

Still for Sale: The Micro-Dynamics of Vote-Selling in the United States, Evidence From a List and Conjoint Experiments

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Abstract

In the nineteenth-century United States vote buying was commonplace. Nowadays, however, vote-buying seems to have declined. Unfortunately, the literature has put its emphasis on studying vote-buying, ignoring the micro-dynamics of vote-selling. We seem to know that vote-buyers cannot afford this strategy any longer. However, we do not know what American voters would do if offered the chance to sell their votes. Would they sell their votes (and at what price), or would they consistently opt-out of vote-selling? Exploiting a novel experimental dataset representative at the national level, 1,479 U.S. voters participated in an online list experiment in 2016. The results are striking. Approximately 25% would sell their votes for \$730. Democrats and liberals are systematically more likely to sell, while education levels and income do not seem to have an impact on vote-selling. In addition to the list experiment, an online conjoint experiment was also fielded. This design was used to measure—in an unbiased way—attitudes towards democracy, a multi-dimensional concept. The analyses suggest that U.S. citizens have “healthy” democratic values. In turn, combining both experimental designs, the paper also finds that likely vote-sellers have lower support levels towards a system governed by principles of checks and balances.

Keywords— vote-buying; vote-selling; clientelism; conjoint experiments; list experiments; United States.

Please consider downloading the last version of the paper [here](#).

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I. VOTE-SELLERS *and* VOTE-BUYERS

Many advanced democracies were first very clientelistic political systems. For instance, Stokes et al. (2013, 200) explain that in the nineteenth-century United States “vote buying was commonplace.” In Chicago, New York City, Newark, and other big cities, votes were exchanged for “cash, food, alcohol, health care, poverty relief, and myriad other benefits” (200), even resembling the worst practices in the current developing world. The street price of the right to vote freely seemed to be very low. Benseal explains that “[voters] handed in a party ticket in return for a shot of whiskey, a pair of boots, or a small amount of money” (in Stokes et al. (2013, 227)). Vote buying, besides being cheap, was “the major urban political institution in the late nineteenth century” (Erie 1990, 2). Students of American political development have analyzed vote-buying in more detail, confirming both its early development, and its generalized practice (Benseal 2004; Campbell 2005).¹

However, nowadays vote-buying seems to have declined considerably. Stokes et al. (2013, 201) have shown that industrialization has driven up the median income of the electorate, making vote-buying more expensive for party machines.² In line with that, Figure 1 suggests—using survey data from the U.S.—that 93.6% of respondents have “never” received a clientelistic offer from a political party.³

That being said, clientelism happens between vote-*buyers* (demand side) and vote-*sellers* (supply side). We seem to know that vote-*buyers* cannot afford this strategy any longer, not at least in a massive scale, thus making vote-buying a rare event. However, several questions remain unanswered. And worryingly, most of them pertain to vote-*sellers*. For instance, *What would voters do, if offered the chance to sell their votes? Would they sell their votes (and at what price), or would they consistently opt-out of vote-selling?* Except for a number of important exceptions (Hicken et al. 2015a, 2018; Corstange 2012; Nichter and Peress 2017), most of the emphasis so far has been devoted to studying vote-*buying*. In fact, Nichter and Peress (2017) explain that studies continue to view clientelism typically as a top-down process, generally overlooking citizens’ demands. Importantly, most contributions on vote-selling are generally formal/theoretical rather than empirical (Vicente and Wantchekon 2009), or experimental. Due to these reasons, prior empirical studies do

1. For the British case during the Victorian Era, see Kam (2017).

2. However, see Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2006, 320), who explain that “it is not economic development that accounts for the emergence and decline of varying linkage practices and not even the nature of formal democratic institutions,” but higher levels of “[s]tate involvement in the public sector.”

3. A very small percentage (4.8%) reports to have received some kind of clientelistic offer from a political party.

not offer satisfactory answers to these questions about vote-selling.

Figure 1 shows responses about whether a candidate or someone from a political party has offered something in exchange for people’s votes, completely ignoring voter’s preferences, or the supply side. The figure, in fact, represents the canon in the clientelism literature, begging the question about whether survey respondents answering “never” *would* still be willing to sell their votes. I contend that this *demand-side bias* gives an incomplete picture. Overlooking the supply-side should give the falsely optimistic impression that U.S. voters systematically *oppose* vote-buying, “thus” engaging almost *never* in clientelism (as Figure 1 strongly suggests). Moreover, demand-side studies of clientelism have traditionally focused, with a few exceptions (Zarazaga 2016; Szwarcberg 2013; Oliveros 2016; Stokes et al. 2013; Corstange 2012; Hicken et al. 2015b, 2018; Bratton 2008) on what parties do by asking *voters* about what parties do, introducing additional bias.

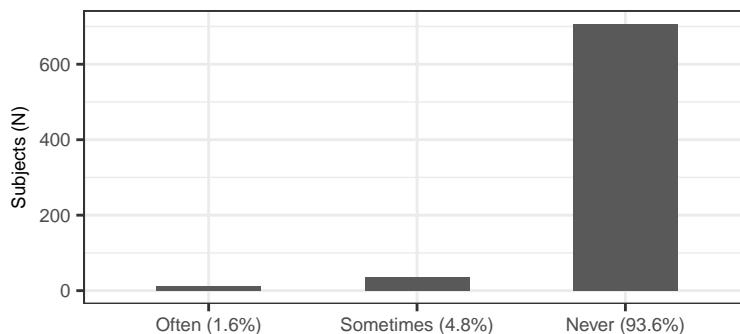


Figure 1: Frequency of Clientelism.

Note: Figure shows the frequency of survey respondents, $N = 755$.

Source: *LAPOP*, 2010 wave for the United States. Question is *clien1*: “In recent years and thinking about election campaigns, has a candidate or someone from a political party offered you something, like a favor, food, or any other benefit or object in return for your vote or support? Has this happened often, sometimes, or never?”

In 2016 a novel dataset representative at the national level was collected. A total of 1,479 U.S. voters participated in a list and a conjoint experiments between March 2nd and March 6th. Leveraging this experimental design, it was possible to identify the demographic factors that would make U.S. voters more likely to sell their votes, at what price, and whether they would systematically lie about selling their votes. In addition to that, a conjoint experiment was implemented to capture—in an novel and unbiased way—support levels towards democracy. Given that democracy

is a multi-dimensional concept, the conjoint analyses shed light on which particular democratic sub-dimension has to fail in order to produce likely vote-sellers.

The results are striking. The list data suggest that a sizable portion of U.S. voters of the nationally representative sample are willing to sell their votes (approximately 25%), that they would sell it at an optimal price of \$730, and that they would systematically lie about it (approximately 8% of the nationally representative sample). Given that these data are representative at the national level—and that this is not a convenient sample—these findings are surprising, going against the standard optimistic panorama offered by analysts of the *vote-buying* approach. Democrats and liberals are systematically more likely to sell than the rest. Education and income levels do not seem to have a systematic impact on vote-selling. In turn, the conjoint data suggest that, while democratic values of U.S. voters are in good shape, survey respondents who systematically do not value horizontal accountability, particularly, between the President and Congress, sell their vote systematically more.

Ultimately, this paper is an attempt to bridge the gap between the supply side and the demand side, i.e. vote-sellers and vote-buyers, by reporting unprecedented high levels of hypothetical vote-selling. While the paper essentially describes the phenomena, it leaves for future research further considerations about the causes of hypothetical vote-selling in the U.S.

While we believe describing a social phenomena—such as the existence of high levels of willingness to sell—is still a valuable exercise *per se*, it is more so if done in a “crucial case” design framework, specifically, a “least-likely” design. As Levy (2008, 12) explains, “[i]nferential leverage from a least likely case is enhanced if our theoretical priors for the leading alternative explanation make it a most likely case for that theory.” The vote-buying literature (which is mostly about developing countries) describes vote-sellers as poor (Weitz-Shapiro 2014, 12), uneducated (González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014), and undemocratic (Carlin and Moseley 2015). Our priors, then, inform us that the willingness to sell votes should be low, making the U.S.—a developed country—a “hard case” for vote-selling. However, the counterintuitive results presented in this paper make our efforts worth pursuing.

In a highly controversial pair of articles, Foa and Mounk (2016, 7) document a deep “crisis of democratic legitimacy [which] extends across a [...] wider set of indicators” in the United States. They find that 26% of millennials say that it is “unimportant” in a democracy for people to “choose their leaders in free elections” (Foa and Mounk (2016, 10), and Foa and Mounk (2017)).

These findings raise a number of (unanswered) questions regarding the actual value citizens give to American electoral institutions, possibly undermining the legitimacy of the integrity of voting. *Is voting “unimportant” enough to make U.S. citizens sell their votes, if offered the possibility?*

Leveraging the ability of conjoint experiments to study attitudes towards multi-dimensional concepts, a conjoint experiment was implemented to study attitudes towards democracy. Democracy, as a concept, is a multi-dimensional one (Munck and Verkuilen 2002). Consequently, in order to capture the complexity of these attitudes, a novel method was developed. This strategy builds directly on Carlin (2018) and Luna (2006), who challenge the standard practice of asking survey respondents *directly* about their levels of democratic support. Instead, and building on O’Donnell (1998), I operationalize “support for democracy” by specifying three components—liberal, republican, and democratic—which in turn, have a number of sub-dimensions, while each sub-dimension has its corresponding survey questions.

Unsurprisingly, I find that levels of democratic support in the U.S. are high in all three dimensions. However, since individual probabilities of vote selling are observed (as per the list experiment), I am able to observe which democratic component should “fail” to produce likely vote-sellers. I find that likely-sellers do not value the role of Congress, as a valid institutional offset to the President’s power, a sub-dimension which belongs to the “liberal” component, which in turn pertains to what O’Donnell (1998) calls “horizontal accountability.” The paper leaves the corresponding explanations for future research.

The **next section** gives a historical account of vote-buying in the U.S. The section is also an effort to situate both vote-selling and vote-buying within a historical context. It particularly shows how vote-buying transitioned from being a very important institution in American elections, to a scarcely practiced method of winning elections. The **following section** explains the measurement, experimental strategies, and empirical findings. Finally, I offer some **working hypotheses and possible lines for future research**.

II. VOTE-SELLING AND PATRONAGE IN THE U.S.: A BRIEF HISTORICAL ACCOUNT

“I took it because it was there to take. I know it isn’t right, but this has been going on for so long that we no longer looked upon it as a crime.”

American vote seller in 1910 (Reynolds 1980, 200).

While all states had made the bribery of voters illegal at very early stages,⁴ these laws were purposely ignored. Well before the Gilded Age (1877-1896), there were a number of norms that aimed to prohibit bribery, clientelism, and patronage. For instance, as early as 1725, the New Jersey legislature had already outlawed a number of electoral malpractices.⁵ However, these restrictions were systematically bypassed. To get around property qualifications, for instance, it was common that office-seekers (and their supporters) would buy “freeholds for landless men in return for their vote,”⁶ a practice that was known as “fagot voting.” Since it was a coercive bribe, after “the election, the land was simply returned to the original owner.”⁷

Weak institutions, poor bureaucracies, and bad-quality record-keeping,⁸ helped to foster a number of electoral malpractices. First and foremost, most states did not have actual registration laws, making voter eligibility difficult to determine.⁹ Historians frequently report that judges at polling places had a hard time figuring out not only the age of the potential voter,¹⁰ but also whether the prospective voter was a U.S. citizen, especially in cases that involved newly naturalized immigrants, who had strong foreign accents.¹¹ Consequently, often times it was at the judge’s discretion whether to let prospective voters cast a ballot. Since judges were party appointees,¹² their discretionary

4. Bensel (2004, 59).

5. Bensel (2004, 59).

6. Campbell (2005, 6).

7. Campbell (2005, 6).

8. For instance, The U.S. Bureau of the Census did not exist at that time. Consequently, it was relatively easy to invent names, “repeat”, or use any other subterfuges to “stuff the ballot box.” In fact, “a St. Louis politician admitted registry fraud but argued that there was no proof that the names he copied into the registry were of real people and, therefore, no crime had been committed,” in (Argersinger 1985, 680).

9. Argersinger (1985, 672).

10. Judges used as a rough proxy whether the prospective voter had the ability to grow a beard. In Bensel (2004, 20).

11. Bensel (2004, 20).

12. Argersinger (1985, 672).

powers were systematically used to shape electoral outcomes.

Low literacy levels helped to sustain vote-selling in the U.S. as well. In places like Kentucky and Missouri, voters were required by law to verbally announce their choices at the polling places, instead of using party tickets.¹³ The *viva voce* method, of course, was very convenient for party workers who usually swarmed around the polling places. Eventually, this method was substituted with the ticket system.

However, the “party strip” or “unofficial” ballot system,¹⁴ permitted all sorts of fraudulent election practices too. Party tickets were produced by the parties themselves. Since they varied by size and color, it made “the voter’s choice of party a *public* act and rendered voters susceptible to various forms of intimidation and influence while facilitating vote buying.”¹⁵

The ticket system required very strong party machines, which in turn, required lots of economic resources to make it work. Political machines were not only oiled with money, however. On the one hand, many “ticket peddlers”¹⁶ were volunteers,¹⁷ saving some of the costs needed to maintain the machine. Most of these volunteers, “enjoyed the patronage of elected party officials by holding government jobs, drawing public pensions, servicing government contracts, or enjoying special licensing privileges.”¹⁸ On the other hand, political appointees, “from janitor to secretary of state,” and some corporations too, donated part of their salaries on a yearly basis.¹⁹ Parties, then, amassed huge amounts of money.

With all these resources flooding the polls on election day, voting was truly a complex spectacle. On election day, as “men moved about the polling place, party agents would often offer them [...] whisky, as an enticement to vote their ticket.”²⁰ Moreover, party machines would make sure that “liquor was both freely available and consumed to excess.”²¹ “As a result, the street or square outside the voting window frequently became a kind of alcoholic festival in which many men were clearly and spectacularly drunk [up to the point that] some could not remember whether or not

13. Bense (2004, 54).

14. Rusk (1970, 1221).

15. Argersinger (1985, 672), emphasis is mine. Rusk (1970, 1221) also explains that distinctive ticket colors and shapes, “assured instant recognition of the ballot by the voters [and] party workers.” See Reynolds and McCormick (1986, 836) as well.

16. Argersinger (1985, 672).

17. Bense (2004, 17).

18. Bense (2004, 17).

19. In Reynolds (1980, 197).

20. Bense (2004, 57).

21. Bense (2004, 20).

they had voted.”²² American elections, even before the Gilded Age, were engineered according to these “principles.” When running for the Virginia House, a young George Washington “spent nearly 40 pounds—a considerable sum for the day—on gallons of rum, wine, brandy, and beer; all used to win over the votes of his neighbors.”²³

Even while the *modus operandi* of clientelism has changed, and both the frequency of vote-buying and the importance of party machines have declined,²⁴ there are still some contemporary accounts of vote-buying in American elections. For instance, Campbell (2005, 243-244) explains how a Democratic leader in Logan County, West Virginia, accepted \$35,000 in cash in exchange of supporting Senator Kennedy. As the Democratic leader explains it, “this money was for one purpose: ‘We bought votes with it [...] that’s the way real politics works.’” Other examples are the famous primary election in March 1972 in Chicago,²⁵ and during the 1980s, in the coal-rich Appalachian mountains.²⁶

Non-academic sources still find that during the 2010 elections, “selling votes [was] *common* type of election fraud,”²⁷ while others find that “[v]ote-buying is *extremely* common in *developed* [...] countries.”²⁸ Clearly, there exists lack of clarity on how common vote-selling is. Next section attempts to quantify in an unbiased way the willingness to sell of a representative sample of U.S. voters.

III. VOTE-SELLING IN AN EXPERIMENTAL CONTEXT

List Experiment: Estimating Hypothetical Willingness to Sell. 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 illegally, like selling one’s vote. If this systematic source of bias is not taken into consideration, this will pose threats to causal inference. List experiments, among other techniques,²⁹ are well suited to elicit truthful answers.

22. Bensel (2004, 20).

23. Campbell (2005, 5). \$1,250 in 2017 U.S. dollars. Conversion based on Williamson (2018).

24. Stokes et al. (2013, 230) explain that “party machines are a thing of the past.”

25. Campbell (2005, 262).

26. Campbell (2005, 275).

27. Fahrenthold (2012). Emphasis is mine.

28. Leight, Pande, and Ralston (2016, 1). Emphases are mine.

29. See for a review Blair (2015).

While list experiments are very common, researchers unfortunately “[utilize] only a difference-in-means estimator, and [do] not provide a measure of the sensitive item for each respondent.”³⁰ Fortunately, Blair and Imai (2012) and Imai, Park, and Greene (2015) provide a statistical framework to analyze list data in a more efficient way. There are a number of advantages in using statistical methods to analyze list experiments data. First, using statistical methods allows inferring who answered “yes” to the sensitive item. Second, they permit to study the relationship between preferences over the sensitive item and individual’s characteristics, such as gender, income, party identification, among others. Third, if a “direct” question over the sensitive item is included in the design, it is also possible to estimate the amount of social desirability bias.

Experimental Design. Despite all these methodological refinements, most studies about vote-buying/selling have been conducted in developing countries only, overlooking a number of interesting questions about the developed world. For instance, González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson (2014) designed a list experiment to study hypothetical vote-buying norms in Latin America. Employing a similar strategy, this paper exploits variance of an online survey list experiment conducted in the United States where subjects were asked whether they would sell their votes. Since the focus of this study is on the willingness to sell, the ability of list experiments to elicit truthful preferences, regardless of whether the behavior is real or hypothetical, seems the ideal strategy to pursue. The data (N=1,479) were collected in 2016, and are representative at the national level.³¹ Figure OA1 shows the geographical distribution of survey respondents broken by party identification.

The experiment was framed as a study about crime in the U.S., not as a study about vote-selling.³² Before splitting the subject pool into their respective experimental conditions, participants were asked to read an *excerpt* where four illegal activities were described (including vote-selling). All of them were formatted as pieces of news. The idea was to explain to “newsreaders” what “vote-selling” was.

30. Glynn (2013, 159).

31. The data were collected by *Research Now SSI* between March 2nd and March 6th. Survey respondents belong to the online panel owned and administered by SSI. Notice of IRB exemption Protocol #E16-292 is kept in file at the Office of Research and Regulatory Affairs of Rutgers University.

32. To isolate the risks and costs associated with engaging in any illegal activity, the next sentence was included: “assuming you would not go to jail.”

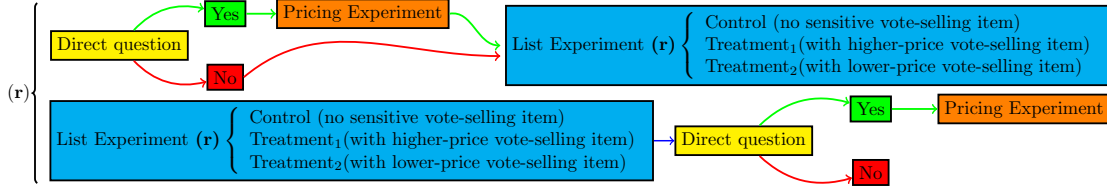


Figure 2: Experimental Flow of the List Design.

Note: This figure shows the flow of the list experiment. Notice that (1) the order in which experimental subjects answered both the direct question and the list experiment was randomized, (2) there are two treatments, one with a selling price of \$100 (“low”), and one with a selling price of \$500.

To prevent possible priming effects,³³ and as suggested in Figure 2, the order in which experimental subjects answered the direct question, and the list experiment, was randomly assigned. To be sure, all subjects answered both the direct question and the list experiment. To further prevent the possibility of biased answers when asking the direct question to individuals in the treated group, the direct question stated that there was going to be assigned, at random, the hypothetical possibility to do one of the illegal things mentioned previously in the excerpt. However, all participants were directly asked whether they would be interested in selling their votes. Direct answers then were used to estimate the proportion of “liars.”

Subjects answering “yes” to the direct question, answered as a follow-up a pricing experiment where they were asked to put a price on their votes. Subjects who answered “no” to the direct question, were asked another follow-up question asking them whether they were sure they did not want to sell their votes. Following standard practice in marketing research, participants slid two handles, one indicating which price was considered “too cheap,” and another one indicating which price was considered “too high” for one’s vote. Both sliders ranged from \$0 to \$1,000, in \$1 increments. The intersection of the “too cheap” and “too high” empirical distributions was used to estimate the optimal selling price for a vote.

The list experiment contemplated one control, and two possible treatments, each with different vote-selling prices. Since it is difficult to price a vote, and based on a number of pretests, it was decided to consider both an arbitrarily low (\$100), or an arbitrarily high (\$500) price. Participants randomly assigned to the treatment condition, only answered one of these two treatments. More than being hard pricing tests, these two treatments account for (possible) different elasticities that

33. Blair and Imai (2012, 54) explain that asking the direct question to individuals in the treated group might bias the results.

might have interacted with individual socio-economic backgrounds, mainly income.³⁴

Moving forward, subjects randomly assigned to the control condition answered the following question:

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 answered one the following two treatments. The ones assigned to the “low” price condition, read the exact same vignette, but the next line was added in the third place: (3) **sell your vote to a candidate for \$100**, while the ones assigned to the “high” price condition, read the following line: (3) **sell your vote to a candidate for \$500**. Since one of the two sentences was added, the item (3) **download your favorite music from the internet illegally** was moved to the fourth place.

Figure 3 shows the distinct frequencies of participants declaring how many (if any) illegal things they would do. Notice that the figure shows the total number of items, not which ones. For instance, a frequency of “3” does not mean the frequency of the third item, but the total number of individuals answering that they would do three of the illegal activities described in the vignette.³⁵ The order of the items was not randomized so as to not violate the stable unit treatment value assumption, or “SUTVA.”³⁶

34. Holland and Palmer-Rubin (2015, 1189) explain that “the poor are thought to be more susceptible to vote buying.”

35. The experimental design passes the standard tests for design effects (floor and ceiling effects). See Table A2.

36. Morton and Williams (2010, 98) explain that the treatment should be invariant, or “stable.”

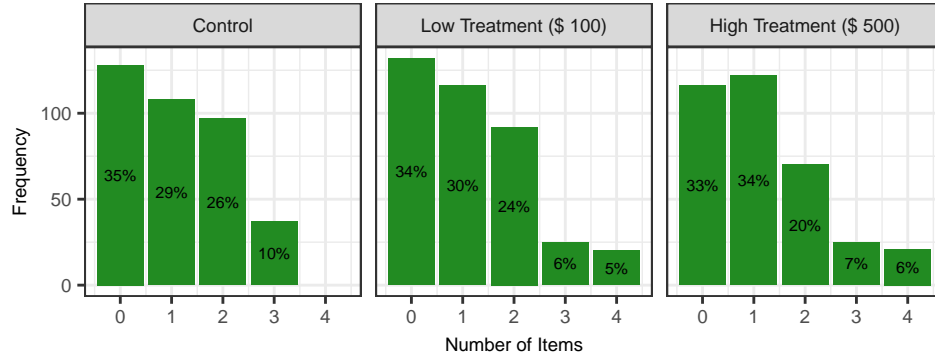


Figure 3: Frequency and Percentages of Subjects Declaring How Many (if Any) Illegal Things They Would Do.

Note: Notice that the X-axis denotes the number of items, not which ones.

List Experiment: Would U.S. citizens sell their vote? Following the advice of Blair and Imai (2012) and Blair et al. (2016), the list data were analyzed using a statistical multivariate approach.³⁷ These analyses allow estimating the individual probability of vote-selling (shown in Figure A2). Using this information, it is possible to estimate the proportion of individuals selling their votes. In combination with the estimates of the direct question, it was also possible to estimate the number of “liars.”

Based on the statistical analyses of the list experiment data, Figure 4 shows the estimated proportion of vote-sellers, the proportion of declared vote-sellers (based on the direct question), and the difference between the two (“liars”). Each estimation is broken down by treatment (“high”/“low”). Since the proportion of vote-sellers does not increase with the high-price treatment, it is then reasonable to think that there are not specific concerns associated with the design of the treatments.

Substantively, the figure suggests that, combining the estimates of the “low” and “high” treatments, approximately 25% of the nationally representative sample would be willing to sell their vote.³⁸ While a considerable proportion answered the direct question affirmatively (18%),³⁹ the analyses still suggest that survey respondents systematically under-reported their true answers. Around 8%

37. The R package `list` was used (Blair et al. 2016). The estimation method used was the “ml,” while the maximum number of iterations was 200,000. The rest of the arguments were left at their default values. Table A1 shows the regression table.

38. This number was calculated averaging over the “high” (27%) and “low” (23%) conditions.

39. This number was calculated averaging over the “high” (19%) and “low” (17%) conditions.

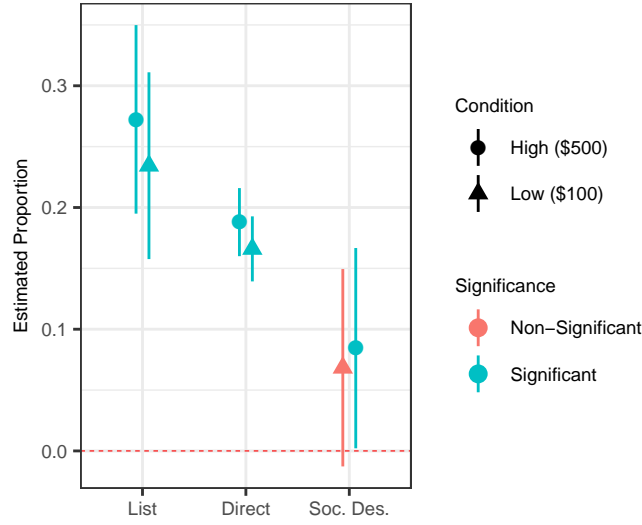


Figure 4: List Experiment Data: Declared and Predicted Vote-Sellers.

Note: The figure shows the proportion of declared and predicted vote-sellers, and its difference (“liars”). These estimations were obtained from the model specified in [Table A1](#). The figure shows 95% confidence intervals. Since the vote-selling prices were set arbitrarily, the idea behind having two conditions (“high” and “low”) was to control for possible price elasticities. While there are some perceptible changes, they are not statistically significant. Consequently, these arbitrary decisions do not threaten the identification strategy.

of the nationally representative sample lied about it.⁴⁰ Overall, these results are striking, and the author is not aware of any other experimental design where subjects in an industrialized democracy are asked whether they would sell their votes, and moreover, finding positive results.

There seem to be two conflicting pictures. On the one hand, and leaving concerns of social desirability bias aside, we “know”—using *non*-experimental data—that most people have never been offered the possibility to sell their votes (as per [Figure 1](#)). On the other hand, the results presented here strongly suggest that they would. While buyers (e.g. parties) are not buying, there is a large proportion of *latent* vote-sellers willing to sell its votes.

Price Experiment: What would be the tipping point for vote-sellers? *Where do supply and demand meet?* A pricing experiment was conducted in this study. Subjects were directed to

40. This number was calculated averaging over the “high” (8%) and “low” (7%) conditions. The “low” condition is barely non-significant, and hence it does not alter the substantive results.

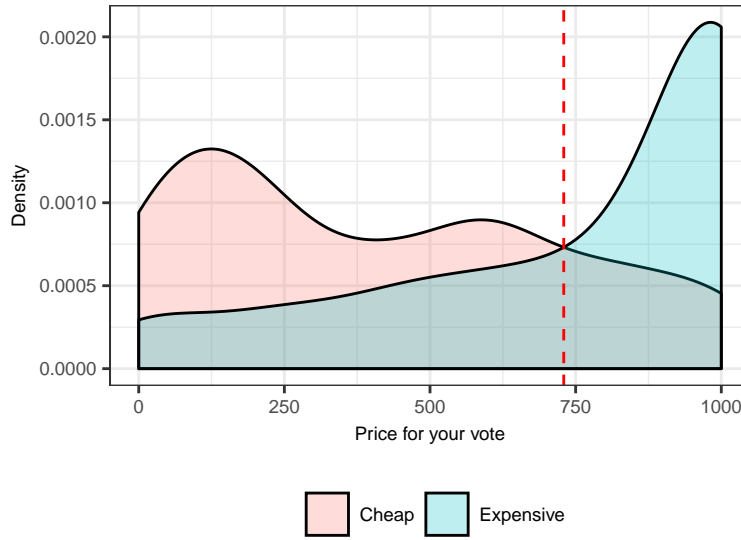


Figure 5: Pricing Experiment: Ideal Selling Price.

Note: Subjects who answered “yes” to the direct question ($N = 189$) were asked to price their votes via a pricing experiment (see [Figure A1](#)). This figure shows the empirical distributions of the “too cheap” and “too expensive” answers. The intersection of these two supply curves (the vertical dashed line) represents the estimated optimal selling price. The data suggest that the right price for one’s vote is \$730.

declare which price was considered “too cheap” and “too expensive.”⁴¹ With these two pieces of information, it was possible to construct two supply curves. The “too cheap” curve, representing the lower bound (mean = \$418), and the “too expensive” curve, representing the upper bound (mean = \$744). Substantively, the optimal selling price is located where both curves intersect. [Figure 5](#) indicates that the average survey respondent would sell his vote for \$730. In practice, these results go in line with some non-academic accounts, where it is found that a broker purchased one man’s vote for \$800 during the 2010 elections in eastern Kentucky.⁴²

These results are aligned with Stokes et al. (2013). From the demand-side, vote-buying is no longer an efficient strategy for party machines. Industrialization has driven up the median income of the electorate, turning vote-buying into an increasingly expensive strategy to win votes. Evidently,

41. Since there is no other way of knowing what “cheap” and “expensive” mean without mentioning directly what specific good is being considered, it was necessary to ask survey respondents directly how much they would sell their votes for. Only 189 individuals would sell their votes when asked directly.

42. Additional information suggests that in some economically marginalized contexts, votes were bought for as low as \$25 or \$75 (Shawn 2012, 6).

with the selling price being so expensive, the demand-side (i.e. parties) is not able to catch up with the supply-side, making vote buying in the U.S. a rare event. This has forced party machines to turn to other, less prohibitively costly alternatives. However, and as these results confirm, from the supply-side (i.e. voters), the vote is still for sale, only for a very high price—a price that party machines cannot really afford.

Conjoint Experiment: Attitudes Towards Democracy. Willingness to sell seems high. *Are democratic values of U.S. citizens “in good health”? And how can they be measured?* This section proposes a new experimental way to measure individual attitudes towards democracy, a multi-dimensional concept.

Carlin (2018, 3) explains that the “most common survey questions of democratic support explicitly ask respondents whether they prefer democracy over other regime types.” That type of strategy is based on the “Linzián” question, which asks whether democracy is preferred over other types of regimes. Unfortunately, these kinds of questions are not only really hard to answer,⁴³ but also they introduce a number of validity concerns, including social desirability biases.⁴⁴

Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014) and Hainmueller and Hopkins (2015) implemented a series of conjoint experiments to study attitudes towards immigration—a multi-dimensional concept too—particularly, attitudes towards a number of immigrant’s characteristics, such as country of origin, language skills, among others. Generally, conjoint designs “ask respondents to choose [...] hypothetical profiles that combine multiple attributes, enabling researchers to estimate the relative influence of each attribute value on the resulting choice.”⁴⁵ In their design, they were interested in knowing what kinds of immigrant profiles were more likely to be granted citizenship. Following their lead, a conjoint experiment was designed to study what kinds of democratic sub-dimensions—administered via different hypothetical candidate profiles—were more salient among U.S. citizens. Importantly, this novel technique captures attitudes towards democracy in a non-intrusive way, and such, the design minimizes the risks of introducing social desirability bias.⁴⁶

In an important paper, O’Donnell (1998)—building on Dahl (1971)—explains that democracy is a multi-dimensional concept. He identifies three sub-dimensions, a democratic sub-dimension, and a liberal and republican sub-dimensions. The first component relates to the degree in which polyarchies

43. McClosky (1964, 376).

44. Carlin (2018, 3).

45. Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014, 2).

46. Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014, 3).

Dalh’s Polyarchy Component	O’Donnell’s Dimension	Experimental Operationalization
Right to vote	Democratic	Citizens can vote in the next two elections
Eligibility for public office	Democratic	Citizens can run for office for the next two elections
Freedom to form and join organizations	Liberal	Citizens can associate with others and form groups
Freedom of expression	Liberal	Media can confront the government
Alternative sources of information	Liberal	Media can confront the Government
Right of political leaders to compete for support	Republican	President can rule without Congress

Table 1: *Attitudes Towards Democracy: A Conjoint Experimental Approach.*

hold free and fair elections (or “vertical accountability”). The last two components, however, pertain to “horizontal accountability.” That is, whether the private and individual spheres are protected from the state (liberal component),⁴⁷ and whether there are “obligations to individuals placed in the public sphere”⁴⁸ (republican component). Luna (2006) conceptualizes these three dimensions in a series of survey questions. Building on his approach, I developed a conjoint experiment that all survey respondents answered after the list experiment portion of the study. Table 1 shows Dalh’s polyarchy components, O’Donnell’s re-conceptualization (three dimensions), and the proposed experimental operationalization.

Following standard practice, experimental subjects were asked to choose between candidates “1” and “2” five times. Every time, both candidates endorsed different (or not) policy positions. Table 2 shows one possible example. To minimize spillover effects, every task had different candidates. That is, the first task asked respondents to choose between candidates “1” and “2,” then in the next task, between candidates “3” and “4,” and so on. Attributes’ order (rows) were randomized. Both the “CAN” and “CANNOT” were also randomized.⁴⁹ In practice, survey respondents chose among unique profiles every time. As the table shows, both candidates could (or could not) differ on their respective policy positions.

Statistically, the ACME was estimated. As explained by Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014, 20), ACMEs for all attributes were obtained by running a single regression of the choice

47. Essentially, “the idea that there are some rights that should not be encroached upon by any power, prominently including the state” (O’Donnell 1998, 3).

48. O’Donnell (1998, 3).

49. To minimize experimental fatigue, it was decided to capitalize both the “can” and “cannot” to accentuate the differences (or similarities) between the two hypothetical candidates.

Please carefully review the options detailed below. Which of these two candidates represents the lesser of two evils for you?		
	Candidate 1	Candidate 2
Right to vote	Citizens CAN vote in the next two elections	Citizens CAN vote in the next two elections
Right to run	Citizens CANNOT run for office for the next two elections	Citizens CAN run for office for the next two elections
Right to associate	Citizens CANNOT associate with others and form groups	Citizens CAN associate with others and form groups
Free press	Media CAN confront the government	Media CANNOT confront the government
President Autonomy	resident CAN rule without Congress	President CAN rule without Congress

Table 2: *Experimental Design: Example of the Tasks Respondents were Asked to Respond.*

outcome on the dummy variables for the attribute values (say 1 for where “Citizens CAN vote in the next two elections,” and 0 where citizens “CANNOT”).⁵⁰ All estimated coefficients then represent a comparison between these two policy positions.

Figure 6 suggests that survey respondents have in general “healthy” democratic values. And to answer the question above, they do systematically value their voting rights (“citizens CAN vote”). Political participation (“citizens CAN run for office”) ranks a little bit lower relative to the rest. Power of the media is slightly stronger than the ability to form groups. The role of Congress is seen as more relevant than the right to run for office.

Conjoint Experiment: Democratic Values and Vote Selling. The following portion of the analyses identified which of these democratic sub-dimensions should fail to produce likely vote-sellers. The statistical analyses performed on list experiment data allowed estimating individual probabilities of vote-selling (as shown in Figure A2). Next, the predicted individual probabilities of vote-selling were arranged on the left-hand side of the ACME linear regression, with the set of chosen attributes (i.e. the “CAN” and “CANNOT”) on the right-hand side of the equation.⁵¹ Using this method, it was possible to regress vote-selling on the chosen democratic sub-dimensions. This allowed investigating

50. More formally, for every sub-dimension, the next OLS model was fitted: $y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Sub-Dimension}_{0,1} + \epsilon_i$, where y_i is the observed choice, for all survey respondents i . Every sub-dimension has either the “CAN” (1) or “CANNOT” (0) option, which is administered at random, as shown in Table 2.

51. More formally, for every sub-dimension, the next OLS model was fitted: $y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Observed Choice}_i + \epsilon_i$, where y_i is the predicted probability of vote selling, obtained via the methods formalized in (Blair and Imai 2012), for all survey respondents i .

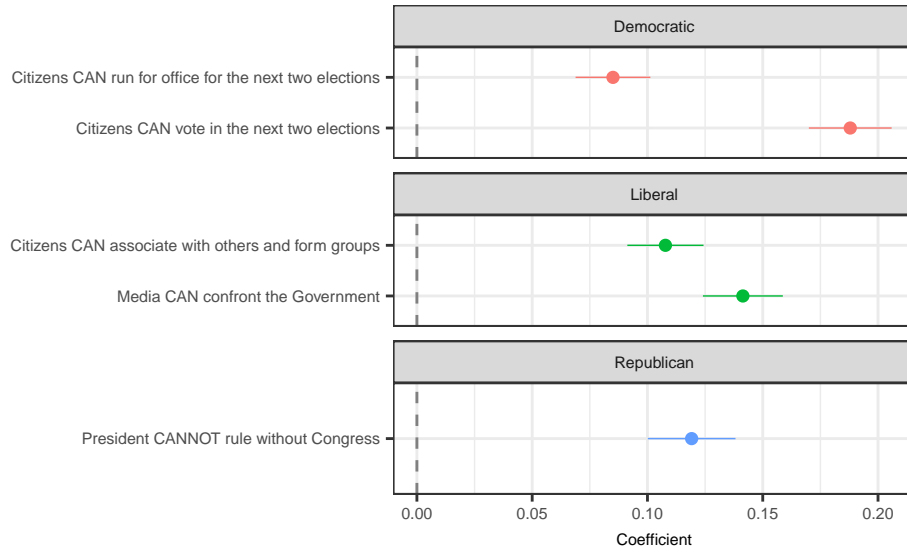


Figure 6: Democratic Values of the American Public: A Conjoint Experimental Approach.

Note: Besides answering the list experiment, survey respondents also answered a conjoint experiment. Following the advice of Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto 2014, the ACME for every democratic sub-dimension (as conceptualized by Dahl 1971; O’Donnell 1998; Luna 2006) was computed. The figure shows estimated preferences towards different democratic sub-dimensions. For instance, and regarding the “democratic” dimension, survey respondents systematically value having political rights in the next two elections as opposed to not have them. Similarly, and regarding the “republican” component, survey respondents systematically value the role of Congress (as opposed to a system where the President “CAN” rule without Congress). 95% confidence intervals are included. All observations were included. $N = 14,770$.

which dimensions should fail to produce likely vote-sellers.

Vote-selling seems to be associated with lower levels of support of a system framed within the tradition of checks and balances (horizontal accountability). Figure 7 shows that individuals who systematically do not value Congress as an institution capable of offsetting the President’s political power, systematically sell their vote more. Neither the democratic nor the republican components seem to have a systematic explanatory power in predicting vote-selling. Sub-dimensions that involve empowerment of citizens and press, do not have an effect on vote-selling. Interestingly, attitudes towards voting do not have an effect on vote-selling either. That is, individuals supporting hypothetical candidates whose preferences include “Citizens CANNOT vote in the next two elections,” do not necessarily sell more. Overall, a structural failure to value a political system embedded within the checks and balances tradition, seems to be associated with vote-selling. For instance, and

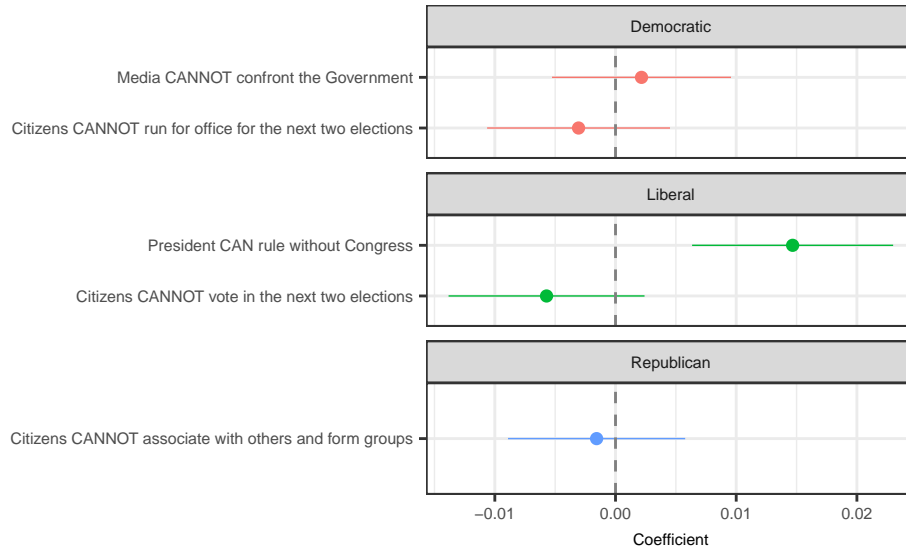


Figure 7: Predicting Vote Selling: Broken Democratic Dimensions.

Note: Figure shows the estimated dimension associated with vote-selling. After estimating the individual propensities for vote-selling via the list experiment, those estimations became the dependent variable in the conjoint portion. The plot shows which of Dahl’s dimensions are associated with vote-selling. 95% confidence intervals included. As per [Figure A2](#), only statistically significant estimations were included. $N = 7,385$. Note that every individual performed five tasks, i.e. “voted” in five “elections.”

while not statistically significant, survey respondents supporting candidates that might ban the free press, which is another form of horizontal accountability, tend to sell their votes more.

List Experiment: Who are the most-likely vote-sellers? Four covariates were included when analyzing the list data: income, education, party identification, and political ideology. These variables have been widely considered in the clientelism literature.⁵² Each variable was estimated twice (one per treatment).⁵³

[Figure 8](#) shows the estimated effect of each variable on vote-selling. Democrats and liberals are systematically more likely to sell. These findings go in line with a string of research that has studied the different constitutive values of liberals and conservatives. Political psychologists have found that liberals, when compared to conservatives, construct their moral systems primarily upon narrower

52. Nazareno, Brusco, and Stokes (2008) and González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson (2014). But also see Bahamonde (2018) and Weitz-Shapiro (2012).

53. The regression table is [Table A1](#).

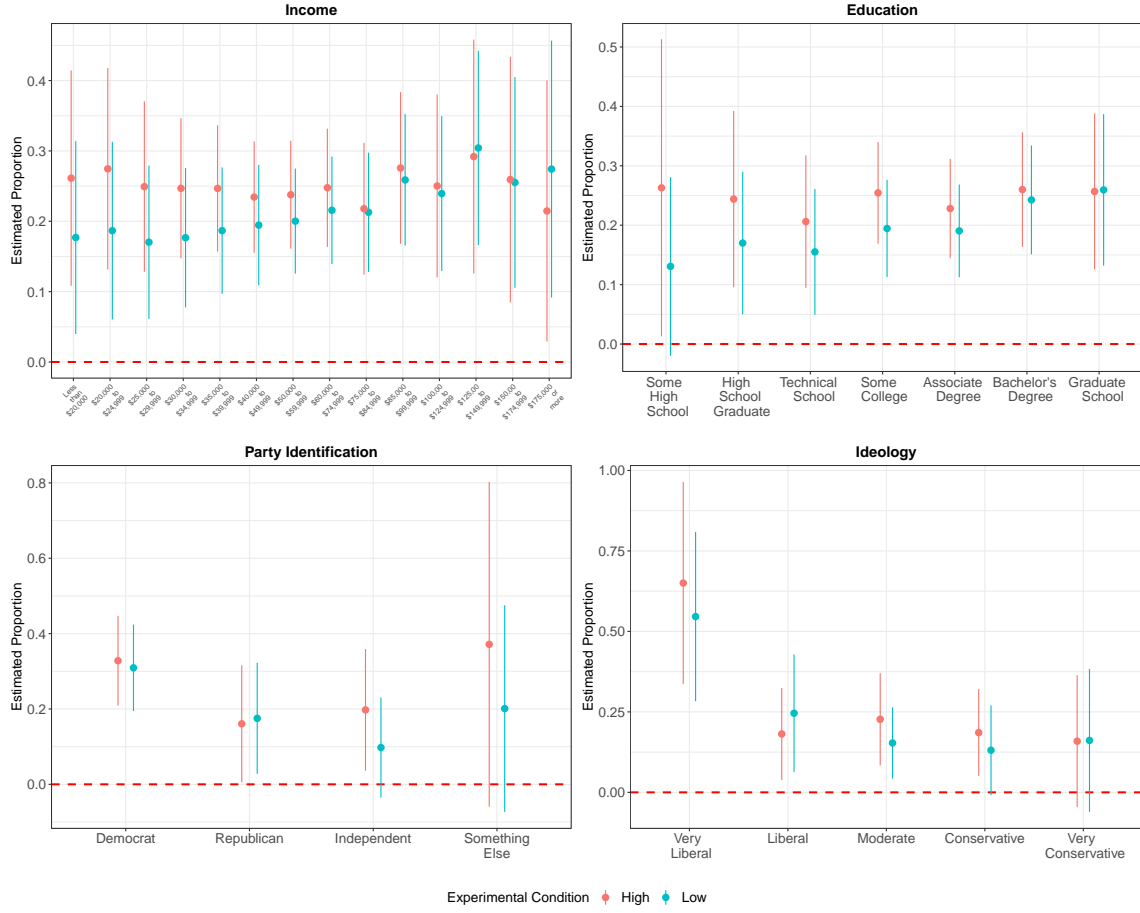


Figure 8: List Experiment: Predicting Vote-Selling.

Note: After fitting the model on the list experiment data (see [Table A1](#)), in this figure are shown the predicted probabilities, and their corresponding 95% confidence intervals, of: income, education, party identification, and ideology. Since the vote-selling prices were set arbitrarily, the idea behind having two experimental conditions (“high” and “low”) was to control for possible price elasticities. While there are some perceptible changes, they are not statistically significant. Consequently, these arbitrary decisions do not threaten the identification strategy.

psychological foundations. Particularly, liberals consider less important both the authority/respect and the purity/sanctity dyads.⁵⁴ This might lead liberals to engage more frequently in behaviors that might be considered “wrong,” such as vote-selling. In fact, Gray, Schein, and Ward (2014, 7) explain that conservatives “see impure violations as relatively more wrong.”

Education and income levels do not seem to have a systematic impact on vote-selling. Interestingly, poverty has long been associated with vote-selling.⁵⁵ Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes (2004), Stokes et al. (2013) and Nazareno, Brusco, and Stokes (2008) explain that since the poor derive more utility from immediate transfers relative to returns associated with future (and risky) policy packages, clientelistic political parties only target the poor. For instance, Weitz-Shapiro (2014, 12) explains that “[a]lmost universally, scholars of clientelism treat and analyze [this] practice as an exchange between politicians and their poor clients.” However, this canonical predictor has recently been questioned. Szwarcberg (2013) “challenges the assumption [that brokers] will always distribute goods to low-income voters in exchange for electoral support,” while González-Ocantos et al. (2012) and Holland and Palmer-Rubin (2015) find that income had little or no effect on vote-buying. In fact Bahamonde (2018) advances an argument for why brokers would also target non-poor individuals.⁵⁶

While the differences between the two treatments are not statistically significant, there seems to be a substantive pattern regarding these two treatments. Factors that heavily determine economic status (income and education), seem to be more elastic to the buying price of the vote. That is, even when poor individuals do not seem to sell more (when compared to wealthier individuals), there does seem to be important within-group differences between the treatments. Particularly, low-income and less educated individuals are willing to sell their vote (just like the rest), but more so under the high-price condition. This might indicate that, for them, it is worthwhile to behave illegally, but only when the payoff is “large enough.” These results go in line with experimental and applied economists who argue that “risk aversion decreases as one raises above the poverty level and decreases significantly for the very wealthy.”⁵⁷ In other words, less educated and low-income individuals, being more fragile and precarious, tend to avoid risks, and hence, illegal activities. However, a discrete increase in the payoff makes the immediate monetary transfer more attractive,

54. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009, 1029).

55. See Calvo and Murillo (2004) and Weitz-Shapiro (2012), Kitschelt (2000) and Kitschelt and Altamirano, in Carlin, Singer, and Zechmeister (2015, ch. 10).

56. Leveraging the Brazilian case, he explains that brokers target individuals when they are identifiable and groups when brokers need to rely on the spillover effects of clientelism. Both effects happen regardless of individual income levels.

57. Riley and Chow (1992, 32).

lessening risk aversion.

IV. GENERAL DISCUSSION

The paper began by establishing the tension between supply and demand sides within a clientelistic relationship. In order to study the micro-dynamics of clientelism, more hypothetical questions should be fielded. If clientelism is conceptualized as a transaction between party machines and citizens, studying only realized transactions should produce only partial answers. Geddes (1990, 131) explains all the well-known problems of studying “only cases that have achieved the outcome of interest.” Questions involving hypothetical scenarios, on the contrary, are able to potentially shed light on unrealized transactions. Notably, González-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson (2014) constitutes one of the few examples in the study of hypothetical behaviors in the vote-buying literature. Following their lead, the paper presents evidence of vote-selling in the United States.

While vote-buying/selling in the U.S. was commonplace during the 19th century, higher median incomes have increased the cost of this strategy as a feasible tool to win elections, in turn, making vote-buying rare in the United States. The paper confirms this hypothesis by suggesting that an important estimated proportion of U.S. voters—25%—is very much willing to sell their votes, but for an estimated very high price—\$730.

The conjoint experiment reveals that U.S. citizens have consistently “healthy” democratic values, scoring high in every democratic sub-dimension. Vote-sellers, however, have lower levels of support towards a system governed by principles of checks and balances, in what both O’Donnell (1998) and Dahl (1971) call “horizontal accountability,” increases the individual probability of selling one’s vote.

Moving forward, *What are the implications that a 25% of the representative sample were willing to sell their votes? Is that considered “high” or “low”?* While there is a big jump between realized and hypothetical behaviors, the results presented in this paper are still worrisome. If that jump is made, this proportion is roughly comparable to what others have found in developing countries. Employing a similar strategy, González-Ocantos et al. (2012, 210) find that 24% of Nicaraguan votes were bought. In turn, the findings presented in this paper are below of what Corstange (2012, 493) finds for the Lebanon, where 55% of voters sold their votes. In any case, the existence of a critical mass willing to sell their votes in the United States, has broader implications for American democracy. This is particularly important in times where the integrity of elections, and the democratic system in

general, have been delegitimized by the President of the United States himself,⁵⁸ possibly denoting a structural democratic legitimacy crisis.

While the paper is rather descriptive in nature, the author believes that the exercise was rather worth pursuing. Not only presenting experimental evidence about a large critical mass willing to sell their votes in a developed country was novel. Also, a new experimental measurement to capture unbiased attitudes towards democracy was introduced. However, it was well beyond the goal of this paper to investigate the long-term structural causes of vote-selling in the U.S., as well as the substantive implications of democratic attitudes on vote-selling. Hopefully, the paper sets the stage for future research, and encourages other scholars to field the experimental designs presented in this paper, including the conjoint experiment, in a comparative setting, where both developed and developing countries are included. Future research should also consider different values placed on different offices.⁵⁹ It is reasonable to think that Presidential, Senate, House, state legislature, mayor, and City Council elections, follow different incentives and constraints to buy and sell votes. Not only that, future research should consider blocking on party identification. For example, designing a more complex experiment, where not only the price varies (like it does in the presented design), but also where the vote-selling treatment is partisan.

58. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018, 61,185). They argue that “no major presidential candidate had cast such doubt on the democratic system since 1860.”

59. I owe this point to .

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V. APPENDIX

I. Experimental Manipulations and Vignettes

Distractor Paragraph. The next paragraph was used to distract subjects from the main purpose of the study, and also to define what vote-selling was.

Washington, D.C.- A department store downtown had a robbery incident last week, reporting several missing iPods from their inventory. Authorities also inform that a group of local residents are trying to ``sell'' their votes to political candidates ahead of a local election for city council. Residents approached some of the candidates running for office and offered to vote for that candidate in return for monetary compensation. In a different subject matter, the local police station released a report on driving habits and behaviors in the Capitol district last week. Finally, cyber-crime has become an increasingly serious issue in the area in the past few year.

Direct Question. All subjects read the next paragraph, and then answered the direct question:

Now you will be entered into a random lottery for the opportunity to do ONE of the illegal things you just read before. This means that you might be randomly offered to hypothetically do ANY of the activities mentioned before.

After a random assignment, you have been selected for the opportunity to hypothetically sell your vote. This means that you will have the hypothetical opportunity to accept money from a candidate for your vote. Would you be willing to accept the offer, assuming you would not go to jail? By selecting ``Yes,'' you could earn up to \$1,000.

Pricing Experiment. Subjects who answered “yes” to the direct question, were immediately asked to price their votes.

Which of the following prices (in USD \$) would you consider...

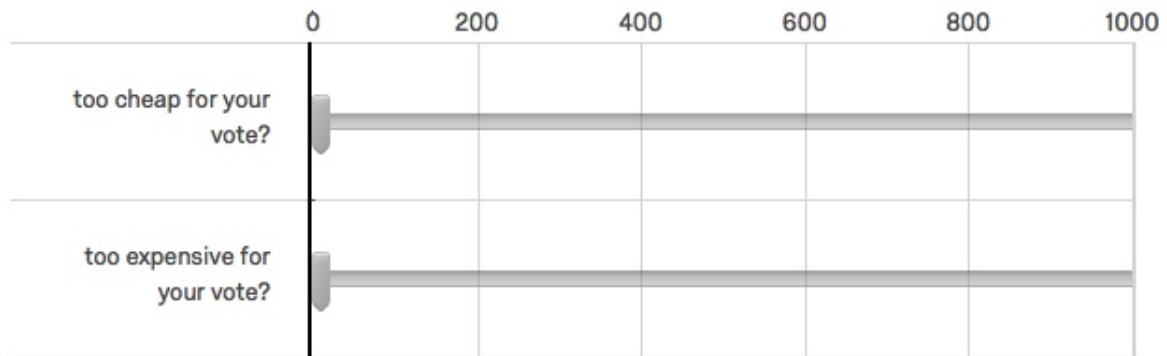


Figure A1: *Pricing Experiment.*

II. Statistical Analysis of the List Experiment: Regression Table

Table A1: *Statistical Analysis of the List Experiment: Estimated coefficients from regression models where the outcome variables are whether or not subjects would sell their vote to a candidate for \$100 or \$500.*

Variables	Sensitive Items				Control Items			
	<i>Low Treatment</i>		<i>High Treatment</i>		<i>Low Condition</i>		<i>High Condition</i>	
	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	−0.06	1.03	0.82	1.2	−0.73	0.22	−0.76	0.24
Ideology _{Liberal}	−1.36	0.8	−2.11	0.9	0.41	0.19	0.36	0.2
Ideology _{Moderate}	−1.79	0.76	−1.74	0.88	0.1	0.18	0.3	0.19
Ideology _{Conservative}	−2.1	0.89	−1.86	0.87	0.23	0.2	0.34	0.21
Ideology _{VeryConservative}	−1.88	1.12	−2	1.03	0.01	0.25	0.09	0.25
Party Id _{Republican}	−0.18	0.75	−0.6	0.73	−0.53	0.15	−0.55	0.15
Party Id _{Independent}	−1.2	0.89	−0.55	0.65	−0.37	0.13	−0.35	0.13
Party Id _{Something Else}	−0.23	1.02	0.32	1.1	−0.4	0.25	−0.24	0.27
Income	0.06	0.08	0.02	0.08	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.02
Education	0.02	0.16	−0.03	0.17	0.01	0.03	0	0.03

III. Testing for Design Effects

Table A2: *Test for List Experiment Design Effects.*

Respondent Types	<i>Low Condition</i>		<i>High Condition</i>	
	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Est.</i>	<i>SE</i>
(y = 0, t = 1)	0	0.03	0.02	0.04
(y = 1, t = 1)	-0.01	0.03	-0.03	0.04
(y = 2, t = 1)	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.02
(y = 3, t = 1)	0.05	0.01	0.06	0.01
(y = 0, t = 0)	0.34	0.02	0.33	0.02
(y = 1, t = 0)	0.3	0.03	0.33	0.04
(y = 2, t = 0)	0.25	0.03	0.23	0.03
(y = 3, t = 0)	0.05	0.02	0.04	0.02

Note: Since the Bonferroni-corrected p-values of the *low* (0.86) and *high* (0.33) conditions are above the specified alpha (0.05), I fail to reject the null of no design effects.

IV. Statistical Analysis of the List Experiment: Individual Probabilities of Vote-Selling

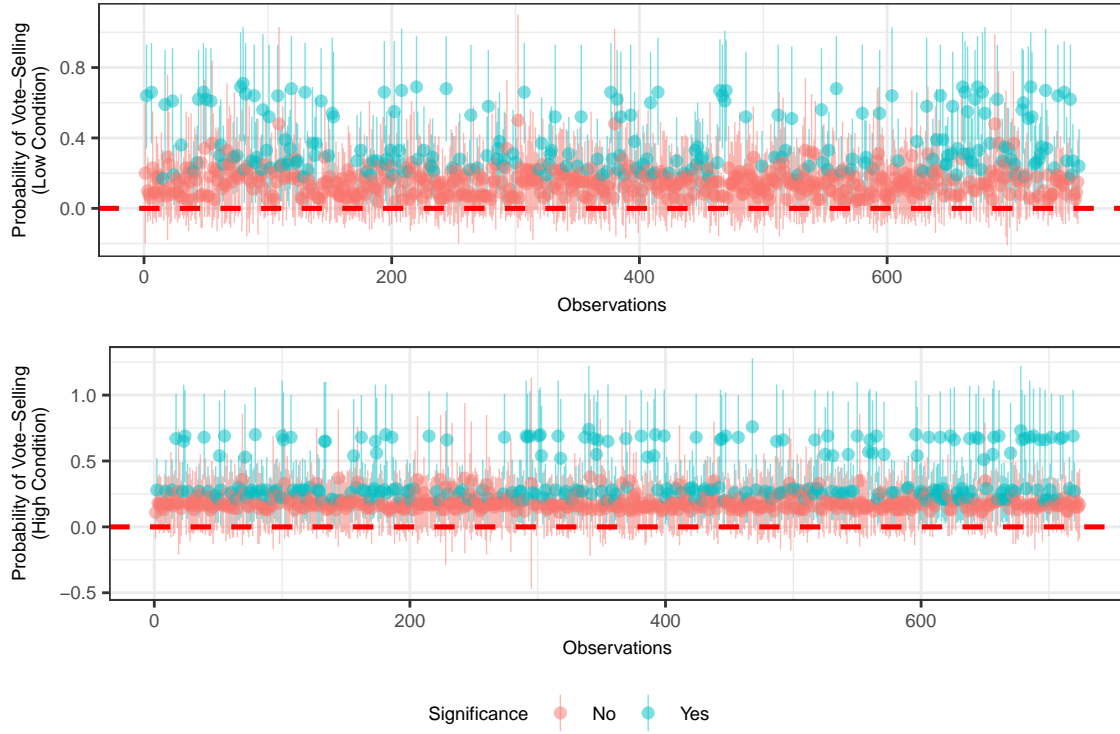


Figure A2: Individual Estimated Probabilities of Vote-Selling.

Note: Figure shows the individual probabilities of vote-selling ($N = 1,479$) under the “low” and “high” conditions. After fitting the model in [Table A1](#), and following the advice of Blair and Imai (2012) and Imai, Park, and Greene (2015), individual probabilities of vote-selling under the “low” and “high” conditions were estimated. A total of 501 estimations are significant (both conditions). The figure also shows 95% confidence intervals.

VI. ONLINE APPENDIX

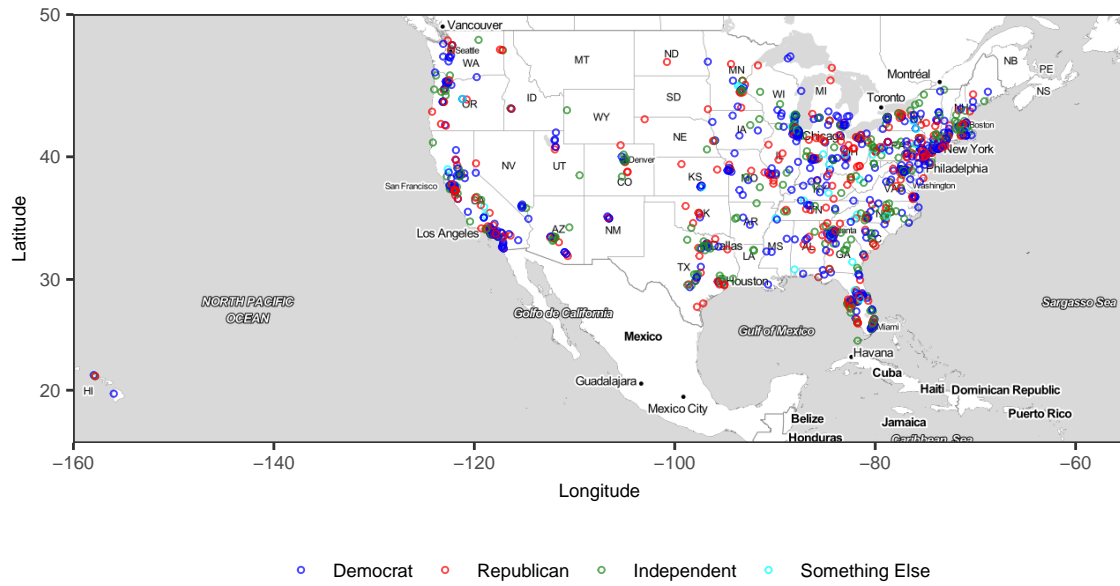


Figure OA1: *Geographical Distribution of Survey Respondents broken by Party Identification.*