

The Transformation of Political Patronage: From the Exchange of Interests to Power Consolidation

Iskandar^{1*}, Andi Burchanuddin², Ansurlawarlin³, Julia Magdalena Wuysang⁴

^{1,2,3} Universitas Bosowa, Makassar, Indonesia

³ Universitas Tanjungpura, Pontianak, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: iskandar@universitasbosowa.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keyword: Political patronage; Clientelism; Patronage networks; Political power; Power consolidation	This study aims to analyze the transformation of political patronage from a mechanism of interest exchange into an instrument of power consolidation by examining patterns of patronage, the actors and networks involved, and the distribution of resources and political loyalty. The study employs a qualitative approach using a case study and documentary analysis to examine patronage practices, patron client relations, resource exchanges, and the dynamics of political power. The findings indicate that political patronage has transformed from initially material and transactional exchanges into more complex power networks involving access to positions, projects, economic opportunities, information, protection, and political support. This transformation has expanded the range of actors involved and strengthened patron client relations through sustained loyalty and continuous resource exchange. Ultimately, patronage serves not only to secure electoral support but also as an instrument of power consolidation through network expansion, the maintenance of political support, and the reproduction of political influence.

INTRODUCTION

Political patronage represents a significant phenomenon in political practice, particularly within democratic contexts characterized by electoral competition, resource distribution, and relationships between political elites and citizens (Drishti et al., 2023; Ismayawati & Rosyada, 2025; Kapanadze, 2026). In general, patronage refers to the exchange of material and non-material resources between patrons and clients, whereby political support is provided in return for access to employment, assistance, facilities, projects, positions, or other resources (Dettman & Gomez, 2020; Drishti et al., 2023; Madani et al., 2021; Moon & Schoenherr, 2022). Over time, patronage has evolved beyond individual relationships between elites and supporters into broader political networks involving political parties, bureaucracies, business actors, civil society organizations, and local political actors (Baharuddin et al., 2023; Jubba et al., 2023; Syukri et al., 2025). This development positions patronage as an informal mechanism capable of influencing political mobilization, resource distribution, and the formation and maintenance of political power (Cendales, 2012; Dawson, 2014).

Previous literature demonstrates that political patronage is closely associated with clientelism, distributive politics, and the exchange of interests within democratic systems (Berenschot, 2018; Gurakar & Bircan, 2018; Sayari, 2014). Studies of patronage politics indicate that the distribution of state and political resources can be strategically employed by elites to cultivate loyalty and secure electoral support. Within electoral democracies, patronage does not

necessarily disappear as democratic institutions develop; rather, it may adapt to changes in political systems and institutional arrangements (Ismayawati & Rosyada, 2025). Patronage may operate through direct assistance to citizens, the distribution of government programs, access to public positions and projects, and informal networks designed to secure political support (Baharuddin, 2022; Baharuddin & Purwaningsih, 2017; Driscoll, 2018). Accordingly, the presence of formal democratic institutions does not automatically eliminate patronage practices, as political actors may strategically utilize these institutions to establish and expand networks of reciprocal interests.

A growing body of research further demonstrates that patronage has transformed from relatively straightforward exchange relationships into increasingly complex networks of power (Gazalin et al., 2025). Whereas traditional patronage tends to be characterized by direct and personalized patron-client relationships, contemporary political dynamics reveal increasingly mediated forms of patronage involving political parties, local elites, bureaucratic actors, business interests, interest groups, and other social actors (Dawson, 2014). Within these networks, exchanged resources extend beyond money and material assistance to encompass political access, strategic positions, protection, information, legitimacy, and economic opportunities (Berenschot, 2020; Coburn, 2016; Jati et al., 2026). This transformation suggests that patronage serves not merely as a mechanism for winning elections but also as a means of sustaining political networks after electoral contests have ended. Patronage therefore constitutes an important mechanism of power consolidation, enabling political elites to maintain network loyalty, control the distribution of resources, and reinforce their political positions over time.

Although scholarship on political patronage has expanded considerably, there remains a significant gap in understanding how patronage practices have transformed within contemporary politics from mechanisms of interest exchange into instruments of power consolidation. This perspective is important because patronage is not limited to transactional relationships between political elites and voters, but also involves the formation and reproduction of power networks encompassing diverse actors and institutions. Accordingly, the study entitled “The Transformation of Political Patronage: From the Exchange of Interests to Power Consolidation” seeks to examine changes in patronage patterns, the actors involved, the forms of resources exchanged, and the ways in which patronage networks are utilized to establish, maintain, and expand political power within contemporary democratic settings.

This study aims to examine the transformation of political patronage from a mechanism of interest exchange into an instrument of power consolidation by analyzing the forms and patterns of patronage, identifying the actors and networks involved, examining the transformation of patron-client relations from transactional practices into more structured and sustainable power networks, and analyzing the role of patronage in building political loyalty, maintaining political networks, controlling resource distribution, and strengthening elite positions within political competition. Academically, the study contributes to the development of political patronage scholarship by explaining its transformation from reciprocal exchange toward a broader mechanism of power consolidation. Practically, the study provides insights for political actors and policymakers into the dynamics of patronage networks and their role in establishing and sustaining political power.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design in Makassar City to gain an in-depth understanding of the practices and transformation of political patronage within the context of local politics. This approach was selected because it enables the researchers to identify patterns of patron-client relationships, forms of resource exchange, and the dynamics of power relations that develop among political actors and their support networks. Research data were obtained through documentary analysis by examining various written sources relevant to political patronage practices in Makassar City. The documentary sources included journal articles, books and previous studies, media reports, political documents, government documents, and other relevant sources containing information on political actors, patron-client relations,

resource distribution, support mobilization, and local political power dynamics. Documents were purposively selected based on their relevance, credibility, and alignment with the research focus.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Forms and Patterns of Political Patronage in Politics

Political patronage practices in Makassar City demonstrate reciprocal relationships involving diverse political and social actors through the distribution of both material and non-material resources. Based on the documentary analysis, patronage extends beyond the direct provision of financial assistance or economic benefits and increasingly operates through access to political positions, projects, political networks, protection, and electoral support. This pattern indicates that patron-client relations in local politics are dynamic, as exchanges of interests may occur before, during, and after electoral contests and involve increasingly broader networks of political and social actors.

Table 1. Forms and Patterns of Political Patronage in Politics

Forms of Patronage	Resources Exchanged	Actors Involved	Patron-Client Relationship Pattern	Political Implications
Material Patronage	Money, social assistance, goods, facilities, and economic support	Political elites, candidates, campaign teams, and citizens	Patrons provide material benefits, while clients provide political support	Builds loyalty and strengthens support mobilization
Programmatic Patronage	Development programs, group assistance, public facilities, and government program allocations	Politicians, government institutions, and community groups	Access to programs is associated with political networks or proximity	Strengthens political relationships between elites and beneficiary groups
Positional Patronage	Access to strategic positions or public offices	Political elites, bureaucratic actors, and political parties	Political support is exchanged for access to particular positions	Builds elite loyalty and expands power networks
Economic Patronage	Projects, contracts, business opportunities, and economic access	Politicians, business actors, contractors, and business networks	Political support is cultivated through the distribution of economic opportunities	Creates reciprocal relationships between political and economic interests
Network-Based Patronage	Access, information, protection, and political connections	Elites, community leaders, business actors, and social organizations	Patrons provide access and protection, while clients maintain loyalty	Expands networks and strengthens the patron's political position
Electoral Patronage	Electoral support, mass mobilization, and campaign resources	Candidates, political parties, campaign teams, local leaders, and voters	Political resources are utilized to secure electoral support	Increases candidates' capacity to win electoral contests
Non-Material Patronage	Status, recognition, legitimacy, protection, and political access	Political elites, community leaders, and interest groups	Relationships are established through loyalty, proximity, and social recognition	Strengthens legitimacy and sustains patronage networks

Source: Results of document analysis, 2026

Based on Table 1, political patronage practices in Makassar City demonstrate that patron-client relationships are constructed through diverse mechanisms of resource exchange. These exchanges involve not only material resources, such as money, assistance, goods, and facilities, but also non-material resources, including access, information, protection, legitimacy, and opportunities to obtain particular positions. The diversity of resources indicates that patronage functions as a flexible political mechanism capable of adapting to the needs and characteristics of the actors involved. Accordingly, patronage should not be understood merely as an economic transaction between elites and citizens, but rather as a reciprocal relationship that connects political, social, and economic interests.

Material patronage demonstrates that economic resources remain important in establishing patron-client relationships. The provision of money, social assistance, goods, and facilities can be utilized by political actors to secure support and establish closer relationships with particular community groups. Within electoral politics, material resources possess significant mobilizing capacity because they provide tangible benefits to recipients. However, the exchange does not end with the provision of benefits, as recipients may subsequently provide political support through voting, participation in political activities, or mobilization of members within their social networks. This pattern demonstrates a reciprocal relationship in which economic resources function as instruments for cultivating political loyalty.

Beyond material patronage, programmatic patronage represents a more complex form of exchange because it involves development programs, group assistance, and public facilities. In this form, patronage may operate through particular groups' access to resources or programs located within the sphere of government policy. This condition demonstrates how the boundary between public policy distribution and political interests can become increasingly blurred when government programs are perceived as outcomes of political proximity to particular actors. Programmatic patronage can therefore expand the political support base because the benefits distributed extend beyond individuals to broader groups and communities.

Positional and economic patronage reveal an increasingly strong relationship between political power and access to strategic resources. Access to public positions can be utilized to cultivate loyalty among elites and actors occupying strategic positions within political networks. Meanwhile, access to projects, contracts, business opportunities, and economic resources can create reciprocal relationships between political actors and business groups. These relationships demonstrate that patronage can extend beyond candidate-voter interactions to form broader networks connecting political actors with groups possessing economic resources. Within such arrangements, political support may generate economic access, while economic resources can subsequently be mobilized to strengthen political activities and networks.

Network-based patronage is particularly significant because it demonstrates that political power is determined not only by the resources controlled by a patron but also by the capacity to establish and sustain social networks. Access to community leaders, business actors, social organizations, and other political actors can constitute important political capital for expanding influence. Through these networks, patrons can obtain political information, identify potential supporters, mobilize communities, and maintain relationships with diverse actors. At the same time, clients gain access, protection, information, and opportunities to connect with centers of political power. This pattern gives patronage a networked character, allowing political relationships to persist even in the absence of direct material transactions.

Electoral patronage provides the clearest illustration of the relationship between resource exchange and political competition. Candidates and political parties require electoral support, while supporting actors seek access to resources and networks capable of generating particular benefits. Under these conditions, local leaders and social groups can function as intermediaries between political elites and communities. They possess the capacity to organize support, facilitate political communication, and influence the political preferences of particular groups. Electoral patronage therefore does not merely create individual relationships between candidates and voters but also constructs broader mobilization networks through which political resources circulate across multiple levels of political actors.

Non-material patronage, meanwhile, demonstrates that patron-client relationships are also constructed through status, recognition, legitimacy, protection, and political proximity. This form indicates that political loyalty cannot always be explained in terms of economic benefits.

Social recognition, access to elites, a sense of belonging within political networks, and protection provided by patrons may constitute valuable political resources for clients. In return, patrons gain social legitimacy and support from networks operating within their sphere of influence. This demonstrates that patronage possesses symbolic and relational dimensions that can sustain political relationships beyond short-term material transactions.

Overall, Table 1 demonstrates that political patronage in Makassar City has developed into an increasingly diverse and layered phenomenon. Patron-client relationships no longer operate solely through direct exchanges but increasingly develop through networks connecting material resources, public programs, political positions, economic interests, information, protection, and electoral support. This condition indicates a transformation of patronage from transactional relationships toward more structured mechanisms of power-network formation. Patronage is therefore utilized not only to win electoral contests but also to maintain loyalty, expand networks of influence, secure access to strategic resources, and strengthen elite positions after political power has been obtained. Political patronage in Makassar City can consequently be understood as an informal mechanism that contributes to the reproduction and consolidation of political power.

The Transformation of Patronage Networks and Political Power Relations

The transformation of political patronage networks in Makassar City demonstrates a shift from relatively simple patron-client relationships toward increasingly complex, extensive, and multilayered power relations. Patronage no longer operates solely through direct relationships between political elites and beneficiary communities but has evolved into networks connecting politicians, political parties, business actors, community leaders, social organizations, bureaucratic actors, and support groups. This transformation demonstrates the capacity of patronage to adapt to developments in political institutions and the changing nature of electoral competition. In this context, networks have become important instruments because they enable the exchange of resources through multiple actors simultaneously, ensuring that power relations do not depend on a single patron-client relationship.

This transformation can be observed in the changing character of patronage relationships, which have shifted from predominantly personalized interactions toward increasingly organized political networks. Patrons do not necessarily interact directly with every client but may rely on intermediaries, including local leaders, organizational representatives, political teams, and influential community actors. These intermediaries perform strategic functions by translating the interests of patrons to community groups while simultaneously communicating the needs and demands of clients to patrons. Consequently, a hierarchical structure of relationships emerges in which political resources and influence flow from centers of power toward broader social networks.

The transformation also reflects the diversification of resources exchanged within patronage networks. Whereas traditional patronage was more readily identified through the exchange of money or material assistance, contemporary patronage networks may operate through access to information, political positions, projects, economic opportunities, political protection, and social legitimacy. This diversification makes patronage relationships more flexible because different actors can obtain different benefits according to their respective positions within the network. For example, business actors may gain economic and political access, while community leaders may obtain strategic positions as intermediaries between political elites and local communities. Under such arrangements, patronage becomes a space for exchanging interconnected political, social, and economic interests.

The transformation of patronage networks is also closely associated with the changing position of political parties within power structures. Political parties are not merely formal vehicles for obtaining political office through elections but can also function as institutional arenas in which diverse networks of interests interact and negotiate. Political elites with established patronage networks may utilize party structures to expand access to resources and organize political support. Conversely, parties benefit from these networks because they can facilitate voter mobilization, support building, and the strengthening of candidates' positions in political competition. This relationship demonstrates the interaction between formal political institutions and informal networks in the construction and reproduction of political power.

In the context of Makassar City, patronage networks can also be understood through the role of intermediary actors who maintain close relationships with particular communities. Community leaders, local business actors, organizational activists, and other social actors may function as intermediaries connecting political elites with citizens. Their positions enable them to convert social capital into political capital. Patrons benefit from an expanded sphere of influence, while intermediary actors gain access to political elites and resources. Consequently, patronage networks are not entirely vertical but increasingly exhibit horizontal and negotiated patterns because each actor possesses particular resources that can be exchanged within the network.

The transformation of patronage is also evident in the increasingly strong relationship between political and economic networks. Politics and economics can mutually reinforce one another when actors possessing economic resources gain access to political networks, while political elites receive financial, logistical, or business-network support. These relationships create more complex exchange patterns than those found in traditional patron-client relations. In certain circumstances, economic networks may serve as resources for political activities, while political power may provide access to economic opportunities. This condition demonstrates that the transformation of patronage involves not only changes in the actors participating in the network but also changes in the types of resources underlying the formation of power relations.

Increasingly complex patronage networks also transform the mechanisms through which political loyalty is constructed. Loyalty is no longer based solely on the direct provision of material benefits but may be sustained through long-term relationships, access, protection, communication, and a sense of attachment to the network. An actor may remain within a patronage network because of political benefits that are not necessarily material in nature. Conversely, patrons depend on network loyalty to maintain the continuity of their influence. Such relationships generate patterns of interdependence that enable patronage networks to persist beyond a single electoral cycle. Loyalty therefore becomes a crucial form of political capital in sustaining power relations.

Another significant transformation concerns the shift in the function of patronage networks from electoral mobilization toward the maintenance of political power. During elections, networks are utilized to mobilize support, organize voters, and strengthen candidates' political positions. Once power has been acquired, the same networks may function to maintain political support, build legitimacy, secure access to resources, and expand political influence. This shift demonstrates the temporal dimension of patronage. Networks established before elections can continue to be maintained after elections through the distribution of access and the preservation of political relationships, making electoral competition only one stage in the broader cycle of power reproduction.

From the perspective of power relations, this transformation demonstrates that political power is not located exclusively within formal institutions but is also produced and reproduced through informal networks. Formal institutions, including political parties, government institutions, and political bodies, provide the legal structure through which power is exercised, while patronage networks provide informal mechanisms for accessing, maintaining, and expanding political influence (Iskandar & Baharuddin, 2026). The interaction between these dimensions produces a complex configuration of power. Understanding local politics therefore requires more than examining formal governmental structures or electoral outcomes; it also requires attention to networks of relationships, resource exchanges, and informal actors operating behind decision-making processes and political mobilization.

Overall, the transformation of patronage networks in Makassar City demonstrates a shift from transactional patronage toward network-based patronage and power consolidation. Patronage networks increasingly involve multiple actors, the resources exchanged have become more diverse, and relationships are increasingly oriented toward long-term sustainability. Patronage is therefore no longer merely an instrument for securing votes during elections but has become a mechanism for building loyalty, connecting political and economic interests, controlling access to resources, and maintaining elite positions within structures of power. This transformation provides an important foundation for the subsequent analysis of how patronage networks are systematically utilized as instruments of political power consolidation in Makassar City.

Political Patronage as an Instrument of Power Consolidation

Political patronage in the context of Makassar City functions not only as a mechanism of interest exchange for securing electoral support but has also evolved into an instrument for building and sustaining power over the long term. Once patron-client relationships develop into relatively stable networks, the resources exchanged are no longer directed solely toward winning electoral contests but also toward maintaining loyalty and strengthening political positions after power has been acquired. This condition demonstrates that patronage performs a strategic function in power consolidation by connecting elite interests with diverse groups possessing social, economic, and political resources.

Power consolidation through patronage occurs primarily through the maintenance of loyalty within political networks. Patrons with access to resources can sustain relationships with supporting actors by providing access, protection, economic opportunities, political positions, or support for particular interests. Such relationships generate forms of interdependence that encourage clients to maintain their proximity to patrons. At the same time, patrons gain political support that can be reactivated when they face electoral competition or political pressures. Loyalty within patronage networks is therefore not static but continuously reproduced through resource exchange and reciprocal relationships.

Patronage also contributes to the expansion and protection of power networks. Political elites do not necessarily establish direct relationships with citizens but may rely on intermediary actors who possess influence within particular communities. Community leaders, business actors, organizational representatives, and local political figures can function as network nodes connecting elites with support groups. Through this structure, patrons can expand their sphere of influence without having to manage every political relationship directly. The broader and more effectively maintained the network, the greater the capacity of political elites to mobilize support and sustain influence within the local political arena.

The consolidation function of patronage is also evident in its capacity to connect political power with access to economic and institutional resources. When relationships among political elites, business actors, and institutional actors are maintained over time, each party can derive benefits from the same network. Economic actors gain access to political opportunities, while elites obtain resources that strengthen their political capacity. At a certain level, these relationships can produce networks of interests through which power is reproduced simultaneously through political and economic relations. This demonstrates that power consolidation does not occur exclusively through formal institutions but also through informal networks that shape the distribution of access and opportunities.

Beyond maintaining support, patronage can strengthen elite positions within political competition. Patronage networks provide elites with resources that can be mobilized to respond to changing political configurations, construct coalitions, and confront competitors. Networks established before elections can be reactivated during subsequent political moments, giving patrons an advantage over actors who rely primarily on electoral campaigns. In this context, patronage functions as political capital that can be converted into support, legitimacy, mobilization capacity, and access to strategic actors. The ability to activate established networks at critical political moments is therefore an important factor enabling the sustainable maintenance of political power.

However, the use of patronage as an instrument of power consolidation also has implications for the quality of democracy and governance. When access to political and economic resources is determined predominantly by proximity to patronage networks, principles of equal access and open political competition may be weakened. The distribution of public resources may likewise be perceived as being influenced not solely by public needs and collective interests but also by particular political relationships. Such conditions can reinforce citizens' and political actors' dependence on patronage networks while reducing the space for more institutionalized, transparent, and accountable political mechanisms.

Overall, political patronage in Makassar City can be understood as an informal mechanism of power reproduction operating through resource exchange, loyalty maintenance, network expansion, and the strengthening of relationships between political and economic interests. The transformation of patronage from short-term transactions into long-term power networks

demonstrates that political success depends not only on the ability to win elections but also on the capacity to build and sustain networks after power has been acquired. Patronage ultimately becomes an instrument of power consolidation when established networks are capable of maintaining support, securing access to resources, expanding political influence, and preserving elite positions within power structures. These findings underscore that understanding local politics in Makassar City requires attention not only to formal institutions but also to the informal relationships through which political power is produced, maintained, and reproduced.

CONCLUSION

The study findings demonstrate that political patronage has transformed from predominantly material and transactional exchanges into increasingly complex networks of power. Patronage now encompasses not only money, assistance, and electoral support but also access to political positions, projects, economic opportunities, information, protection, legitimacy, and political networks involving elites, political parties, business actors, community leaders, and social groups. This transformation has positioned patronage as an informal mechanism for cultivating loyalty, expanding networks, maintaining political support, and consolidating political power. Patronage networks enable elites to connect political and economic interests while sustaining their influence beyond electoral contests, although such practices may also undermine equal access, open political competition, and accountability in governance.

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