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

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Abstract

The clientelism literature has advanced a number of important questions. Unfortunately, most of it addresses the issue from the party's side (vote-buying). In this paper we bridge this gap by bringing the voters back in, particularly by incorporating the vote-buying and vote-selling dynamics into the same framework. After formalizing a basic theory of vote-buying and vote-selling, we implemented an economic experiment to study different strategic behaviors. Our empirical results suggest that parties buy votes from their core constituencies, while voters sell their votes to the opponent winning party. Voters consistently derive more utility when parties take the initiative in the vote-buying game.

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I. The Neglected Voter in Clientelism Research

Non-programmatic linkages (Kitschelt 2000) are reciprocal (Auyero 2000; Finan and Schechter 2012). That is, the clientelist exchange usually happens between parties *and* voters, where the former provide particularistic benefits and the latter provide electoral support (Nichter 2008; Nichter 2014). Yet most quantitative scholars have overlooked voters' preferences, thus failing to describe the available strategies of vote sellers. The literature often focuses only on parties and how they target individuals. As noted in this paper, the clientelism literature is heavily unbalanced, showing a huge interest in vote buying relative to vote selling. Hence, while the literature has advanced a number of important questions (see Hicken 2011 for an excellent review), most accounts of clientelism tackle the issue from the party's side.

We contend that omitting the voter's side not only limits our understanding of the phenomenon as a whole but also may seriously threaten our inferences. This issue is particularly problematic because there are only a few quantitative papers that address vote selling. For instance, Hicken, Leider, et al. (2015) and Hicken, Leider, et al. (2018) study vote selling in the Philippines, while Bahamonde (2022) studies vote selling in the United States. This suggests a lack of interest in the quantitative study of vote selling, even though, as we explain in this paper, a number of theoretical and empirical problems arise when the systematic study of vote sellers is omitted.

One important consequence of this deficit is that we do not know whether the dynamics of vote selling and vote buying are systematically different. A simple question has gone largely unanswered: *Which setting—vote buying or vote selling—is more convenient for either side (parties and voters)?* Ethnographers have raised similar issues. For example, (Hagene 2015, p. 152) notes that many clientelist relationships are "client-initiated." (Tosoni 2007, pp. 55–57) explores instances where slum dwellers in Mexico strategically approach brokers to solve collective needs, while (Gay 1999) describes how neighborhood associations in Brazilian *favelas* attract resources in exchange for electoral support. These accounts suggest that voters and community leaders play an active role in initiating and structuring exchanges. Yet we still know little about *what strategies voters and parties follow in these different settings, and whether these strategies lead to systematic differences in utilities.*

At the same time, many studies that do include voters are still embedded in a vote-buying framework. For instance, (González-Ocantos, Jonge, et al. 2012; González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014; Kiewiet de Jonge 2015) show that voters systematically lie when asked directly about vote *buying*. These contributions clarify measurement problems, but they do not tell us much about preferences, dynamics, or strategies that are specific to vote sellers. Implicitly, voters are often treated as passive receivers of clientelism. In this paper we adopt a different view: voters are active agents seeking profit during campaigns, and bringing them back into the analysis is necessary to understand how clientelism actually works.

Conceptually, clientelism is not so different from any other market: there is an arena (campaigns), buyers (parties), and sellers (voters).[1] Classic demand and supply arguments then suggest that we must understand both sides of the exchange. However, most of the literature has concentrated on the demand side—party targeting, resource allocation, and monitoring—while forgetting about the supplier. Our starting point is that a full account of clientelism requires modeling and measuring the supply side as well: when voters choose to sell, to whom, and at what price.

This perspective also reframes long-standing debates about targeting. The canonical question is

[1]Other arenas beyond campaigns clearly exist. (Hagene 2015) provides an excellent discussion of the differences between "vote buying" and "clientelism." The former is short term (elections), while the latter may be sustained in the long term and accompanied by affective, personal, and problem-solving elements. For simplicity, we focus on the short-term, electoral aspect here.

whether parties target core constituencies or swing voters (Carlin and Moseley 2015). On the one hand, (Cox and Mccubbins 1986) and (Zarazaga 2016, p. 7) argue that constituencies that are well known to clientelist parties receive more resources. On the other hand, (Lindbeck and Weibull 1987; Dixit and Londregan 1996; Daglberg and Johansson 2002; Stokes 2005) contend that allocating resources to voters who would support the party anyway is wasteful, so parties should instead focus on swing voters. Yet both sides of this debate are typically framed from the party's perspective. We know far less about how different kinds of voters position themselves in clientelistic markets, who initiates exchanges, and how that interacts with partisan targeting.

Finally, there is a growing methodological consensus that experimental methods are particularly well suited to address such questions. Following (Aldrich and Lupia 2011; McDermott 2002), and in line with the view that experiments are a promising tool for the study of democracy and development (De La O and Wantchekon 2011), we use an economic experiment to place voters and parties on equal analytical footing. The next section develops the theoretical framework and hypotheses that we bring to that experiment.

II. Bringing Voters Back In: Theory, Contribution, and Hypotheses

In order to bridge the gap between demand- and supply-side accounts, we formalize a basic game of vote buying and vote selling. Campaigns are modeled as an arena in which parties and voters interact strategically: parties decide whether to offer particularistic benefits, voters decide whether to sell their votes, and both sides update their expectations based on ideology and electoral risk. By establishing payoffs that are contingent on the quality of participants' decisions and by randomizing roles (party or voter), ideology, income, and different electoral scenarios, the experiment recreates the supply and demand conditions that make vote buying and vote selling more or less attractive.

Our previous work applies prospect theory to the study of vote buying, showing that parties' willingness to buy votes depends on whether they perceive themselves to be in the domain of gains or losses (Bahamonde and Canales 2022). Strong parties "over-insure" against potential losses, while parties facing negative prospects gamble on buying votes to avoid falling into the loss domain. In that setup, parties initiate the exchange and voters respond. The present paper extends this logic to the vote seller's side of the market. We treat vote selling as a distinct game in which voters can move first, propose an offer, and choose which party they try to sell to. Reversing the order of moves shifts bargaining power and changes the outside options of each actor, which in turn should affect both targeting and utilities.

The experimental results speak directly to these theoretical issues. First, we find that parties tend to buy votes from their core constituencies: when they act as buyers, they allocate more resources to ideologically proximate voters than to distant ones, even when electoral scenarios vary. Second, when voters act as sellers, they do not simply reward their preferred party. Instead, they disproportionately sell their votes to the *opponent winning party*, consistent with the idea that vote selling can be used to hedge against unfavorable electoral outcomes. Finally, voters consistently derive more utility when parties take the initiative in the vote-buying game than when they must initiate the exchange themselves. In other words, "the house" does not always win: in this particular market, institutionalizing party-initiated exchanges appears to favor voters, while voter-initiated selling advantages parties.

These findings translate into three core contributions. Substantively, we show that voters are not passive recipients of clientelism but strategic actors whose decisions about when and to whom to sell their votes systematically shape outcomes. Methodologically, we provide one of the first experimental designs that embeds both vote buying and vote selling in the same framework, with random assignment of roles and electoral scenarios, allowing direct comparison across games. Theoretically, we connect the long-standing debate on core versus swing targeting with behavioral accounts of risk and loss aversion, now on both sides of the market.

On this basis, we advance the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis $\mathbf{H_1}$: When parties act as buyers, they spend more resources on ideologically proximate voters than on distant ones, even after accounting for expected vote share and party budgets. Parties primarily buy votes from their core constituencies.

Hypothesis $\mathbf{H_2}$: When voters act as sellers, they are more likely to direct high offers to the party that is expected to win the election, even when this party is not their closest ideological match. Voters use vote selling to hedge against unfavorable electoral outcomes by extracting benefits from electorally strong but ideologically distant parties.

Hypothesis $\mathbf{H_3}$: Because initiative and outside options differ across games, voters earn higher expected payoffs in the vote-buying game than in the vote-selling game, while parties' expected payoffs are similar or higher under vote selling. Clientelistic institutions in which parties initiate the exchange are therefore more favorable to voters than institutions that rely on voter-initiated selling.

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III. Appendix

Appendix