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

Hector Bahamonde [1] Andrea Canales [2]

[1]University of Turku, Finland

[2]O'Higgins University, Chile

Dec 11th 2026

Today we're Gonna Talk about Sequencing

- Sequencing really changes social outcomes, creating losers and winners depending on **who plays first**.
- **Welfare state and unions:** Do welfare outcomes differ when *unions mobilize first* versus when *governments act first*?
- **Intergenerational inequality:** Does inequality persist when *parents invest first* (education, housing), compared to systems where *the state provides support first*?

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✓ My talk will be about sequencing in **clientelism**.

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

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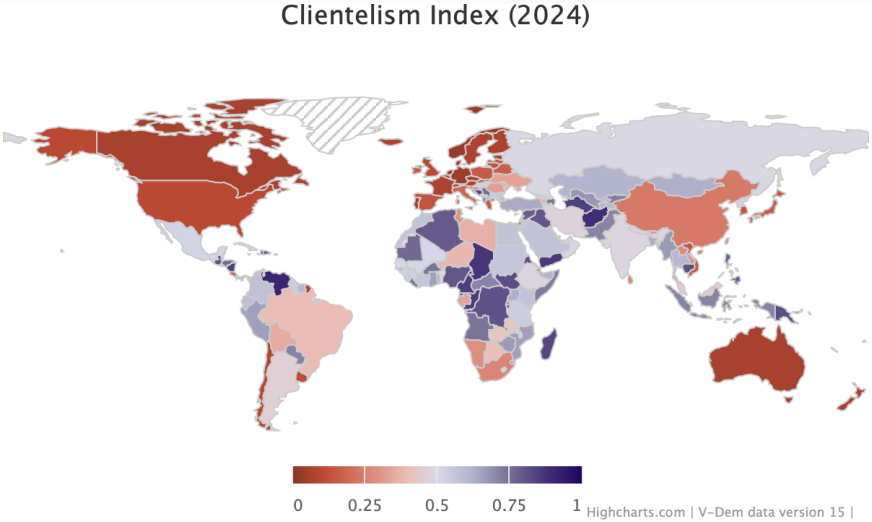
E.g., cash for your vote.


Clientelism Index (2024)
0
0.25
0.5
0.75
1
Highcharts.com | V-Dem data version 15 |

Sequencing and Clientelism: Supply and Demand

- **Qualitative**: usually study how **voters begin** the sequence, and **sell their votes**.
- **Quantitative**: usually study how **parties begin** the sequence, and **buy votes**.

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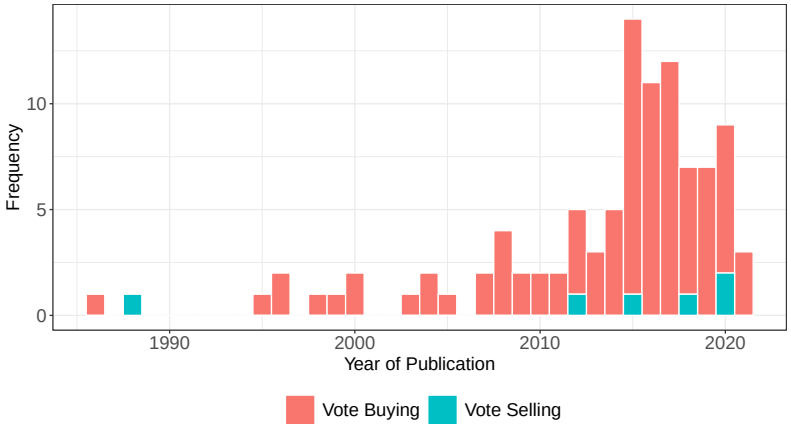
✓ **We argue**: clientelism is a **market**, with both *buyers* **and** *sellers*.

✓ **The gap**: the literature has failed to consider the political economy of both vote-buyers *and* vote-sellers.

- Very few studies **vote selling**.

Sequencing and Clientelism: Supply and Demand



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

Our Paper and Today's Talk

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  - ✓ When voters move first: they **demand higher prices** from winning parties that are ideologically far away.
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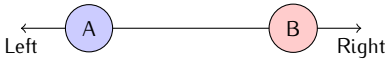

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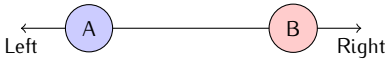

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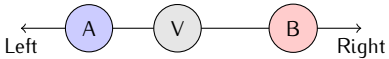

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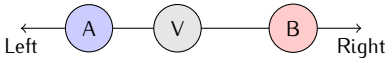

Implication

Voters face a **tradeoff between ideological utility** $u_j(\gamma_i)$ **and electoral risk** $R_i = \pi W_i$.

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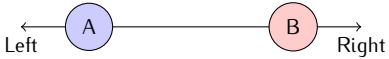

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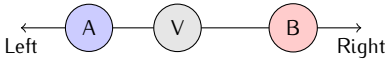

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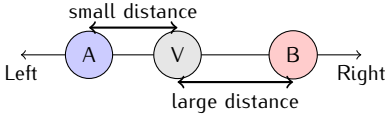

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Δ represents the minimum compensation the voter needs to switch sides.

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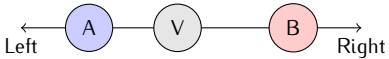

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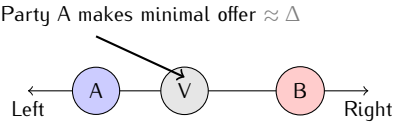

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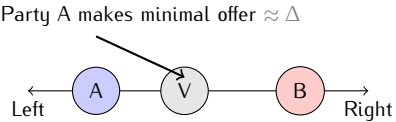

Implication

It is cheapest to buy a vote from a **party supporter** (i^*, with advantage Δ).

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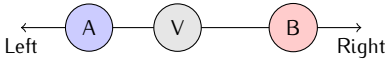

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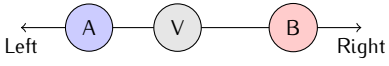

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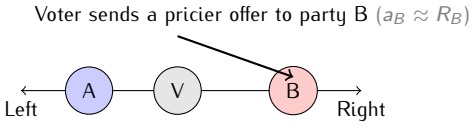

Implication

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

(Formally Derived) Hypotheses

- [H1] **Core Targeting Under Party Initiative:**
  - When parties begin, parties mainly buy from their followers.
- [H2] **Selling to the Opponent Winning Party:**
  - When voters begin, they demand higher prices from electorally strong but ideologically distant parties.
- [H3] **Higher Voter Payoffs Under Party Initiative:**
  - Because parties overspend under electoral risk (Bahamonde and Canales, 2022), voters make more in vote-buying.

Laboratory implementation

- **Participants and implementation**
  - Following the formal model, we designed a lab experiment in oTree.
  - Recruited 102 adult participants.
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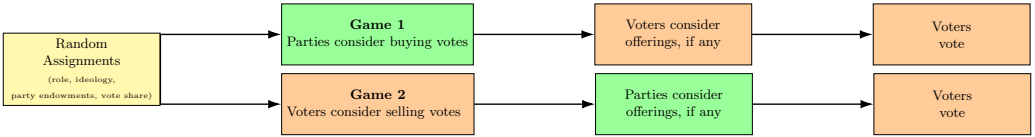
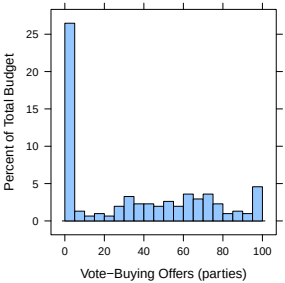
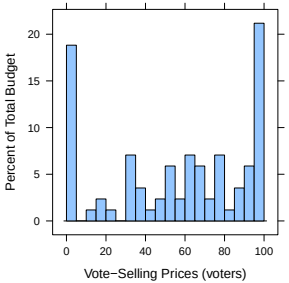
- **What was randomized (3x)**
  - Role (party, voter).
  - Voter's ideology (payoffs if **A** or **B** wins).
  - Party budgets (to buy votes).
  - If the voter is pivotal.

Randomized Sequencing in Two Games



The Dependent Variable: Vote-buying and 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 when Parties Begin

- **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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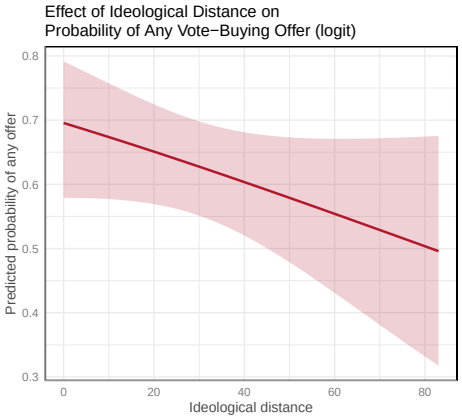

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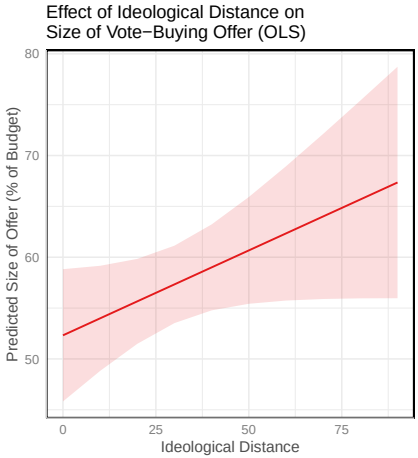

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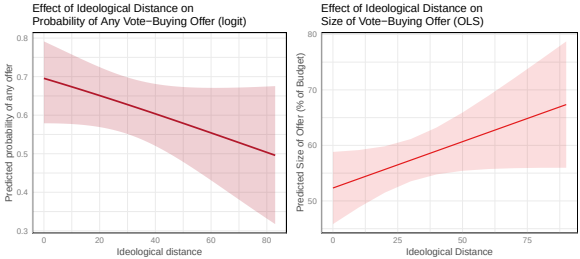

- As ideological distance increases, parties are **less likely** to make any offer at all.
- If they offer, parties pay **larger** transfers to more distant voters.
- So: parties target followers cheaply (right), but pay more to buy distant votes (left).

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

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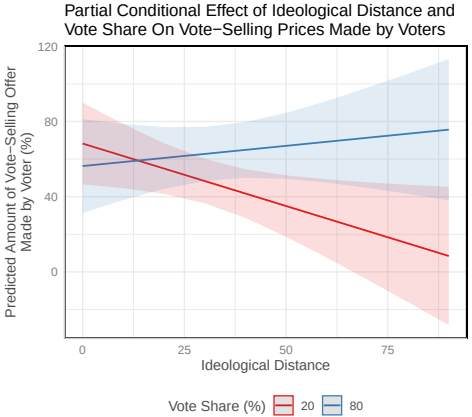
Requested Prices by Ideology and Electoral Strength



- Voters ask for expensive transfers:
  - When the **weak** party is ideologically close but likely to lose (insurance against losses).
  - When the party is **strong** but distant (voters exploit electorally strong parties' higher electoral stakes R_i.)

Sequencing and Payoffs by Game

- Parties' payoffs are similar across vote buying and vote selling.
- Voters **make more** when parties begin the exchange.

Main Takeaways

- **Conceptual move**: integrated vote buying *and* vote selling into the same framework.
- **Theory**: formalized a spatial model with one voter and two parties.
  1. Parties moved first.
  2. Voters moved first.
- **Experiment**: based on the formal model, we designed an econ lab 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.

So What? Why This Matters Beyond Clientelism

- **Who moves first is power.** In many settings—unions vs. governments or parents vs. the welfare state—the side that moves first usually captures more benefits.
- **Same resources, different winners.** Our paper shows that even with the same agents and setup, simply changing who starts the exchange flips who gets the better deal. This logic also travels to other policy contexts.

✓ If we care about inequality or democracy, we shouldn't just ask *who gets how much*, but also *who moves first*.

Thank you

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