2 R(e) - WG]$ is the expected future utility. With probability $\Pi(G)$ the incumbent wins the election and this is larger the greater the G . If re-elected the incumbent has resource income $p_2 R(e)$ and consumes this minus wage payments to public sector workers. With probability $1 - \Pi(G)$ the incumbent loses power and in this case his payoff is zero.

¹ Another interpretation is that within each period the marginal cost of extraction is increasing.

² In the main text we interpret the probability of the incumbent being in power next period as the probability of reelection. However, a similar function is also likely to hold for other regimes than those with free elections. Dictatorships also need support and to gain it they use the same types of clientelistic policies that democrats do. Indeed, most neopatrimonial regimes in Africa have not been democratic.

Differentiating with respect to e and G , respectively, the two first order conditions for this problem are

$$p_1 + \Pi(G)p_2 R'(e) = 0, \quad (2)$$

$$-[1 + \Pi(G)]W + \Pi' [p_2 R(e) - WG] = 0. \quad (3)$$

The first condition (Eq. (2)), says that the marginal benefit of extracting the resource today, which is simply the amount of consumption that a unit of the resource would generate – i.e. p_1 , should be equated to the expected marginal cost of extracting today. The cost of extracting today is that there is less left for tomorrow. The marginal benefit of having more tomorrow is $p_2 R'(e)$, but in Eq. (2) this is multiplied by the re-election probability $\Pi(G)$ because the incumbent only gets the benefit tomorrow with this probability. Eq. (3) relates the marginal cost of public sector employment, $- [1 + \Pi(G)]W$, which is simply the increase in the wage bill, to the expected marginal benefit. The benefit is that higher public sector employment increases the re-election probability, $\Pi' > 0$ and re-election brings the benefit $p_2 R(e) - WG$, i.e. future resource rents minus the public sector wage bill.

These two-first order-conditions generate a straightforward but important result. Denote the socially optimal extraction of resources in the first period e^e . We then have our first proposition.

Proposition 1. Resources are inefficiently over-extracted so that $e > e^e$.

To see this, first note that the socially optimal extraction of resources in the first period solves

$$e^e = \arg \max_e \{p_1 e + p_2 R(e)\},$$

and thus is the solution to the first-order condition,

$$p_1 + p_2 R'(e^e) = 0. \quad (4)$$

e^e is simply the value of first-period extraction which maximizes the total value of the resources extracted over the two periods.

Comparing Eq. (2) with Eq. (4), since $\Pi < 1$ it is immediate that $e > e^e$. Inefficiency here arises from the fact that the incumbent politician discounts the future stock of resources by the probability that he wins power. Compared to the socially efficient extraction path a politician when in power over-extracts resources.

To find how extraction and public sector employment depend on the price path (p_1, p_2) of the resource, we write the two first order conditions in differential form:

$$\Pi p_2 R'' de + \Pi' p_2 R' dG = -dp_1 - \Pi(G)R' dp_2, \quad (5)$$

$$p_2 \Pi' R' de - 2W \Pi' dG = -\Pi' R dp_2, \quad (6)$$

where we have for simplicity (and as in our 2006 paper) assumed that the effect of public employment on the re-election probability is linear so that $\Pi'' = 0$. The second order conditions for the maximization problem are fulfilled provided the determinant is positive, i.e. $D \equiv -2W \Pi \Pi' R'' - p_2 (\Pi')^2 (R')^2 > 0$, which we assume is the case.³

Proposition 2 (the proof of which and all remaining propositions is in the Appendix A) shows that the political incentives of changes in resource prices are absolutely key to understanding their implications for the extraction path and social efficiency and they depend on whether the resource boom is permanent, transitory, or anticipated.

³ Note that in the 2006 version there is a printing error in that the minus sign in front of $\Pi(G)R' dp_2$ in Eq. (5) has been left out. However, the calculations in the paper have this included so none of the results are affected.

Proposition 2.

- i) A permanent resource boom (i.e. such that $dp_1/p_1 = dp_2/p_2 = dp/p$) reduces resource extraction and increases the efficiency of the extraction path.
- ii) A temporary resource boom (i.e. $dp_1 > 0$ and $dp_2 = 0$) increases resource extraction and decreases the efficiency of the extraction path.
- iii) An anticipated future resource boom (i.e. $dp_1 = 0$ and $dp_2 > 0$) reduces resource extraction and increases the efficiency of the extraction path.

With a permanent resource boom the efficient extraction path is unaltered, at least in the reasonable case where the ratio of p_1 to p_2 is unchanged. This is evident from Eq. (4). Yet as the resource price increases, the benefit of being in power to the incumbent increases. The reason that a permanent resource boom increases the efficiency of the extraction path is that it makes it more valuable to be in power in the future. This induces the incumbent to expand the public sector and this increases $\Pi(G)$. When $\Pi(G)$ increases, the incumbent discounts the future less and moves the extraction path closer to that which would be socially optimal.

A similar result emerges with an anticipated future resource boom. In this case the efficient response is to reduce the extraction rate. The reduction in the extraction rate by the politician exceeds that of the optimal response. Thus, as the extraction rate is too high in the first place, also in this case the extraction path moves closer to that which is socially optimal.

In the case of a temporary resource boom the socially optimal response is to increase the extraction rate. Resources have become more valuable in the present than in the future, thus more should be extracted in the present and less in the future. If the resource boom is only temporary, the efficiency of the extraction path does in fact decrease. The reason is that the equilibrium extraction rises more than the efficient change in the extraction rate.

Resource booms, if not viewed as being only temporary, thus may not represent a problem for the efficiency in the resource sector itself. The problem is the effect on the rest of the economy: our next result demonstrates this point.

Proposition 3.

- i) A permanent resource boom (i.e. such that $dp_1/p_1 = dp_2/p_2 = dp/p$) increases public sector employment and decreases private sector employment.
- ii) A temporary resource boom (i.e. $dp_1 > 0$ and $dp_2 = 0$) decreases public sector employment and increases private sector employment.
- iii) An anticipated future resource boom (i.e. $dp_1 = 0$ and $dp_2 > 0$) increases public sector employment and decreases private sector employment.

Since a long lasting or an anticipated resource boom increases the rents from being in power, the incumbent politician has an incentive to influence the votes of more people by employing them in the public sector. Although this is good for the clients that receive jobs and the incumbent who is more likely to be re-elected, these deals decrease the efficiency of the economy by transferring labor from the relatively high productivity private sector to the low productivity public sector. A positive side effect, however, is that, as we noted in Proposition 2, the increased probability of re-election induces the incumbent to value the future stock of resources higher, which increases the efficiency of resource extraction.

When we consider a temporary resource boom more resources are extracted in the period when the price is high. Since less resources are left for the second period, the value of remaining in power decreases, and the incumbent politician has less incentive to influence the votes of people by employing them in the public sector. In turn this decreases the probability of re-election, and the incumbent values the future stock of resources even less than in the first place. As the valuation of future resources has decreased, the efficiency of the extraction path has become worse. Thus, for the

efficiency in the economy as a whole, the extraction path effect and the labor allocation effect pull in opposite directions. With more misallocation of labor the efficiency of the extraction path increases, while with less misallocation of labor the efficiency of the extraction path decreases. This leads to our final proposition.

Proposition 4. A resource boom increases total income if institutions are sufficiently strong but may decrease income if institutions are weak.

As the proof of the proposition in the Appendix A shows income is more likely to go down with a resource boom the more the incumbent can affect the reelection probability by hiring public sector workers. In regimes where it is not possible to affect the reelection probability by hiring clients of the incumbent in the public sector, resource booms have a positive effect on income. In other types of regimes, with rich opportunities to bribe people into voting for the incumbent through public employment, a resource boom is more likely to lower total income. Thus, the effect on income from a resource boom may be of opposite sign in regimes with high and low institutional quality, or what we have called weak or strong institutions.

It is useful here to discuss what sort of microfoundations would be consistent with our model of clientelism. Why does an offer of employment influence an individual's voting behavior? The traditional political science literature is somewhat vague on this. If voting behavior is observable, as for example Sartori (1994, p. 18) claims it was in Italy under the pre-1992 electoral rules, then public sector employment may be attractive because it is a form of benefit that can be targeted to a specific individual. Moreover, it can be taken away if the voter/client does not fulfill his part of the bargain. With observable voting politicians know if the client fulfilled his part of the bargain. On the other hand, for this mechanism to work, it must also be the case that other politicians (who compete with incumbents) do not want, or are not able, to offset these incentives by offering such a person continued employment if they fail to support their incumbent patron. Intrinsic then to clientelism appears to be that a patron is able to offer to his client something that no other political agent can offer. There is an essential asymmetry about the situation. Once this is true the question of whether or not voting behavior is observable becomes irrelevant because clients will sincerely prefer that their patron succeeds in an election – since only one patron can offer them employment or favors – and will consequently be willing to vote for him.

Where does this asymmetry come from? The most plausible idea is that individuals are already matched into groups or selected into social networks and patrons tend to make offers to individuals from their own group or network. In this context Turner and Young (1985, p. 158) note

“Formation of a patron–client relationship is based not only on reciprocal advantage, but on some principle of affinity which supplies a social logic to the network. Kinship and ethnic affinity are the most frequent bases for network formation.”

A natural idea is that this allows patrons to credibly offer to clients from within their group things that people from outside the group could not offer. This might be because individuals within a group partially internalize the welfare of other members of the group (a sort of altruism), or because group members interact with each other more frequently than they do with individuals outside the group and this allows them to cooperate better and use intertemporal sanctions to solve problems of commitment.

For our purposes the key point is that politicians are able to gain the support of voters/clients by exchanging favors for support. This is valuable because it increases the probability of re-election, but it also costs money because government employees have to be paid and it has further ‘opportunity costs’ since if an individual works for the government they do not work for the private sector and we assume that private sector employment is more productive.

Why does clientelistic exchange between members of a group take the form of employment in the public sector? For example, why would a patron not simply give money to a client? Although belonging to the same group aids problems of commitment, some things are more credible than others. For example, Robinson and Verdier (2013) show that while promises to give income in exchange for votes to members of one's own group may not be credible, offers of employment may be. Politicians may be able to transfer rents by employing individuals when there is moral hazard in the employment relationship since then it is optimal ex post for politicians to concede rents to public sector workers. Alternatively it could be the case that employment can be decided in advance of an election and is costly to reverse. The fact that only an incumbent can determine employment in advance induces a type of incumbency bias which also seems to be recognized as a key part of clientelism. Alternative approaches are due to Coate and Morris (1995) whose theory implies that patronage takes the form of public sector employment because this is less obviously clientelism than transfers of money (see Alesina et al., 2000, for evidence). Finally, it could also be, as argued by Acemoglu and Robinson (2001), that inefficient redistribution, here public sector employment, is a way of maintaining the coherence of a group and thus their future political power.

3. An alternative utility function in the 2006 version

In the 2006 paper Eq. (9) specifying the utility function of the incumbent contains a last term showing the utility of the incumbent in case he should fail to win the next election. Rather than the term $(1 - \Pi(G_1))\alpha_2^2(-F + H)$ it is more reasonable to let this term be $(1 - \Pi(G_1))\alpha(-G_1F + \frac{1}{2}H)$ since the cost of firing F only applies to those that are employed in the public sector in the first period. However then Ψ_2 in the 2006 version becomes $2\Pi_C(F - H) > 0$, which violates the second order conditions. Therefore for that model to remain valid with the more reasonable utility function the fundamentals would have to be modified to incorporate a different mechanism via which it is credible for the incumbent to not fire members of his own group (perhaps along the lines developed in Robinson and Verdier, 2013).

4. Conclusion

We presented a considerably simpler reduced-form version of the model of our 2006 paper where all the same conclusions hold. In addition we noted that the utility function in the 2006 version is unreasonable and that our original microfoundations would have to be changed in order for the results of our 2006 paper to be valid as stated.

Appendix A

We now provide complete proofs of the results in the text.

Proof of Proposition 2.

i) For a permanent resource boom (i.e. such that $dp_1/p_1 = dp_2/p_2 = dp/p$) it follows from Eqs. (5) and (6) that

$$\frac{de}{dp/p} = \frac{R(\Pi')^2 R' p_2}{D} < 0. \tag{7}$$

As well it is easy to see from Eq. (4) that

$$\frac{de^e}{dp/p} = 0.$$

Since $e > e^e$, a permanent resource boom increases the efficiency of the extraction path.

ii) From Eqs. (5) and (6) we find

$$\frac{de}{dp_1} = \frac{2W\Pi'}{Dp_2} > 0.$$

Now differentiation of Eq. (4) provides

$$\frac{de^e}{dp_1} = -\frac{1}{R'' p_2}.$$

Substitution of the expression for D gives also:

$$\frac{de}{dp_1} = \frac{1}{-R'' \Pi p_2 - \frac{(\Pi' R')^2}{2W\Pi'}} > -\frac{1}{R'' p_2}.$$

Hence⁴

$$\frac{de}{dp_1} > \frac{de^e}{dp_1}.$$

Since $e > e^e$, it follows that overextraction $e - e^e$ increases with p_1 .

iii) From Eqs. (5) and (6) we find

$$\frac{de}{dp_2} = \frac{2W\Pi\Pi'R' + (\Pi')^2 RR' p_2}{Dp_2} < 0.$$

Now differentiation of Eq. (4) provides

$$\frac{de^e}{dp_2} = -\frac{R'}{R'' p_2} < 0.$$

Again after substitution of D , and rearrangement of terms, we get:

$$\frac{de}{dp_2} = -\frac{R'}{R'' p_2} \frac{2W\Pi\Pi' + (\Pi')^2 R p_2}{2W\Pi\Pi' + \frac{(\Pi' R')^2 p_2}{R}} < -\frac{R'}{R'' p_2}.$$

Hence

$$\frac{de}{dp_2} < \frac{de^e}{dp_2}.$$

Since $e > e^e$, it follows that overextraction $e - e^e$ decreases with p_2 .

Proof of Proposition 3. From Eq. (5) and (6) we find easily that for the three cases i), ii) and iii) that

$$\frac{dG}{dp/p} = -\frac{\Pi\Pi'RR''p_2}{D} > 0, \tag{8}$$

$$\frac{dG}{dp_1} = \frac{\Pi'R'}{D} < 0, \tag{9}$$

$$\frac{dG}{dp_2} = \frac{\Pi\Pi'[(R')^2 - RR'']}{D} > 0. \tag{10}$$

Since private sector employment equals $1 - G$ the proposition follows.

⁴ As in the 2006 version we for simplicity assume $R'' = 0$.

Proof of Proposition 4. Consider for simplicity the case of a permanent resource boom (i.e. $dp_1/p_1 = dp_2/p_2 = dp/p$) (the same type of ambiguity persists for a temporary present or future boom). The total (net present value of) income Y in the economy if the incumbent remains in power equals production plus resource rents,

$$Y = 2(1-G)H + p_1e + p_2R(e).$$

By differentiating with respect to p the effect on total income from a resource boom is given by

$$\frac{dY}{dp/p} = p_1e + p_2R + (p_1 + p_2R') \frac{de}{dp/p} - 2H \frac{dG}{dp/p}. \quad (11)$$

A resource boom has three effects on income. First, the increased proportional value of the resource has the direct effect of increasing income (the term $p_1e + p_2R$). Second, a resource boom increases income as the efficiency of the extraction path increases (the term $(p_1 + p_2R')$ $\frac{de}{dp/p}$ which is positive since $p_2R' = -\frac{p_1}{\Pi} < -p_1$ and $\frac{de}{dp/p} < 0$). Third, as shown by the last term in Eq. (11), a resource boom transfers labor from the private to the less productive public sector, pulling in the direction of decreased income.

By inserting from Eqs. (7) and (8) in Eq. (11) one finds after some calculation that

$$\text{sign} \frac{dY}{dp/p} = \text{sign} \left[2R'' \left(-eW - \frac{p_2}{p_1} (W-H)R \right) - \frac{\Pi'}{\Pi} \left(ep_2(R')^2 - p_2RR' \right) \right].$$

Here the two first terms on the right hand side are positive while the two last terms are negative (recall that $R' < 0$). It is in general not possible to sign the expression. Note however that if Π' is sufficiently small then $\frac{dY}{dp/p} > 0$ while when Π' is sufficiently large then it may be that $\frac{dY}{dp/p} < 0$.

The same property holds for expected income, EY , over the two periods which is given by

$$EY = (2 - (1 + \Pi)G)H + p_1e + p_2R(e),$$

which implies that the effect of the resource boom is determined by

$$\text{sign} \frac{dEY}{dp/p} = \text{sign} \left[R' \left(-2eW - \frac{p_2}{p_1} (2W - H(1 + \Pi + G\Pi))R \right) - \frac{\Pi'}{\Pi} \left(ep_2(R')^2 - p_2RR' \right) \right].$$

The magnitude of the derivative of Π captures in a nice way the impact of institutions on clientelism. When Π' is small it implies that electoral outcomes are not very responsive to public sector employment. This would happen when employment does not guarantee that citizens support the client. This might be because employment must be based on non-political criteria, or because politicians have become accountable to voters, and not the other way round. It could also be because of changes in electoral institutions which limit the ability of politicians to monitor employees' voting behavior. We associate the case with a small Π' with strong institutions that limit the effectiveness of clientelism, while a large Π' captures weak institutions that encourage clientelism since it is relatively effective. Hence the proposition follows.

References

- Acemoglu, Daron, Robinson, James A., 2001. Inefficient redistribution. *Am. Polit. Sci. Rev.* 95, 649–662.
- Alesina, Alberto, Baqir, Reza, Easterly, William, 2000. Redistributive public employment. *J. Urban Econ.* 48, 219–241.
- Coate, Steven T., Morris, Stephen E., 1995. On the form of transfers to special interests. *Eur. J. Polit. Econ.* 103, 1210–1235.
- Robinson, James A., Verdier, Thierry, 2013. Political economy of clientelism. *Scand. J. Econ.* 115, 260–291.
- Robinson, James A., Torvik, Ragnar, Verdier, Thierry, 2006. The political foundations of the resource curse. *J. Dev. Econ.* 79, 447–468.
- Sartori, Giovanni, 1994. *Comparative Constitutional Engineering*. New York University Press, New York.
- Turner, Thomas, Young, Crawford, 1985. *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.