Vote-Selling and Vote-Buying: Does The House Always Win? Gambling Votes in the Lab

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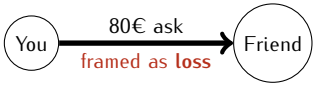
Why sequencing matters

- Friend **offers** 50€: you might see them as (unexpected) **gains**.
- You **demand** 80€ for the same good: now you fear **losses**.



✓ Two different "mindsets."

✓ Mindset depends on how the **sequence** flips the frame.

My talk is about **sequencing in clientelism**.

Who moves first can reshape the deal.

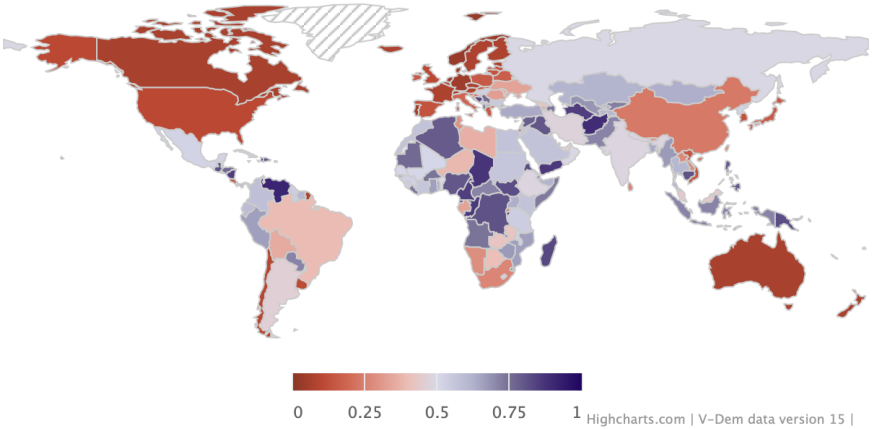
Move second, and you risk becoming a **price taker**.

Sequencing beyond clientelism

- **Welfare state and unions:** Do we get different welfare states when *unions must first mobilize* before benefits expand, versus when *governments move first* potentially avoiding workers' needs?
- **Intergenerational inequality:** What happens to class reproduction when *parents must invest first* (education, housing, debt) and the state steps in later, versus systems where *the state introduces first* universal support?

Clientelism: distribution of private rewards to individuals during elections in exchange for electoral support (Nichter, 2014).

Clientelism Index (2024)



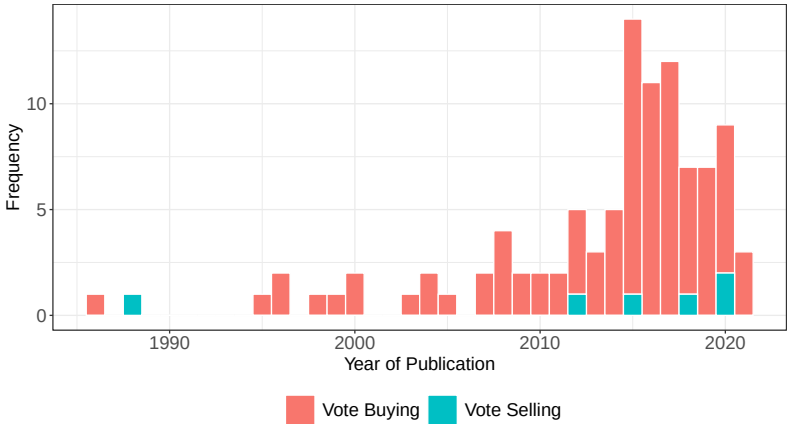
Timing had been Overlooked

- Ethnographers emphasize **reciprocity**:
  - Voters, neighborhood leaders, and brokers (potential **sellers**) often **begin** exchanges.
- Quantitative: show clientelism as **party-initiated demand** for votes.
  - Do parties buy from own supporters or undecided voters?

✓ Timing had been overlooked in the quantitative literature:
- Heavily focused on **vote buying**.
- Very few studies **vote selling**.

✓ We argue that understanding clientelism properly requires putting **voters as strategic sellers**, just like vote-buying parties.

Vote-Selling Literature is Really Lagging Behind



Annual frequency of Web of Science publications whose abstracts include the terms "vote buying" and "vote selling."

Our Paper and Today's Talk

- **Conceptual move**: integrate vote buying *and* vote selling in the same framework.
- **Theory**: formalize a spatial model with one voter and two parties.
  1. Parties moves first.
  2. Voters moves first.
- **Experiment**: based on the formal model, we designed a lab econ experiment.
- **Findings**:
  - ✓ When parties move first: transfers concentrate on **party supporters**.
  - ✓ When voters move first: they **demand higher prices** from winning parties that are ideologically far away.
  - ✓ Voters earn **higher average payoffs** when parties initiate the exchange.

A minimal political environment

- Politics lives on a simple **left–right line**.

  $y \in \Gamma = \{1, \ldots, 100\}$

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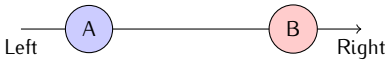

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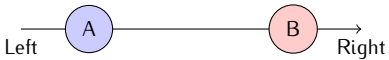
  W_i; electoral stake $R_i = \pi W_i$



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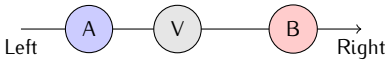

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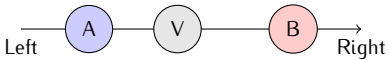
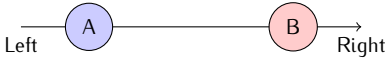


Key idea

Voters have a **preferred party** (i^*)

Ideology creates an advantage

- Ideological advantage Δ



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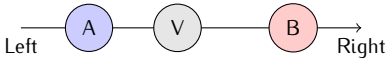

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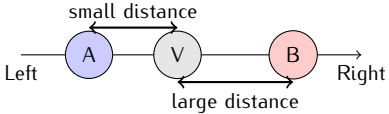
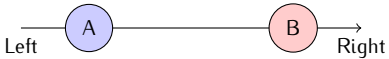


Implication

Δ is how much compensation (minimal transfer) the voter needs to switch sides.

Elections create stakes

- Sometimes, both parties run in tight races (high pivotality π).



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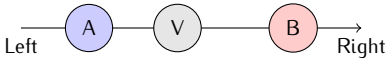

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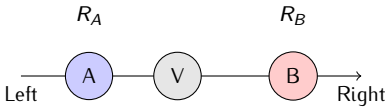
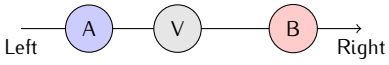


Intuition

R_i = how much winning is worth, changing the voter's price.

When parties move first: vote buying

- When parties begin, they make offers in the vote-buying game s_A, s_B.



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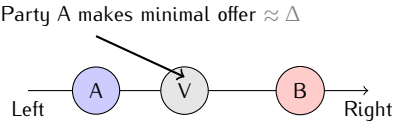

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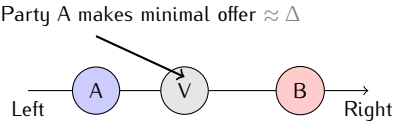
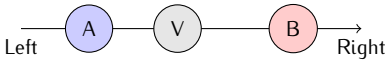


Key result

It is cheapest to buy the vote from the **core voter** (i^*, with advantage Δ).

When voters move first: vote selling

- The voter requests vote-selling prices in the vote-selling game a_A, a_B.



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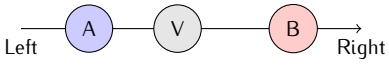

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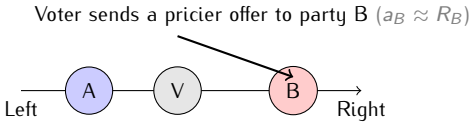


Implication

Voters ask more from parties with **more to lose** (big R_i).

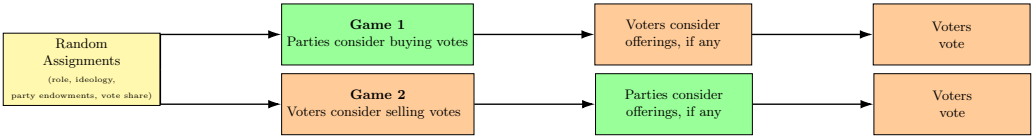
Hypotheses

- **H1 (Core Targeting Under Party Initiative):**
  - When parties initiate, transfers concentrate on ideologically proximate voters; parties mainly buy from their core.
- **H2 (Selling to the Opponent Winning Party):**
  - When voters initiate, they demand higher prices from electorally strong, often ideologically distant parties, using vote selling to hedge against electoral risk.
- **H3 (Higher Voter Payoffs Under Party Initiative):**
  - Because parties overspend under electoral risk when they initiate vote buying, while rejecting many high-priced proposals in vote selling, voters earn higher expected payoffs in VB than in VS.

Laboratory implementation

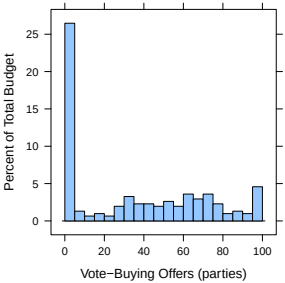
- **Subjects and implementation**
  - Following the formal model, we designed a lab experiment in oTree.
  - Recruited 102 adult participants.
  - Payed them according to the quality of their decisions.
- **Roles**
  - Each game: three (real) players (Party A, Party B, Voter).
  - Each subject played the game three times.
  - Every time we executed a new randomization block.
- **What was randomized every time**
  - Role (party, voter).
  - Voter's ideological payoffs if **A** or **B** wins.
  - Party budgets (to buy votes).
  - If the voter is pivotal.

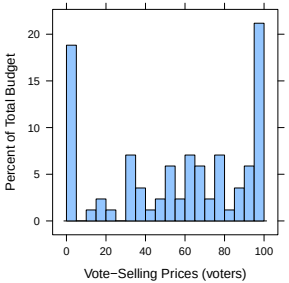
Experimental Flow



Two institutional variants in an otherwise identical strategic environment.

Plotting the Dependent Variable: Vote-buying vs vote-selling prices





- The two histograms describe **very different worlds**:
  - When **parties move first**.
  - When **voters move first**.
- **What explains the differences of these two games?**

Modeling vote-buying offers

- **What explains the variance of the vote-buying offers?** Estimate OLS:

$$\text{Offer}_{di} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \text{Ideology}_{di} + \gamma_2 \text{VoteShare}_{di} + \gamma_3 \text{Pivotal}_d + u_{di}$$

- Also a logit model for the probability of making *any* offer.
- Standard errors clustered at the party level.

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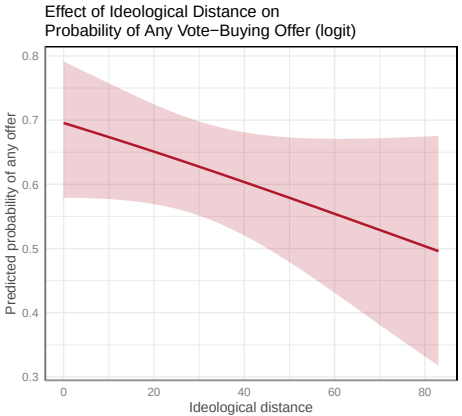
Results: Vote-Buying Offers and Core Targeting



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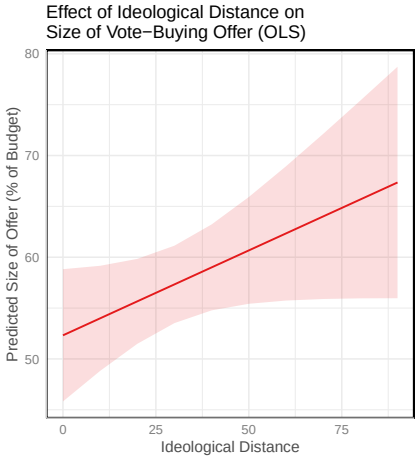

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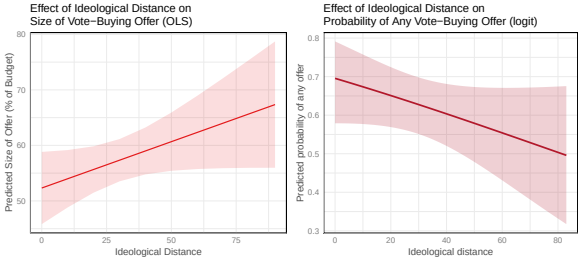

- As ideological distance increases, parties are **less likely** to make any offer at all.
- If they offer, parties pay **larger** transfers to more distant voters.
- So: parties target followers cheaply (right), but pay a premium to buy distant votes (left).

Modeling vote-selling prices

- **What explains how voters price their vote?** Estimate OLS:

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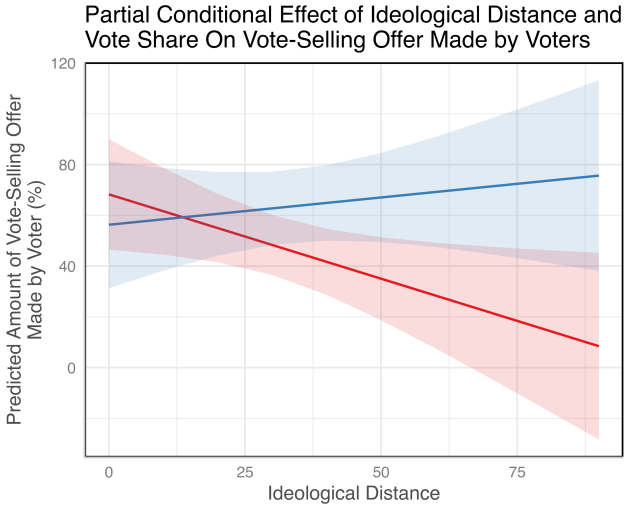
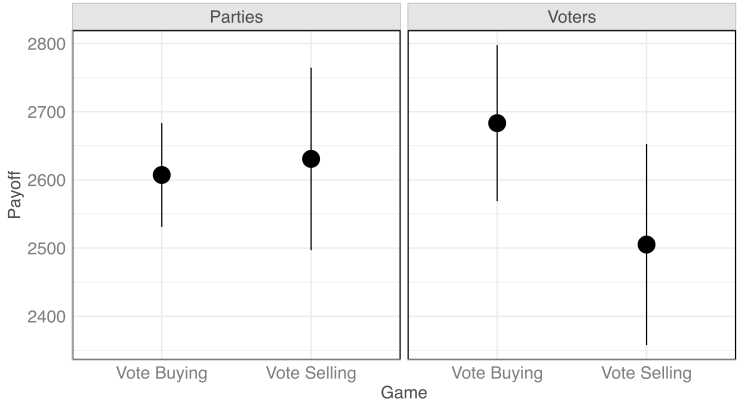
Requested prices by ideology and electoral strength



Interpreting H2

- With **electorally weak** parties:
  - Requested prices **decrease** with ideological distance.
  - When the weak party is ideologically close, voters ask for relatively high transfers to insure against its likely loss.
  - When it is distant, requested prices approach zero.
- With **electorally strong** parties:
  - Requested prices **increase** with ideological distance.
  - When the strong party is distant, voters often escalate demands toward the party's full budget.
  - Voters exploit stronger parties' higher electoral stakes R_i.
- This pricing pattern is consistent with **H2**: when voters initiate, they use vote selling to hedge against electoral risk by demanding more from electorally strong, often ideologically distant parties.

Payoffs by role and institutional variant



Mean payoffs for voters and parties under party-initiated vote buying (VB) and voter-initiated vote selling (VS). Error bars: non-parametric 90% CIs.

Does initiative change who wins the game?

- **Parties:**
  - Party payoffs are similar or slightly higher in VS than in VB.
  - Shifting initiative to voters does not reduce party utilities in our setting.
- **Voters:**
  - Voters earn **higher average payoffs** when parties move first (VB) than when voters move first (VS).
  - One-sided test of the difference in means is statistically significant (p-value from the t-test in the paper).
- Interpretation:
  - In VB, parties often overspend relative to the minimal compensating transfer Δ, especially under electoral risk.
  - In VS, very high requested prices are often rejected, leaving some voters with only ideological payoffs.
  - Overall, initiative shapes how surplus is split: voters do better when parties initiate, while parties do at least as well when voters initiate.

Main takeaways

- Treating vote buying and vote selling as **institutional variants of the same market** clarifies:
  - Who is targeted (core vs strong opponent).
  - How much is paid.
  - How surplus is allocated between parties and voters.
- When **parties initiate** (VB):
  - Transfers concentrate on core voters.
  - Parties tend to overspend under electoral risk.
  - Voters capture a larger share of surplus.
- When **voters initiate** (VS):
  - Voters demand higher prices from electorally strong, ideologically distant parties.
  - Many of these high demands are rejected, lowering average voter payoffs.
  - Parties' payoffs are stable or higher relative to VB.

Implications and next steps

- Conceptually:
  - Clientelism is a **market** with both demand (parties) and supply (voters).
  - Initiative is a core institutional rule that helps explain core–swing targeting and surplus allocation.
- Methodologically:
  - Experiments that vary who initiates the exchange can uncover mechanisms that are hard to see in observational data.
- Limitations:
  - One-shot lab games, no brokers, no repeated interactions or sanctions.
  - Bilateral monopoly: two parties and one voter; no networks or groups of sellers.
- Future work:
  - Multi-voter and multi-party environments, with brokers and networks.
  - Lab-in-the-field and survey experiments varying initiative.
  - Linking this institutional perspective to ethnographic evidence on how often exchanges are party- vs voter-initiated.

Thank you

- Paper and abstract: www.HectorBahamonde.com
- Feedback very welcome.