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

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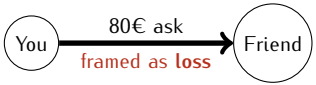
Why sequencing matters

- 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.

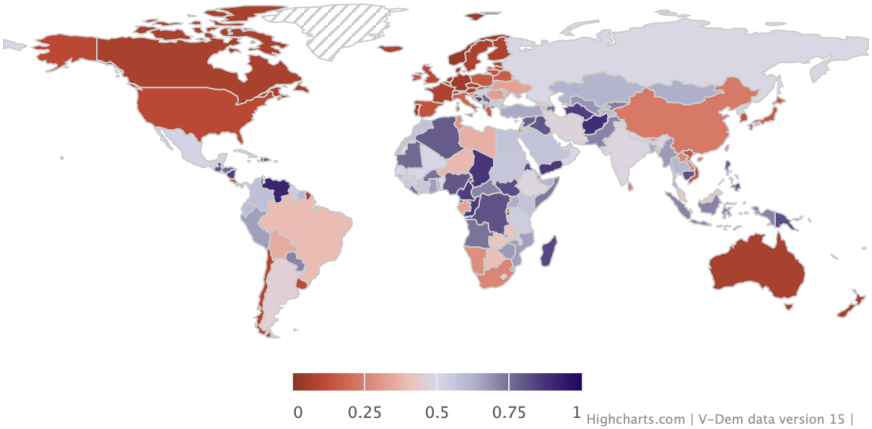
Move second, and you risk becoming a **price taker**.

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)



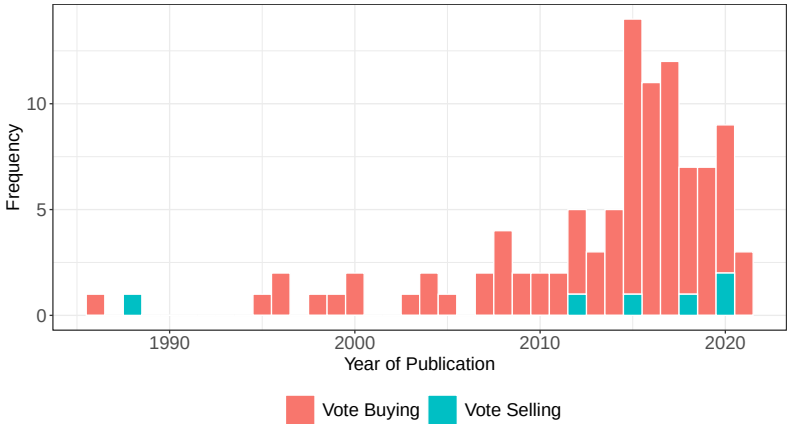
Timing had been Overlooked

- 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**.

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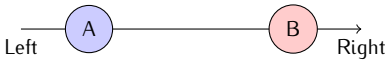

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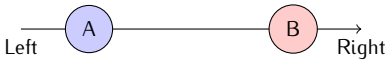
  W_i; electoral stake $R_i = \pi W_i$



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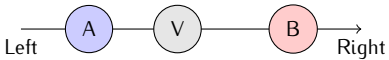

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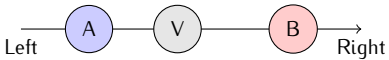
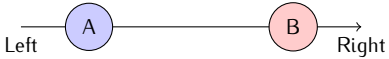


Key idea

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

Ideology creates an advantage

- Ideological advantage Δ



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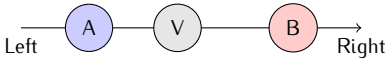

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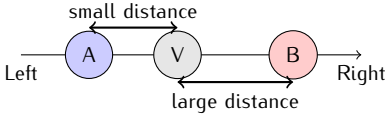
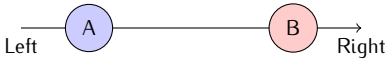


Implication

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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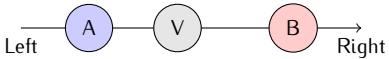

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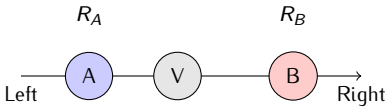
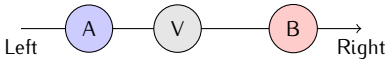


Intuition

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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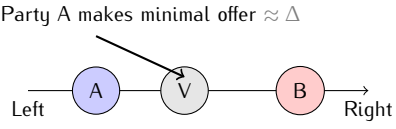

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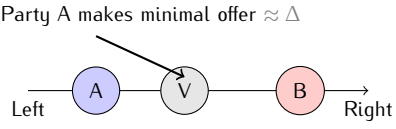
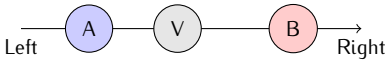


Key result

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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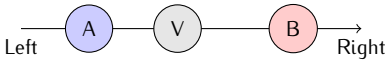

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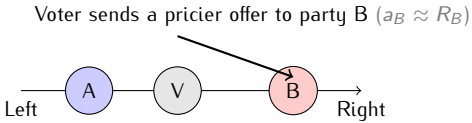


Implication

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

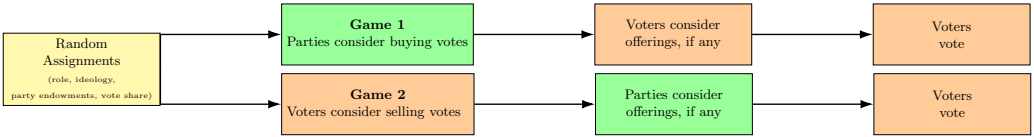
Hypotheses

- **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

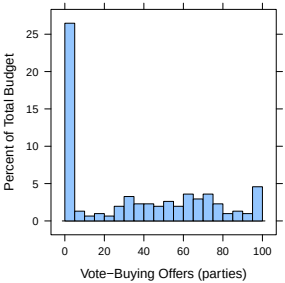
- **Subjects and implementation**
  - Following the formal model, we designed a lab experiment in oTree.
  - Recruited 102 adult participants.
  - Payed them according to the quality of their decisions.
- **Roles**
  - Each game: three (real) players (Party A, Party B, Voter).
  - Each subject played 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.

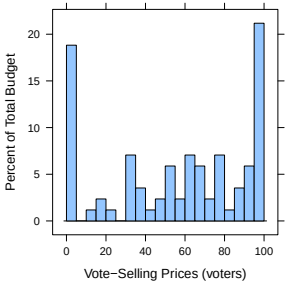
Experimental Flow



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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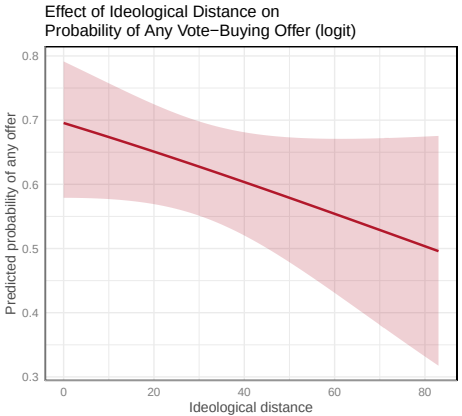
Results: Vote-Buying Offers and Core Targeting



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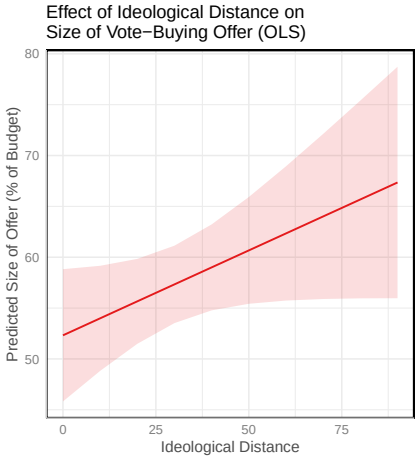

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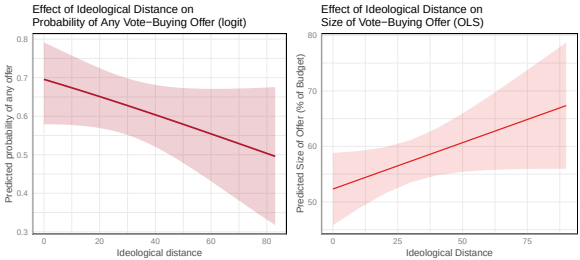

- As ideological distance increases, parties are **less likely** to make any offer at all.
- If they offer, parties pay **larger** transfers to more distant voters.
- So: parties target followers cheaply (right), but pay a premium to buy distant votes (left).

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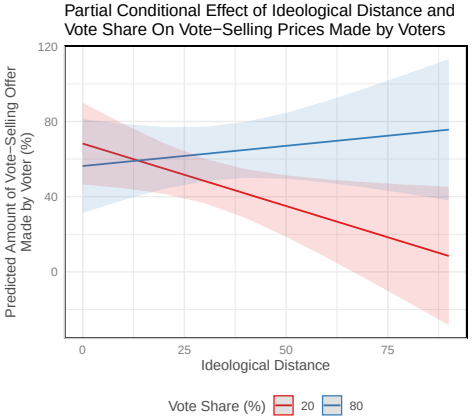
Requested Prices by Ideology and Electoral Strength



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

Payoffs by Role and Institutional Variant

- Party payoffs are similar across vote buying and vote selling.
- Voters earn **higher average payoffs** when parties begin the exchange.

Main takeaways

- **Conceptual move**: integrated vote buying *and* vote selling in the same framework.
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Thank you

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