

Clientelism in Chile: New Experimental Insights from the Lab

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I. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND STATE OF THE ART

Motivation We seem to know that clientelism is practically extinct in Chile. “Clientelism” can be defined as “the distribution of rewards to individuals or small groups during elections in contingent exchange for vote choices” (Nichter 2014, 316). Leveraging the programmatic/non-programmatic framework proposed by Kitschelt (2000), Luna and Zechmeister (2005, 413) find that Chile scores among the highest in political representation,¹ while Calvo and Murillo (2013, 874) find that Chilean voters use ideological cues—as opposed to clientelist ones—to choose their candidates. In fact, survey data seem to confirm that vote buying is a rather unusual in Chile (see Figure 1).

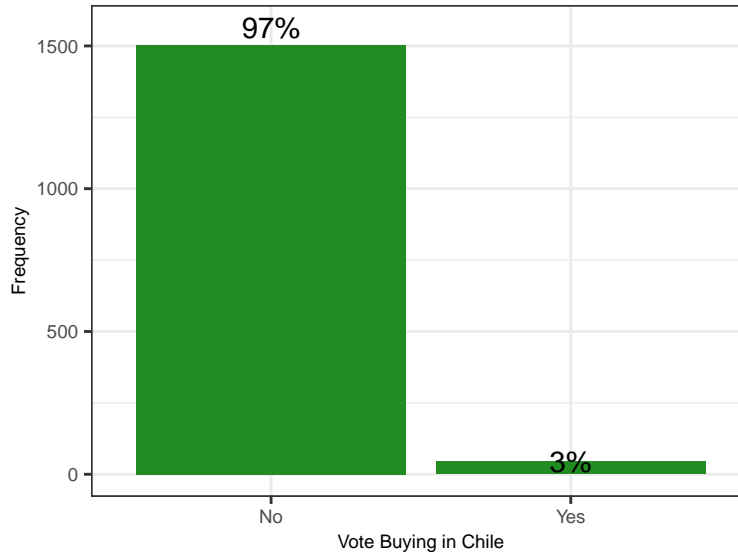


Figure 1: Frequency and Percentages Vote Buying in Chile.

Note: LAPOP survey data for Chile (2014 wave). Question is *clientel*: “been offered a favor, gift or any other benefit in exchange for their electoral support.” Only a small proportion have engaged in clientelism. Percentages correspond to the grand total. $N = 1,548$.

1. With Uruguay.

While that is good news, we are rather ignorant about a number of other interesting, and yet, unanswered questions. First and foremost, the approach used by most quantitative scholars focuses exclusively on vote *buying*. That is, the literature usually looks at parties *buying* votes—as the LAPOP survey question conveys—unfortunately, *ignoring* voter’s preferences and incentives, particularly, their willingness to sell. This is striking. The clientelist relationship has been clearly described as “reciprocal” (Auyero 2000). However, the quantitative study of clientelism has almost ignored this. For instance, the LAPOP question, by exclusively focusing on vote buying, gives the falsely optimistic impression that Chilean voters systematically “oppose” vote buying, “thus” rarely engaging in clientelism (as Figure 1 strongly suggests).

My research project seeks to study the supply and demand conditions under which clientelist transactions occur, that is, taking into account both parties’ and voters’ incentives. The project focuses its attention on some conditions such as selling/buying prices, weather voter and party id’s match, and levels of electoral uncertainty (i.e. the degree in which the party believes is in risk of losing the election). To study these questions, I seek to implement a series of lab experiments (for which I have already piloted some preliminary designs).

Gaps in the Literature I contend that overlooking the *reciprocal* relationship that exists between vote *buyers* (political parties) and vote *sellers* (voters) **biases** our knowledge about clientelism. In fact, it seems that whether studies focus on vote buying or vote selling depends partly on methodological rather than theoretical decisions. On the one hand, historical and/or ethnographically based contributions describe clientelist transactions from the point of view of voters, focusing on the conditions that make vote selling most likely (Posada-Carbó 1996; Sabato 2001; Auyero 2000; Szwarcberg 2013; Borges 2019). On the other hand, statistical, survey, and/or experimental-based studies mostly explore issues related to vote buying. For example, using a field experiment in Benin, Wantchekon (2003) stresses the role of incumbency on vote buying. Jensen and Justesen (2014, 227) focus on the impact of “poverty on vote buying,” while Khemani (2015, 84) shows that “vote buying in poor democracies is associated with lower [public] investments.”

Except for several important quantitative studies (Corstange 2012; Imai, Park, and Greene 2015; Nichter and Peress 2017; Hicken et al. 2015, 2018; Michael and Thachil 2018; Bahamonde 2020), the emphasis of statistical studies remains on studying vote buying. In fact, the vast majority of quantitative studies practically overlooks the reciprocal relationships taking place in clientelist transactions (i.e. buyers *and* sellers). Since applied quantitative scholars have systematically neglected the intertwined relationship that exists between vote *buyers* and vote *sellers*, we remain in ignorance about a number of important questions. In fact, the clientelism literature has been quite myopic regarding other aspects other than individual profiles. As Carlin and Moseley (2015, 14) correctly point out, “[e]xisting research [on clientelism] looks almost *exclusively* at individuals’ socio-economic and, specially, electoral profiles [and] [y]et our knowledge of who parties target remains incomplete.”² My project intends to bridge this gap.

Finally, another gap in the clientelism literature is that most studies ignore that survey respondents are highly affected by social desirability bias. Social desirability bias happens when survey respondents systematically lie when

2. Emphasis is mine.

asked about sensitive, illegal or embarrassing questions (such as selling one’s vote). If this bias is not accounted for, our results will inevitably be wrong. To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies about the willingness to sell the vote in Chile that account for social desirability bias. In the study of clientelism the issue of social desirability bias has been addressed in the United States (Bahamonde 2020) and Latin America (González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014; González-Ocantos et al. 2012). Notably, Chile has *not* been studied.

II. OBJECTIVES, HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Who do parties target? Who do voters sell their vote to? Under what conditions the supply of votes (voters) and demand for votes (parties) meet? While these questions might seem obvious, the literature is far from conclusive. Dixit and Londregan (1996) and Cox and McCubbins (1986) show that parties target their own supporters. Since the “core constituencies” are well known individuals to the party machines, they are less likely to defect (that is, take the bribe, and then vote as they wish). However, Stokes (2005) explains that parties target “moderate opposers.” She explains that targeting core constituencies is a waste—contradicting Dixit and Londregan (1996), and Cox and McCubbins (1986)—and hence, party machines target people whose future support is in doubt. In turn, Nichter (2008) explains that parties target “unmobilized supporters.” My research project seeks to contribute to this debate by shedding some light on the following questions.

Specific Questions: Economic Experiment This portion of the project seeks to study the micro dynamics of vote buying and vote selling via an economic experiment (explained in the methods section). My research questions are the following. **For vote buyers:** *Under what conditions do parties buy votes? What is the buying price? What are the market factors (price, electoral uncertainty, party ID) that foster clientelism? And for vote sellers:* *Under what conditions do voters sell the vote? What is the selling price? Would voters sell their vote to their party of preference, or would they sell it to the opposing party? Do voters set a higher selling price if selling to the opposing party, while lowering the price if selling to the party they support?*

Working Hypotheses: Economic Experiment (1) The function that determines the probability of vote buying follows a U-inverted shape. **This hypothesis challenges the literature.** As Weitz-Shapiro (2012) explains it, this relationship is lineal: more competition increases vote buying. I disagree: when the probability of losing/winning the election is high, vote buying is *less* likely. The reason is quite intuitive. When losing the election is the most likely scenario, or when a party feels that the probability of winning the election is high, investments in vote buying represent a waste. However, the probability of clientelism is the highest when it is uncertain whether the party will lose or win the election, that is when there is a 50/50 chance of winning/losing the election. *It is electoral uncertainty, no competition what drives clientelism.* (2) The probability of getting caught decreases the probability of buying and selling votes. (3) All else equal, parties with larger endowments buy *more* votes. **This hypothesis also contradicts the literature.** Szwarcberg (2013) explains that parties with more resources not always buy votes. I disagree. In line with Bahamonde (2018), I expect parties to expand their clientele by buying votes from

the wealthy too. After bribing the poor, clientelistic parties should move on and engage in expensive clientelism buying votes from the wealthy, if possible. That implies that (4) higher individual incomes do not stop clientelism but increase the selling price of the vote. (5) Selling to the own party lowers the price. However, (6) selling to the opponent party increases the selling price.

Specific Questions: List Experiment This portion of the project seeks to study the micro dynamics of vote selling via a list experiment (explained in the Methods section). The experiment seeks to understand—in an unbiased way—the conditions under which a sample of Chilean voters are more willing to sell. The research questions for vote sellers are: *Under what conditions do voters sell their vote? What is the selling price?*

Working Hypotheses: List Experiment (1) Chilean voters do sell their votes but at high prices. Since parties cannot afford this strategy, the transaction is not produced—lowering the levels of vote buying (Figure 1)—but also putting heavy incentives for parties to connect with their constituencies by offering policy packages rather than clientelism (Kitschelt 2000). However, (2) Chilean voters do not necessarily value democracy better. That is, while actual levels of clientelism are low/inexistent (Figure 1), that does not imply that their democratic values are high. It only means that the supply and demand of clientelism do not meet.

Objectives Both experiments will provide the necessary data for writing the following papers, which will be circulated at different international conferences, and eventually, published in different international academic WOS-indexed journals. Rest assured, this project is fundamental to build my academic career.

I intend to publish, at least the following papers:

1. “Evaluating Willingness to Sell the Vote in Chile, a List Experiment: Hidden Sellers with High ‘Democratic’ Values.”
2. “An Economic Experiment of Vote Buying and Vote Selling in Chile: the case of price elasticities.”
3. “An Economic Experiment of Vote Buying and Vote Selling in Chile: the case of party id’s.”
4. “An Economic Experiment of Vote Buying and Vote Selling in Chile: the case of competitive elections.”

In addition, this project seeks to achieve the next objectives, all related to scientific divulgation:

1. **To advance our knowledge about the micro dynamics of clientelism.** Unlike past research, my project aims to disentangling the—so far ignored—relationship that exists between vote buyers (parties) and vote sellers (citizens). Given that the overall methodology used—yet to be explained and justified in the methods section—is in nature experimental, that will allow me to do so in a non-intrusive way, that is, without generating the social desirability biases associated with the study of clientelism. This methodology, also, will permit modeling the incentives of each player (i.e. voters and parties) in selling/buying votes, as well as modeling the incentives of defecting (i.e. accepting the bribe and then defecting). I do so by modifying (1) the

probability of being caught, (2) manipulating the size of the initial endowment for both parties and voters, (3) manipulating the type (i.e. id) of each player—whether parties buy from supporters or opposers. As I explain later, modeling these parameters allows me to emulate (1) the quality of electoral institutions, (2) differences in party/voters endowments, (3) the dual relationship between vote sellers and vote buyers.

2. **To refine our criteria in terms of public policy.** The papers will not only advance our academic knowledge about clientelism in Chile, but also help us in understanding—and importantly too—*diagnosing* the “democratic health” of the Chilean electorate. Particularly, the survey experiments will be the firsts of their kind in eliciting *truthful* answers from actual voters about clientelism. The approach is novel. Using a series of statistical techniques which I will explain later, I will be able to predict the individual probabilities of vote selling. This piece of information will be studied along other questions to capture levels of democratic support. What we learn, in turn, is where we, as a society, should put our attention to when it comes to educating our citizens. *What can be rethought in terms of implementing civic courses in elementary school? How can we think about a better and stronger citizenship?* These interesting, and fundamental questions, will be addressed in three public lectures at the *Universidad de O’Higgins*. I consider writing some op-ed pieces regarding this issue too, particularly linking these findings with the social unrest process of 2019.
3. **To open up the debate, from a regional perspective, but with an international focus.** The questions mentioned above will be addressed by one widely-known international speaker per year, and myself, in a public conference/event held at the *University*, in Rancagua. Along with that, preliminary results of paper 1 and 2 (year 1), paper 3 (year 2), and paper 4 (year 3), will be presented at these events. This will stimulate the public debate among students, faculty, and the whole regional society. Some of these three public events might also include a speaker from the *Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación*, particularly, as it relates to early learning developments about citizenship and democracy, in elementary and high-school contexts.

III. SCIENTIFIC NOVELTY OF THE PROPOSAL

I find that the quantitative literature of clientelism has failed to look at this phenomenon as a *reciprocal* network of relationships, an issue that my research proposal seeks to shed some light on. Thus, my project does fill a number of important gaps in the literature.

The bulk of the research project is composed by two experiments (both explained in the methods section). Both experiments advance our substantive and methodological knowledge in the study of clientelism. The economic experiment is relevant to the study of clientelism in Chile because it incorporates both sides of the clientelist relationship (vote buyers and vote sellers). In turn, the list experiment effectively prevents social desirability biases. One important aspect of the economic experiment is that it manipulates price elasticities for both buyers and sellers—i.e. willingness to sell, contingent on discrete increments in both selling and buying prices. In addition, the economic experiment accounts for party identification—an unstudied relationship within the experimental study of vote buying/selling. In turn, the list experiment seeks to study willingness to sell the vote, while accounting for social

desirability bias. Since the substantive goal of my proposal is to study the consequences of clientelism, addressing issues of democratic representation, and especially, support for democracy, the list experiment is a particularly important component of the project as a whole.

To conclude, another novelty of my research project is that it studies hypothetical behaviors. This is in fact an unexplored avenue of research in the study of clientelism. I believe that studying hypothetical behaviors—such as the willingness to sell—is a valuable exercise. Geddes (1990, 131) explains the well-known issues of selection bias of studying “only cases that have achieved the outcome of interest.” I contend that scholars should explore latent behaviors as well. Hence, if we are interested in understanding the micro dynamics of clientelism—particularly as a supply-and-demand issue—we should incorporate the preferences of both sellers and buyers. Since the focus of this project is on the willingness to sell, I believe that we can also learn from *unrealized* clientelist transactions. Thus, part of the novelty of my proposal relies on the fact that there is only a couple of studies addressing questions of hypothetical vote buying/selling (González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014; Bahamonde 2020). Notably, neither study focuses on Chile.

IV. METHODOLOGY

List Experiment The study of individual preferences depends on truthful answers. However, there might be circumstances under which individuals might not want to answer truthfully due to social pressure. For instance, in avoiding being judged by the interviewer, individuals might not want to reveal that they have done something illegal, like selling one’s vote.

List experiments administer at random two kinds of lists where different sentences are listed. Both lists look exactly the same (say, each one containing the three same items), however the treatment list includes (traditionally) a fourth item, which is the sensitive item related to the socially-condemned behavior. List experiments have been implemented before (Corstange 2008; Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Franko 2010; Blair and Imai 2012; Glynn 2013; Imai, Park, and Greene 2015; Kiewiet de Jonge 2015). Notably, none in Chile in the context of clientelism.

To illustrate how list experiments work, let’s consider an example. Subjects randomly assigned to the control condition read the following:

Now, you will have to type HOW MANY, if any, of the following illegal activities you might engage in, assuming you would not go to jail.

- (1) steal an iPod from a large department store
- (2) speed on the highway because you're late for work/school
- (3) download your favorite music from the internet illegally

Type in HOW MANY (NOT WHICH), if any, of these things you would do.

In turn, subjects randomly assigned to the treatment condition read the following list:

Now, you will have to type HOW MANY, if any, of the following illegal activities you might engage in, assuming you would not go to jail.

- (1) steal an iPod from a large department store
- (2) speed on the highway because you're late for work/school
- (3) sell your vote to a candidate
- (4) download your favorite music from the internet illegally

Type in HOW MANY (NOT WHICH), if any, of these things you would do.

Both lists are identical, except that the treatment list includes the sensitive item in the third place. The important aspect that conceals the true answer is that respondents are asked **how many items** in the list they would endorse, **not which ones**. This particular feature helps in learning about individual's preferences in a non-intrusive fashion. For instance, if an experimental subject answers "2," the interviewer will not know whether that number includes the sensitive item. Consequently, if the survey respondent wants to endorse the sensitive item, the answer will be "masked" by the other items in the list. This concealment makes this technique suitable to study socially condemned behaviors such as vote buying (González-Ocantos et al. 2012; Hicken et al. 2018; Corstange 2012, 2008; Blair and Imai 2012), drug use (Druckman et al. 2015), sexual preferences (LaBrie and Earleywine 2000), attitudes towards race (Kuklinski et al. 1997; Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Franko 2010), among others.

Given that both lists are assigned at random, the mean number of nonsensitive activities that respondents endorsed should be equal across the two lists. However, if there are any statistically significant differences between the two means (i.e. treatment and control lists), that should be attributed only to the presence of the sensitive item. Finally, if a survey respondent answers "4," that would naturally imply the endorsement of the sensitive item. Luckily, there are statistical techniques that help in identifying possible design issues (Blair and Imai 2012).

Economic Experiment Economic experiments assign roles and initial endowments at random. They also distribute at the end of the experimental sessions actual payments. Notably, payments vary according to the quality of decisions made by experimental subjects (Morton and Williams 2010).

In my design, the game is played in several rounds of anonymous party-voter pairs. Individuals with the *party* role seek to win the election. They might or might not want to buy votes. However, if they lose the election, they lose actual money from their given endowment. The idea is to study the tipping point at which clientelism becomes a reasonable strategy. Individuals acting the *voter* role, want their parties to be elected. If their party loses, they lose actual money from their given endowment. Voters might or might not want to sell their vote. Similarly, the

idea is to study, for instance, the threshold at which poverty fosters vote selling. Hence, there are strong incentives to win the election, buy/sell votes only when necessary and avoid clientelism when the probability of getting caught is high. Thus, economic experiments put heavy incentives for both players to be as strategic as possible.

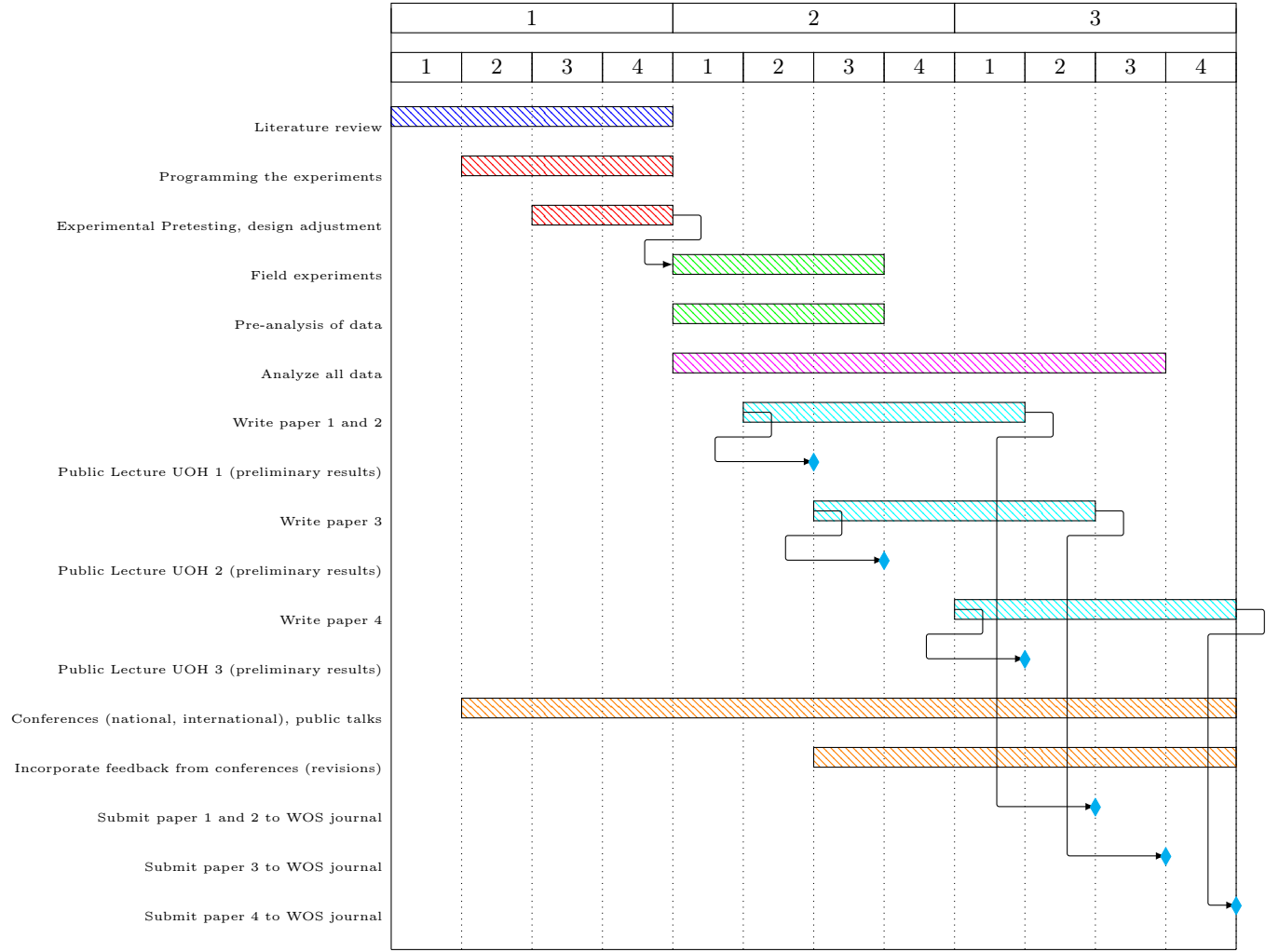
Both players are offered the possibility to sell their votes (voters) or buy votes (parties). My design considers the following exogenous manipulations: (1) the probability of losing the election (electoral uncertainty), (2) the probability of being caught (quality of electoral institutions), (3) initial economic endowments (inequality levels, which apply to voters and parties). For instance, party *A*, facing heavy risks of losing the election, might want to engage in vote buying. *Does party A buys votes from voters A, B, or both? Do A voters sell their votes cheaper to party A, when compared to party B? When is defection most likely?* Also, *Do individuals with lower endowments (the “poor”) sell their vote systematically more than “wealthy” individuals?*

Ultimately, by repeating this procedure a number of times, I will be able to **recreate a market of vote sellers and vote buyers. The specific game to be used is a bargaining game in an extensive form** (Watson 2007). While omitted in this proposal due to space concerns, the model has already been developed and formally identified using standard game theory techniques.

Experimental Sample Both samples will be collected by survey research companies/research centers. A standard battery of socio-economic and political questions will be included as well in both experiments. For statistical reasons, the sample size should be of about 1,500 individuals.

V. WORK PLAN, SCHEDULE AND GANTT CHART

I will organize this Gantt chart in three years of four trimesters each.



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