

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. IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO

Non-programmatic linkages (Kitschelt 2000) are reciprocal (Auyero 2000). 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 the role of voters (vote-selling) often times focusing only on parties (vote-buying). As we note in this paper, the clientelism literature is heavily unbalanced, showing a huge interest in vote-buying relative to the interest paid to studying the dynamics 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 might seriously threaten our inferences. This issue is particularly problematic because there are no more than just 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 (2020) studies vote-selling in the U.S. This seems to suggest that there is a lack of interest in the quantitative study of vote-selling. However, as we explain in this paper, there are a number of issues that arise when omitting the systematic study of vote-sellers.

One particular consequence of this important deficit in the literature is that we do not know whether the dynamics of vote-selling and vote-buying are systematically different. Specifically, one simple question that has not been addressed in the literature due to the lack of interest in studying vote-selling is *Which setting (vote-buying or vote-selling) is more convenient for either side (parties and voters)?* Some ethnographers have addressed similar issues before, however the authors are not aware of any other quantitative study concerned about similar questions. For instance, Hagene

(2015, p. 152) notes that many clientelist relationships are “client-initiated.” Notably Tosoni (2007, pp. 55–57) explores different instances where slum dwellers in Mexico strategically approach brokers to solve their collective needs, while Gay (1999) describes how neighborhood associations successfully managed to attract resources to Brazilian *favelas* in exchange of electoral support. *What strategies do voters and parties follow? Do these strategies lead to significant differences in perceived utilities?*

In fact, often times voters are considered but within the vote-buying framework. For instance, González-Ocantos, Jonge, et al. (2012), González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson (2014), and Kiewiet de Jonge (2015) note that voters systematically lie when asked directly about vote-buying. While these are important contributions, they do not tell us much about the preferences, dynamics or strategies that are *specific* to vote-sellers. We believe that—unfortunately—voters have been assumed as passive receivers of clientelism. We contend this view by noting that voters are active agents seeking profit during campaigns, and consequently, in this paper we intend to bring the voters back in the clientelism literature.

Conceptually, clientelism is not so different from any other market: there is an arena (campaigns), buyers (parties) and sellers (voters).¹ Hence, the basic implications of classic demand (party) and supply (voter) laws still apply for a phenomenon like clientelism. Yet, the literature usually forgets about the supplier. In order to bridge this gap in the literature, this article starts by formalizing a basic game of vote-buying and vote-selling. Then, we present and explain our experimental design. By establishing payoffs that are contingent on the quality of the participant’s decisions, by randomizing the role (party or voter), ideology, income and different electoral scenarios, we recreate the supply and demand conditions that make vote-buying and vote-selling more likely. The authors

¹We recognize that other arenas than campaigns might exist. Hagene (2015) provides an excellent discussion about the differences between the concepts of “vote-buying” and “clientelism.” One of the main differences is that the former is short-term (only elections), while the latter might be sustained in the long-term, most importantly, accompanied by affective, personal and networking (“problem-solving”) elements. Due to simplicity, in this paper we strictly focus on the short-term aspects of clientelism.

are not aware of any experimental design that considers both vote-buying and vote-selling in the same framework.² Our empirical results suggest that parties buy votes from their core constituencies, while voters sell their votes to the opponent winning party. Importantly, voters consistently derive more utility when parties take the initiative in the vote-buying game. And hence, “the house” does not always win.

This paper contributes to the literature by addressing the question about whether parties target core constituencies or swing voters. On the one hand, Cox and McCubbins (1986) and Zarazaga (2016, p. 7) explain that since constituencies are well known to clientelist parties, they allocate resources to core voters. On the other hand, Lindbeck and Weibull (1987), Dixit and Londregan (1996), Daglberg and Johansson (2002), and Stokes (2005) argue that since allocating resources to individuals who *ex-ante* vote for the party is a waste, parties target swing voters. However, “our knowledge of who parties target remains incomplete” (Carlin and Moseley 2015, p. 14). Second, and from a methodological standpoint, we follow Aldrich and Lupia (2011) and McDermott (2002) in that there is a need of implementing experiments aimed to test formal models, and such, we believe that political scientists might benefit from this process to establish empirical validation of formal models (McDermott 2002, p. 45). Our paper is particularly relevant to the the study of democracy and development where experiments have been described as “a promising research tool” (De La O and Wantchekon 2011).

II. VOTE-BUYING: I’M DANCING WITH MYSELF

In this section we review the vote-buying literature paying particular attention to the different emphases or variants of each account. We concentrate on general accounts of vote-buying, accounts

²Leight et al. (2020) present an experimental design of vote-buying. They find that vote-buying reduces the voters-willingness to hold politicians accountable.

that are country or region-specific (where there are contributions that consider underdeveloped or developed cases) and level of inference (macro-institutionalist and ethnographic accounts). Ultimately, the section is an attempt to signal that there is a remarkable hyper-specialization among vote-buying scholars, putting heavy pressures to fix the heavy imbalance that exists between the vote-buying *literature* and the few contributions on vote-selling.

For instance, Reynolds (1980) provides a historical account of different vote-buying dynamics in New Jersey during early 20th century, Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes (2004) analyze vote-buying in Argentina, Nichter (2008) introduces several party targeting strategies, notably “turnout buying” which explains why parties target nonvoting supporters. Similarly, Gans-Morse, Mazzuca, and Nichter (2013) expand on the same idea and introduce other ways in which parties employ diverse portfolios of strategies (i.e., vote buying, turnout buying, abstention buying, and double persuasion.). Moving forward, Albertus (2013) explains that parties may buy votes from both swing and core voters, Carreras and Irepoglu (2013) analyze the consequences of low trust in elections and exposure to vote buying, while Carlin and Moseley (2015) explain that parties also pay attention to individual democratic attitudinal profiles, suggesting that targets with higher levels of trust in democracy might condemn vote-buying (see also Weitz-Shapiro 2012).

Country-specific studies predominantly study vote-buying as well. For instance, Diaz-Cayeros, Estévez, and Magaloni (2012) study different strategies of vote buying in Mexico, Finan and Schechter (2012) find that in Paraguay targeted individuals are not significantly closer to the middlemen. For the Brazilian case, Hidalgo and Nichter (2015) and Hidalgo and Nichter (2016) find that vote-buying shapes the composition of the electorate, while Bahamonde (2018) argues that economic inequality rather individual levels of income are associated with vote-buying. In turn, Rueda (2017) finds that in Colombia brokers buy more votes in districts where the size of the polling station is small,

cite Cox
& McCubbins, 1986;
Dixit & Londregan, 1996;
Lindbeck
& Weibull, 1987; Stokes, 2005

i.e. providing better monitoring capacities. When the literature turns to other developing contexts different than Latin America, the focus is still on vote-buying. For instance, Bratton (2008) and Rueda (2015) study vote-buying in Nigeria, Vicente and Wantchekon (2009) and Vicente (2014) implemented a field experiment in Benin and Sao Tome and Principe and found that an anti-vote-buying campaign had a negative effect on vote-buying. In turn, Sandholt Jensen and Justesen (2014) study the impact of poverty on vote-buying in sub-Saharan Africa, while Heath and Tillin (2018) study vote-buying in India. Similarly, Khemani (2015), Hicken, Leider, et al. (2015), and Hicken, Leider, et al. (2018) study vote-buying in the Philippines. Scholars focused on developed regions, such as Australia (Denemark 2021) and Russia (Saikkonen 2021) also focus on vote-buying exclusively.

Institutionalist accounts have usually focused on vote-buying also. For instance, Hicken (2007) explains that candidate-centered electoral systems, weak parties, and access to resources may facilitate vote-buying. In turn, Aidt and Jensen (2016) concentrate on the effects of the secret ballot reform in Western Europe, the United States and British elections (Kam 2016) during the 19th and 20th centuries. Others have studied vote-buying respect to the availability of state resources (Gherghina and Nemcok 2021), while Kitschelt (2000), Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2006), and Kitschelt and Altamirano (2015) have focused on other important structural conditions that make vote-buying more prone.

In fact, except for a few ethnographic accounts, most researchers consider mostly party dynamics. Notably (Auyero 2000, p. 55) analyzes the logic of clientelism in Argentina not only by looking at political brokers but also while paying particular attention to the “clients’ own views on the network.” In turn, Zarazaga (2016) interviews 120 brokers from Argentina, Szwarcberg (2012) explains that brokers are independent agents motivated by personal interests, while Szwarcberg (2013) argues

that parties with access to resources is a necessary but insufficient condition to vote-buying.

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III. APPENDIX

Appendix