

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

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April 13, 2018

Abstract

In the nineteenth-century United States vote buying was commonplace. Nowadays, however, vote-buying seems to have declined considerably. 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 a 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 a systematic impact on vote-selling.

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*I thank Virginia Oliveros, Richard Lau, David Redlawsk, Christopher Chambers-Ju, Jessica Price, Maria Akchurin, Kosuke Imai, and the 2016 Experimental Research Group in Political Psychology at Rutgers. This project was funded by the Center for the Experimental Study of Psychology and Politics (Rutgers University). Notice of IRB exemption Protocol #E16-292 is kept in file at the Office of Research and Regulatory Affairs of Rutgers University.

I. VOTE-SELLERS AND VOTE-BUYERS: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN?

Many advanced democracies were first very clientelistic political systems. For instance, [Stokes et al. \[2013, 200\]](#) explains 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,”¹ 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.”² Vote buying, besides being cheap, was “the major urban political institution in the late nineteenth century”³ in “one-half of the nation’s twenty largest cities.”⁴ Students of American political development have analyzed vote-buying in more detail, confirming both its early development, and its generalized practice.⁵ However, nowadays vote-buying seems to have declined considerably. For instance, [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.⁶ 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.⁷

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. *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? What are the micro-foundations of vote-selling?*⁸ Given that the emphasis so far has been devoted to studying vote-buying, ignoring the micro-dynamics of vote-selling, prior studies do not offer satisfactory answers to these questions.⁹

Prior research usually focuses on whether *parties* have attempted to buy votes, overlooking the question of whether citizens would *sell* their votes. For instance, [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 the *supply* side. The figure, in fact, represents the canon in the

¹[Stokes et al. \[2013, 200\]](#).

²In [Stokes et al. \[2013, 227\]](#).

³[Erie \[1990, 2\]](#).

⁴[Erie \[1990, 2\]](#).

⁵See particularly [Benseal \[2004\]](#) and [Campbell \[2005\]](#). For the British case during the Victorian Era, see [Kam \[2017\]](#).

⁶However, 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.”

⁷A very small percentage (4.8%) reports to have received some kind of clientelistic offer from a political party.

⁸In a similar vein, [Weitz-Shapiro \[2012\]](#) explains that vote-buyers in Argentina would opt-out of clientelism in scenarios where the middle class, due to “moral or normative” reasons, would fail to support clientelistic politicians.

⁹[Hicken et al. \[2015a, 2018\]](#) constitute two very important exceptions.

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,¹⁰ on what *parties* do by asking *voters* about what *parties* do. This *reverse demand-side bias* might cause other problems too. For instance, not only asking (directly) survey respondents about illegal behaviors constitutes an important source of social desirability bias,¹¹ double-biasing these results. Also, *indirectly* learning about what parties do by asking voters, poses a number problems to causal inference. At least, individual responses should be confounded with personal frustrations and/or negative opinions about political parties and politics in general.

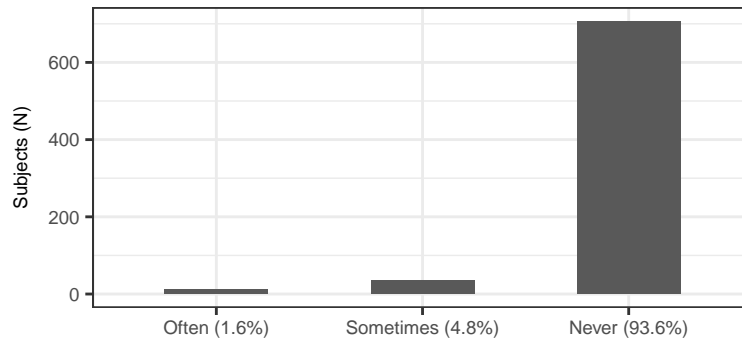


Figure 1: Frequency of Clientelism.

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

Source: *LAPOP*, 2010 wave for the United States. Question is *cli1en1*: ‘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 I collected a novel dataset representative at the national level, where a total of 1,479 U.S. voters participated in a list experiment between March 2nd and March 6th. Leveraging this experimental design, I was able 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. The results are striking.

¹⁰Notably, Zarazaga [2016] interviewed 120 brokers in Argentina. Szwarcberg [2013] employed a similar strategy. Oliveros [2016] interviewed 1,184 lower-and mid-level local public sector employees in three Argentinean municipalities about the provision of favors. See also Stokes et al. [2013]. Vote-selling has been studied in other regions as well, such as Lebanon (Corstange [2012]), Philippines (Hicken et al. [2015b, 2018]), and Nigeria (Bratton [2008]).

¹¹Actually suggesting that the number of *never(s)* should be larger. See Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. [2012]. However, and unfortunately, their focus is on vote-buying, overlooking vote-selling too. They ask whether “candidates or activists gave [voters] a gift or did a favor.”

They suggest that a sizable portion of U.S. voters of the nationally representative sample (approximately 25%) are willing to sell their votes, 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, these findings are astonishing, going against the standard optimistic panorama offered by analysts of the *vote-buying* approach (and exemplified in [Figure 1](#)). Democrats and liberals are systematically more likely to sell than the rest. Education levels and income do not seem to have a systematic impact on vote-selling.

Ultimately, this paper is an attempt to bridge the gap between *vote-sellers* and *vote-buyers*, by looking at where supply and demand meet, not by criticizing the *vote-buying* literature *per se*. Particularly, by exploiting individual variations within a list experiment framework, the paper advances our knowledge about the micro-dynamics of *vote-selling* in an industrialized country by incorporating a “crucial case” design, specifically, the “least-likely” design.¹² Our priors, based on relevant literature, inform us that levels of vote-selling should be low, making the U.S. a “hard case” for vote-selling. However, the counterintuitive results of U.S. citizens’ willingness to sell their votes, and the narrow treatment the literature has traditionally given to the issue, by particularly focusing on *vote-buyers*, overlooking *vote-sellers*, make these paper’s efforts worth pursuing. As [Levy \[2008, 12\]](#) explains it, “[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 author is not aware of any other study where voters of an advanced democracy are asked via an experimental design (and finding positive results) whether they would sell their votes.

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](#).

¹²See [Levy \[2008\]](#).

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]).

The exercise of the *sine qua non* democratic practice (i.e., voting) in the early U.S. was questionable, to say the least. While norms that existed to exclude women, African-Americans and Native Americans from politics were systematically enforced norms that were imposed to restrict voting based on property qualifications, or made vote buying illegal, were not. While all states had made the bribery of voters illegal at very early stages,¹³ these laws were purposely ignored. In particular, 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.¹⁴ 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,”¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

Weak institutions, poor bureaucracies, and bad-quality record-keeping¹⁷ 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.¹⁸ Historians frequently report that judges at polling places had a hard time figuring out not only the age of the potential voter,¹⁹ but also whether the prospective voter was a U.S. citizen, especially in cases that involved newly naturalized immigrants, who had strong foreign accents.²⁰ Consequently, often times it was at the judge's discretion whether to let prospective voters cast a ballot. Since judges were party appointees,²¹

¹³Bensel [2004, 59].

¹⁴Bensel [2004, 59].

¹⁵Campbell [2005, 6].

¹⁶Campbell [2005, 6].

¹⁷For 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]).

¹⁸Argersinger [1985, 672].

¹⁹Judges used as a rough proxy whether the prospective voter had the ability to grow a beard. In Bensel [2004, 20].

²⁰Bensel [2004, 20].

²¹Argersinger [1985, 672].

their discretionary 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.²² 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 due to a number of issues. First of all, and given a series of factors that I explain later in this section, voters had a hard time “memoriz[ing] the names of the candidates for office.”²³ Second of all, the *viva voce* method was impractical. It worked relatively “well” in small towns, but as population grew, polls had to be kept open for up to three consecutive days, so each citizen could vote.²⁴

However, the “party strip” or “unofficial” ballot system,²⁵ 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.”²⁶ Since party workers were hired to monitor the surroundings of the voting window,²⁷ this gave ample opportunities to punish (or reward) voters accordingly.

The ticket system required very strong party machines, which in turn, required lots of economic resources to make it work. While it is true that the street price of vote-buying was very cheap, votes were sold and purchased at massive scales.²⁸ In addition, higher levels of electoral competition drove up the unit price of each vote.²⁹ In fact, it has been described that “party hawkers” usually peddled it “to the voters in what resembled an *auctioneering* atmosphere in and around the polling station.”³⁰ Moreover, tickets had to be printed by each party, and handed on an individual-basis

²²Bensel [2004, 54].

²³Bensel [2004, 54].

²⁴This system was far from being ineffective for political elites. Generally, from the elite’s perspective, it delivered efficient electoral outcomes, while minimizing levels of electoral uncertainty at very low costs. Consequently, as Bensel [2004, 56] puts it, “it was logistical necessity, not the integrity of voting, that motivated the change from voice voting to tickets.”

²⁵Rusk [1970, 1221].

²⁶Argersinger [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.

²⁷Argersinger [1985, 672].

²⁸Reynolds [1980, 195] explains that “Estimates of the number of citizens receiving money regularly appeared in the press. The *Newark Evening News* reported in 1889 that roughly 8,000 of Essex county’s and 45,000 voters were known to be purchasable. Jersey City, New Brunswick, Orange, Trenton, Long Branch and Atlantic City were all condemned at one time or another as major electoral marketplaces.” See also Argersinger [1985, 678].

²⁹Every time the election was highly contested, “vote sellers could sometimes be seen loitering about the polls in hopes of negotiating a better deal as the day wore on” (Reynolds [1980, 196]). Vote-buyers, anticipating this, would target extra resources to these districts. For instance, Reynolds [1980, 197-198] explains that Republicans in New Brunswick, NJ, for example, had to aim additional economic resources to buy more votes, as they knew that “Democrats would ‘swamp’ the area with money.” This sometimes led “political leaders [...] across party lines to standardize bribery practices and prices.” (in Argersinger [1985, 679]).

³⁰Rusk [1970, 1221]. Emphasis is mine.

outside the polls, and throughout the entire country. All these factors combined made political campaigns very expensive enterprises.³¹ Consequently, to perform well at all these tasks, political parties developed well-oiled national machines. To contextualize the amount of work needed in such a campaign, in the 1858 election in New York's Third Congressional District, one particular candidate employed 200 men on election day to distribute tickets. These men did all they could to secure the candidate's election. Some stayed at the poll, while others hunted up voters. Most of them (134) were paid five dollars each for the day.³² The remainder received more money. In total, somewhere between six and eight hundred dollars had been spent employing men in the campaign.³³

Political machines were not only oiled with money. On the one hand, many "ticket peddlers"³⁴ were volunteers,³⁵ 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."³⁶ 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.³⁷ Parties, then, amassed huge amounts of money. And while it is hard to calculate, it has been explained elsewhere that given all these donations, and the large pool of volunteered work, party machines were able to spend *half of their budgets* on vote-buying.³⁸

With all these resources flooding the polls on election day, voting was truly a Dantesque spectacle. On election day, as "men moved about the polling place, party agents would often offer them liquid refreshment, almost always whisky, as an enticement to vote their ticket."³⁹ Moreover, party machines would make sure that "liquor was both freely available and consumed to excess."⁴⁰ "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 they had voted."⁴¹ 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."⁴² In summary, the environment

³¹Camp et al. [2014, 561] explain that parties in the United States were well aware of these costs. However, since both of them did not want "to be the only party not using agents," and hence minimizing losses, they were trapped in a prisoner's dilemma, and had to hire party agents anyway.

³²\$154 in 2017 U.S. dollars. Conversion based on Williamson [2018].

³³See Bense [2004, 65]. In 2017 U.S. Dollars, somewhere between \$18,400 and \$24,600 (Williamson [2018]).

³⁴Argersinger [1985, 672].

³⁵Bense [2004, 17].

³⁶Bense [2004, 17].

³⁷In Reynolds [1980, 197].

³⁸Reynolds [1980, 197].

³⁹Bense [2004, 57].

⁴⁰Bense [2004, 20].

⁴¹Bense [2004, 20].

⁴²Campbell [2005, 5].

outside the voting window was pitiful. Crowds were so drunk that not only voters were accustomed to fights outside the polls,⁴³ but also “were thoroughly inebriated by the time they turned in their ticket.”⁴⁴

The Australian ballot system lowered the frequency of most of these malpractices significantly.⁴⁵ However, as vote-selling and vote-buying were so embedded into what was considered normal,⁴⁶ the immediate effect of the Australian system was to lower turnout levels.⁴⁷

Even while the *modus operandi* of clientelism has changed, and both the frequency of vote-buying and the importance of party machines have declined,⁴⁸ 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. Regardless of what you want to believe, that’s the way real politics works.’” Other examples are the famous primary election in March 1972 in Chicago, where twenty *Tribune* reporters managed to act as precinct officials. As one reported, “[when] one voter was offered a ballot by a precinct official, the voter casually replied, ‘I already have one.’”⁴⁹ And in the 1980s, in the coal-rich Appalachian mountains, “[c]oal companies still exercised considerable leverage in election contests [where] liquor and cash were displayed in large quantities.”⁵⁰

To add some perspective, the vote-buying literature (which is mostly about developing countries) describes vote-sellers as poor,⁵¹ uneducated,⁵² and undemocratic.⁵³ *What do we know about contemporary likely vote-sellers in the U.S.?* Unfortunately, the literature has overlooked this important question. However, 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 (including also a number of European countries). They find that 26% of millennials say that it is “unimportant” in a democracy for people to “choose their leaders in free

⁴³Argersinger [1985, 685] and Campbell [2005, 3]. In turn, Bense [2004, 13] explains that “[a]lmost anything was permitted in this public space in terms of speech, electioneering, and, all too often, physical intimidation [while] election officials had no authority to maintain order outside.”

⁴⁴Bense [2004, 57].

⁴⁵Rusk [1970, 1221] and Reynolds and McCormick [1986, 836].

⁴⁶Reynolds [1980, 195] explains that during “the Gilded Age (1877-1896) parties had so integrated vote buying into their operations that the transactions were common everywhere.”

⁴⁷Reynolds and McCormick [1986, 851].

⁴⁸Stokes et al. [2013, 230] explain that “party machines are a thing of the past.”

⁴⁹Campbell [2005, 262].

⁵⁰Campbell [2005, 275].

⁵¹Weitz-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.”

⁵²Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. [2014] find that schooling plays a negative role on clientelism.

⁵³Carlin and Moseley [2015] argue that citizens endowed with more democratic values feel more “moral repugnance” to clientelism.

elections.”⁵⁴ 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? Unfortunately, there have not been efforts dedicated to investigate these matters, and even less so employing experimental designs. Vote buying and selling was once common. While this is no longer the case, a new possible crisis of democratic legitimacy reopens this debate in the U.S. *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? Who is most likely to sell?*

III. VOTE-SELLING IN AN EXPERIMENTAL CONTEXT: A LIST EXPERIMENT IN AN INDUSTRIALIZED DEMOCRACY

List Experiments. 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,⁵⁵ are well suited to elicit truthful answers. List experiments administer two lists of items; one to the control group, one to the treated group. 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 some socially condemned behavior.

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,⁵⁶ drug use,⁵⁷ sexual preferences,⁵⁸ attitudes towards race,⁵⁹ among others.

⁵⁴Foa and Mounk [2016, 10]. See also Foa and Mounk [2017].

⁵⁵See for a review Blair [2015].

⁵⁶Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. [2012], Hicken et al. [2018], Corstange [2012, 2008], Blair and Imai [2012].

⁵⁷Druckman et al. [2015].

⁵⁸LaBrie and Earleywine [2000].

⁵⁹Kuklinski et al. [1997], Redlawsk et al. [2010].

Methodologically, 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 differences in means, they should be attributed only to the presence of the sensitive item. Blair and Imai [2012] formalize two assumptions, namely, there are (1) “no design effects” (i.e. the inclusion of a sensitive item has no effect on respondents’ answers to control items) and (2) “no liars” (i.e. respondents give truthful answers for the sensitive item).

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.”⁶⁰ Fortunately, Blair and Imai [2012] and Imai et al. [2015] explain that when the two assumptions hold, and given that the item count for types $y = 0$ and $y = 4$ are fully observed,⁶¹ experimental subjects with item count types $y = 1$, $y = 2$ and $y = 3$ can be inferred using multivariate techniques.

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. Given that traditional list experiments contain information about two *groups* (i.e. treatment and control), *individual* preferences are not observed. Whilst still unobserved, under reasonable assumptions, statistical analyses permit estimating preferences at the individual level. Third, if a “direct” (i.e. non-experimental) question over the sensitive item is included in the design, it is also possible to estimate the amount of social desirability bias by comparing the results of the list experiment and the direct question.

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. Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. [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.⁶² Figure OA1 shows the geographical distribution of survey respondents broken by party identification.

⁶⁰Glynn [2013, 159].

⁶¹For an hypothetical treatment list of four items.

⁶²The data were collected by *Research Now SSI*.

The experiment was framed as a study about crime in the U.S., not as a study about vote-selling. 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.⁶³

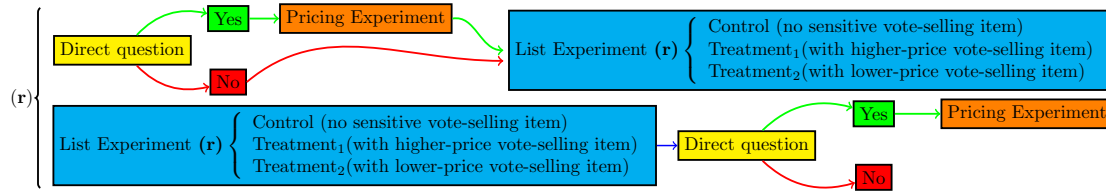


Figure 2: Experimental Flow.

Note: This figure shows the flow of the 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,⁶⁴ 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,” a process which I describe below.

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. As I explain below, 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 (without any sensitive vote-selling item), and

⁶³According to several pre-studies that were conducted, it was noticed that the concept of “vote-selling” was not common knowledge.

⁶⁴Blair and Imai [2012, 54] explain that asking the direct question to individuals in the treated group might bias the results.

two possible treatments, each with different vote-selling prices. Since it is difficult to price a vote, based on a number of pretests, it was decided to consider both an arbitrarily low (\$100) *or* an arbitrarily high (\$500) price as possible treatments. To be sure, 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 might have interacted with individual socio-economic backgrounds, mainly income.⁶⁵

Moving forward, subjects randomly assigned to the control condition⁶⁶ 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 and 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) sell your vote to a candidate for \$100
- (4) download your favorite music from the internet illegally

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

However, the ones assigned to the “high” price condition, read exactly the same vignette, with the only difference that the third item read as follows: (3) **sell your vote to a candidate for**

⁶⁵Holland and Palmer-Rubin [2015, 1189] explain that “the poor are thought to be more susceptible to vote buying.”

⁶⁶This is a hypothetical situation. 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.” In any case, the paper focuses on the *willingness* to sell.

\$500. 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.⁶⁷ Importantly, the sensitive item might or might not be included in this frequency. Finally, and following standard practice in the literature, the order of the items was not randomized so as to not violate the stable unit treatment value assumption, or “SUTVA.”⁶⁸

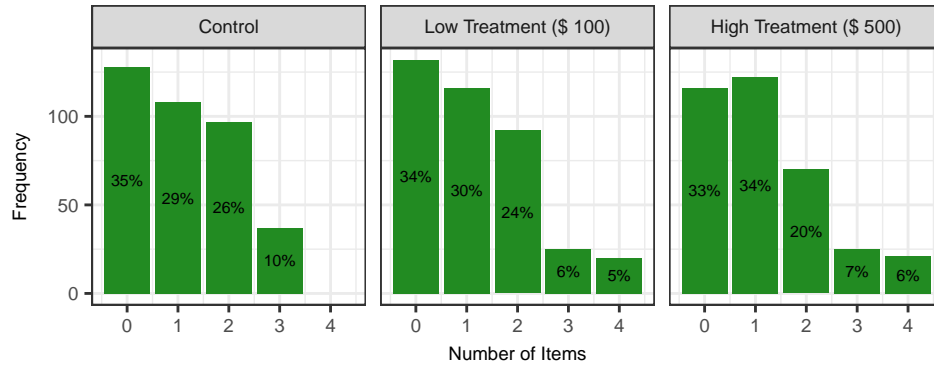


Figure 3: Frequency and Percentages of Subjects Declaring How Many (if Any) Illegal Things They Would Do.

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

Given that the focus is to outline some conditions under which voters would sell, the paper acknowledges that there is considerable friction and transaction costs in the real world that might mean that actually creating a market for vote selling would not be easy. For instance, party identification might increase (or decrease) the cost of selling one’s vote, presumably preventing (or fostering) the transaction. For instance, if the party of both sellers and buyers coincide, that might represent a win-win situation for both, presumably fostering vote-selling. The experimental design does not consider blocking on party identification, as that might have increased the number of cells considerably.⁶⁹ Having that in mind, the paper’s aim is to explore the micro-dynamics of the willingness to sell the vote, presumably, in elections that are relatively non-partisan.

Would U.S. citizens sell their vote? Following the advice of Blair and Imai [2012] and Imai et al. [2014], the list data were analyzed using a statistical multivariate approach.⁷⁰ These analyses allow

⁶⁷The experimental design passes the standard tests for design effects (floor and ceiling effects). See Table A2.

⁶⁸Morton and Williams [2010, 98] explain that the treatment should be invariant, or *stable*.

⁶⁹To $3 \times 2 \times 3 = 18$ cells: Republican/Democrat/Independent vote-selling treatments, High/Low vote-selling prices, Republican/Democrat/Independent party identifications. Such experiment is not only much more expensive, but statistically more complex.

⁷⁰Table A1 shows the regression table.

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.”

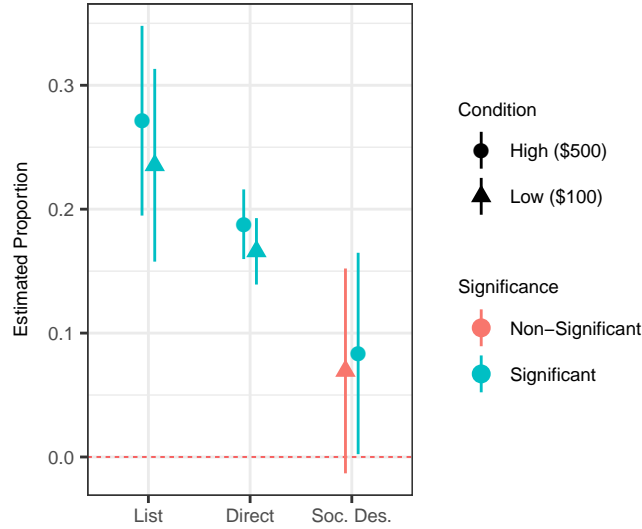


Figure 4: Declared and Predicted Vote-Sellers.

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.

[Figure 4](#) shows the estimated proportion of vote-sellers based on the list experiment, the declared proportion of vote sellers based on the direct question, and the difference between the two, which is the estimated proportion of “liars.” Each estimation is broken down by treatment (“high”/“low”). As stated before, both of them were introduced to control for possible different selling elasticities associated with discrete increments in income. 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.⁷¹ While a considerable proportion answered the direct question affirmatively (18%),⁷² which is surprising, the analyses still suggest that survey respondents systematically under-reported their true answers.

⁷¹This number was calculated averaging over the “high” (27%) and “low” (24%) conditions.

⁷²This number was calculated averaging over the “high” (19%) and “low” (17%) conditions.

Around 8% of the nationally representative sample lied about it.⁷³ 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 in this study strongly suggest that they *would*: a very high proportion of the nationally representative sample would be willing to give up, in exchange for money, its right to vote freely. That is, while buyers (e.g. parties) are not buying, there is a large proportion of *latent vote-sellers* willing to sell its votes.

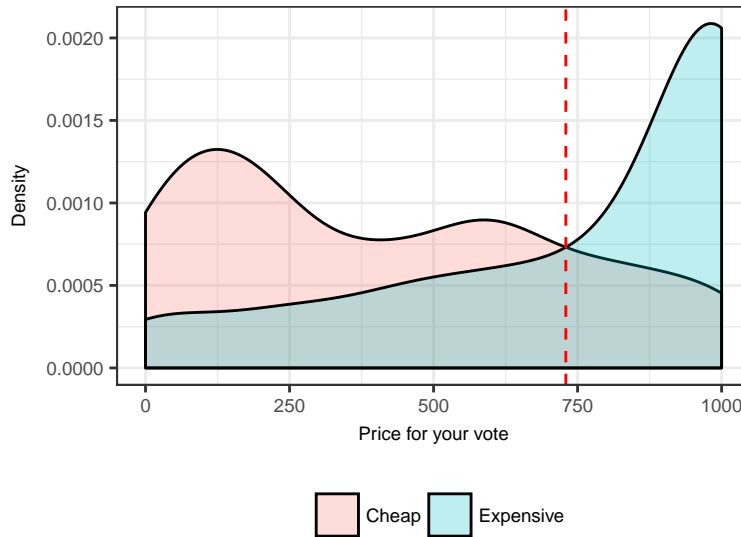


Figure 5: Pricing Experiment: Ideal Selling Price.

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.

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 declare which price—within a \$1-\$1,000 range, and in \$1 increments—was considered *too cheap*, and which price—idem—was considered *too expensive*. With these two pieces of information, it was possible to construct two supply curves. The *too cheap* curve represents the lower bound (with an estimated mean of \$418), while the

⁷³This 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.

too expensive curve represents the upper bound (with an estimated mean of \$744). Substantively, the optimal selling price is located where both curves intersect. Following this procedure, [Figure 5](#) indicates that the average survey respondent would sell his vote for \$730.

In light of what is explained in [Stokes et al. \[2013\]](#), these results go in line with their findings. 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, 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.⁷⁴ 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.

Who are the most-likely vote-sellers? Since the location is known, [Figure 6](#) suggests that willingness to sell the vote predominates among urban clusters. Big cities like Los Angeles, Miami, Philadelphia, New York City, and the Chicago area seem to be the places where (likely) vote-sellers live.

Beyond their geographical location, however, the objective of this study is to learn about the micro-dynamics of vote-sellers, including what socio-economic variables are most associated with vote-selling.⁷⁵ While there are a number of important factors that explain vote-selling, the motivation of the statistical model presented here is to provide an overview of the phenomenon. Considering this, four covariates were included; namely, income, education, party identification, and political ideology. These variables have been widely considered in the clientelism literature.⁷⁶ Each variable was estimated twice, i.e. one model per treatment (“low”/“high”).⁷⁷

[Figure 7](#) shows the estimated effect of each variable on vote-selling. Democrats and liberals are systematically more likely to sell than conservatives. 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 psychological foundations. Particularly, liberals consider less

⁷⁴Since 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. First and foremost, the list experiment confirms that survey respondents systematically underreported the willingness to sell. Consequently, there is an unknown number of participants that would have sold their votes, but due to the potential risk of being socially condemned, they preferred not to answer this question. Only 189 individuals did. In any case, the results of the pricing experiment serve as a rough proxy of the right price for a vote.

⁷⁵The R package `list` was used ([Blair et al. \[2015\]](#)). The estimation method used was “ml” while the maximum number of iterations was 200,000. The rest of the arguments were left at their default values.

⁷⁶[Nazareno et al. \[2008\]](#), [Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. \[2014\]](#). But also see [Bahamonde \[Unpublished\]](#) and [Weitz-Shapiro \[2012\]](#).

⁷⁷The regression table is [Table A1](#).

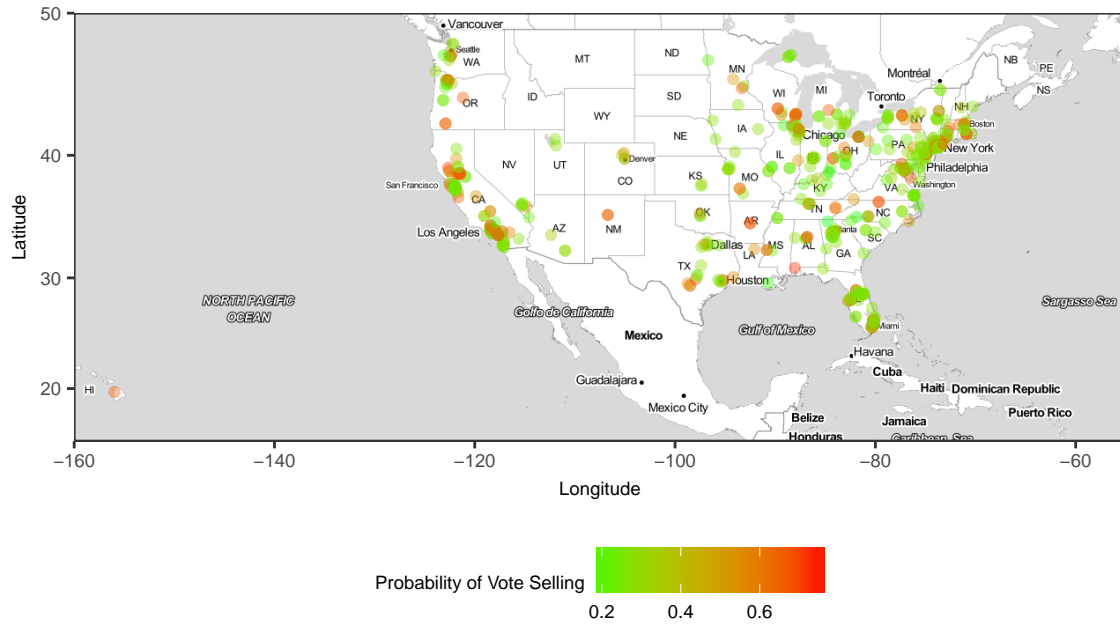


Figure 6: Mapping (Predicted) Vote-Sellers.

Note: Figure shows the geographical location (at the ZIP code level) of estimated vote-sellers. Using the estimations in [Table A1](#), individual probabilities of vote-selling were obtained (see [Figure A2](#)). This map shows the geographical location of the estimations that are statistically significant only ($N = 501$).

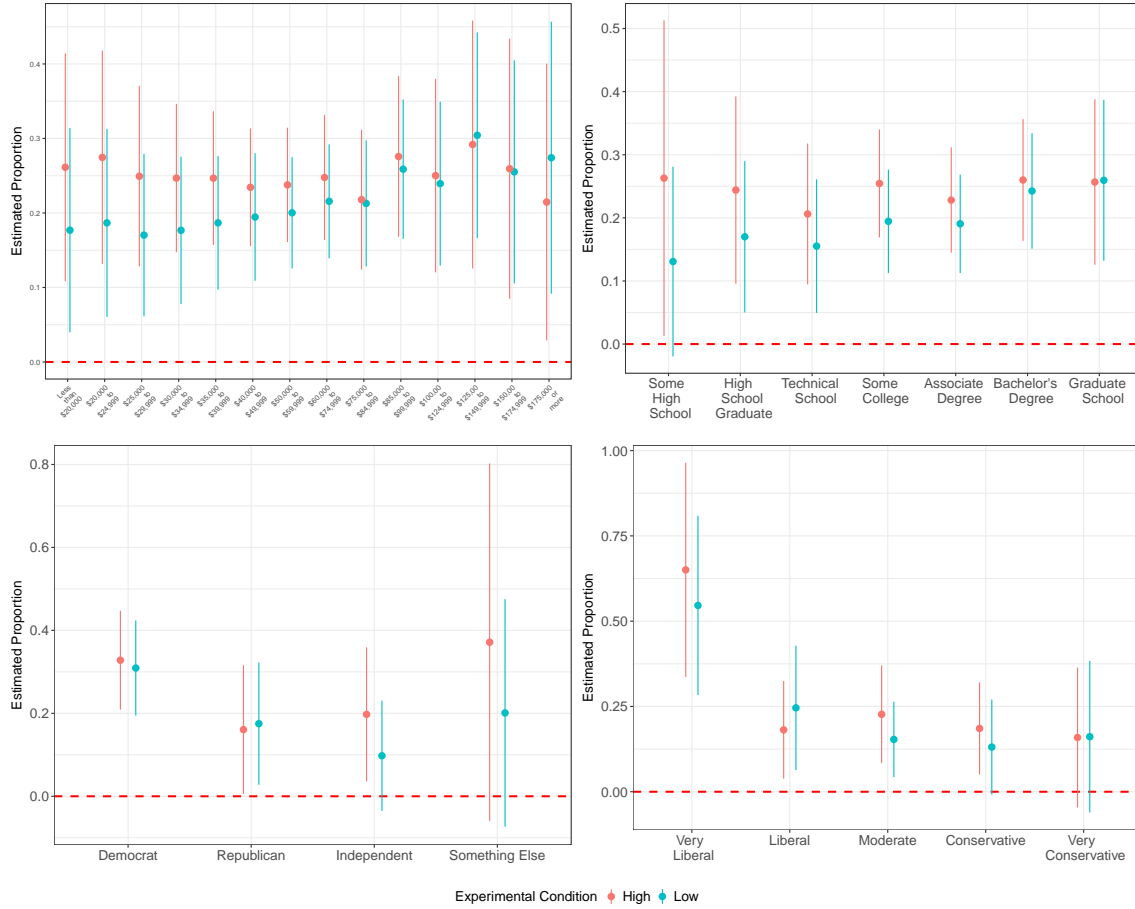


Figure 7: Predicting Vote-Selling: Individual Characteristics.

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.

important both the authority/respect and the purity/sanctity dyads.⁷⁸ This might lead liberals to engage more frequently in behaviors that might be considered “wrong,” such as vote-selling. In fact, Gray et al. [2014, 7] explain that conservatives “see impure violations as relatively *more* wrong,”⁷⁹ in turn, presumably, making them *less* likely to engage in illegal activities. In turn, liberals’ constitutive set of values make them more likely to sell their votes.

Education and income levels do not seem to have a systematic impact on vote-selling. Interestingly, poverty has long been associated with vote-selling.⁸⁰ Brusco et al. [2004], Stokes et al. [2013] and Nazareno et al. [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.”⁸¹ 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 Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. [2012] and Holland and Palmer-Rubin [2015] find that income had little or no effect on vote-buying. In fact Bahamonde [Unpublished] advances an argument for why brokers would also target *non*-poor individuals.⁸² Overall, the findings presented in this paper seem to support the idea that low-income individuals are not necessarily more likely to sell their votes relative to wealthier individuals.

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 regarding both experimental stimuli. 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.”⁸³ In other words, less educated and low-income individuals, being more fragile and precarious, tend to avoid risks, and hence, illegal activities.

⁷⁸Graham et al. [2009, 1029].

⁷⁹Emphasis is mine.

⁸⁰See Calvo and Murillo [2004], Weitz-Shapiro [2012], Kitschelt [2000] and Kitschelt and Altamirano in Carlin et al. [2015, ch. 10].

⁸¹Emphases are mine.

⁸²Leveraging 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.

⁸³Riley and Chow [1992, 32].

However, a discrete increase in the payoff makes the immediate monetary transfer more attractive, lessening risk aversion. On the contrary, higher-income and more educated individuals do not seem to be affected by the different stimuli, and sell their vote in the same proportion, regardless of the price. For instance, highly-educated individuals (graduate school level) sell their vote at the same proportion, both under the “high” (25.68%) and “low” (25.95%) conditions. Relatedly, [Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. \[2014, 205\]](#) and [Corstange \[2012, 494\]](#), also find very weak results for education in Peru and Nicaragua, and Lebanon, respectively.

IV. GENERAL DISCUSSION

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. However, my results suggest that an important (estimated) proportion of U.S. voters are very much willing to *sell* their votes. Consistently with the literature, they are willing to sell their votes, but for a (estimated) very high price.

The paper began by establishing the tension between supply and demand sides within a clientelistic relationship, that is, between the ones who sell and the ones who buy votes. 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.” Similarly, studying a transactional relationship only from the demand-side (vote-buying), overlooking the supply-side (vote-selling), should cause similar problems. Questions involving hypothetical scenarios, on the contrary, are able to potentially shed light on unrealized transactions. Notably, [Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. \[2014\]](#) 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.

The evidence presented makes the case that there is still a large number of votes that are for sale in the United States; an unusual finding, considering the industrialized nature of this case. The findings, moreover, contradict the optimistic conclusions that might be derived by glancing at what is shown in [Figure 1](#). Even when *vote-buying* is rare in the U.S., that does *not* imply, for instance, that U.S. citizens have “healthier”/“better” democratic values, presumably making them less prone to *sell* their votes. Until we study in more systematic ways *vote-sellers*, such preliminary conclusions should be incomplete or wrong (as it is found in this paper).

Approximately, 25% of the nationally representative sample is 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, [Gonzalez-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,⁸⁴ possibly denoting a structural democratic legitimacy crisis.

Future research should also consider different values placed on different offices.⁸⁵ 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. *Do subjects sell more when they sell it to the party of their like? Or do citizens opt-out of vote-selling when they are being bought by the opposite party? Or do vote-sellers do not care about these distinctions at all?* One downside of such a design might be that the number of cells increases from 2 (i.e. *high* and *low* treatments), to $3 \times 2 \times 3 = 18$ cells.⁸⁶ Such higher-dimension factorial design, in turn, implies having enough number of individuals in every cell, increasing the cost of the experiment. Moreover, within the behavioral economics framework, future designs should consider real monetary incentives and real (monetary) risks of selling one's vote. Another interesting addition might be to assign a random probability of being caught selling the vote.

⁸⁴[Levitsky and Ziblatt \[2018, 61,185\]](#). They argue that “no major presidential candidate had cast such doubt on the democratic system since 1860.”

⁸⁵I owe this point to NAME.

⁸⁶Republican/Democrat/Independent vote-selling treatments, High/Low vote-selling prices, Republican/Democrat/Independent party identifications.

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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...

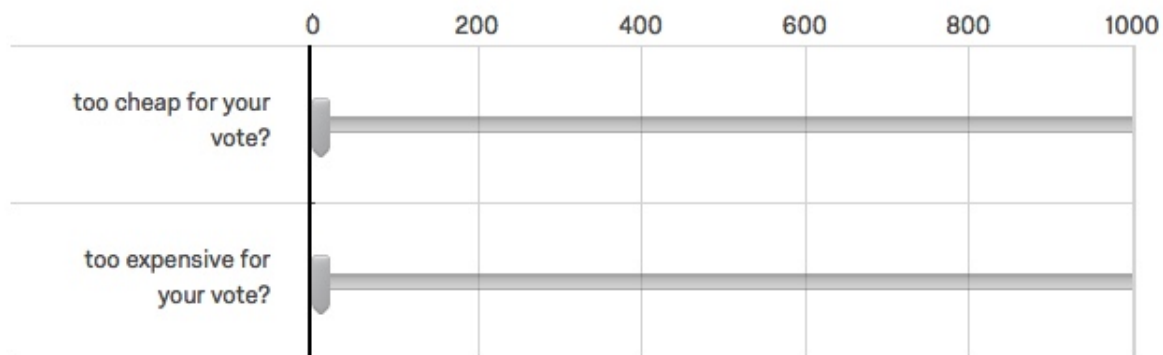


Figure A1: *Pricing Experiment*

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			
	Low Treatment		High Treatment		Low Condition		High Condition	
	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE	Est.	SE
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 _{Very Conservative}	-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

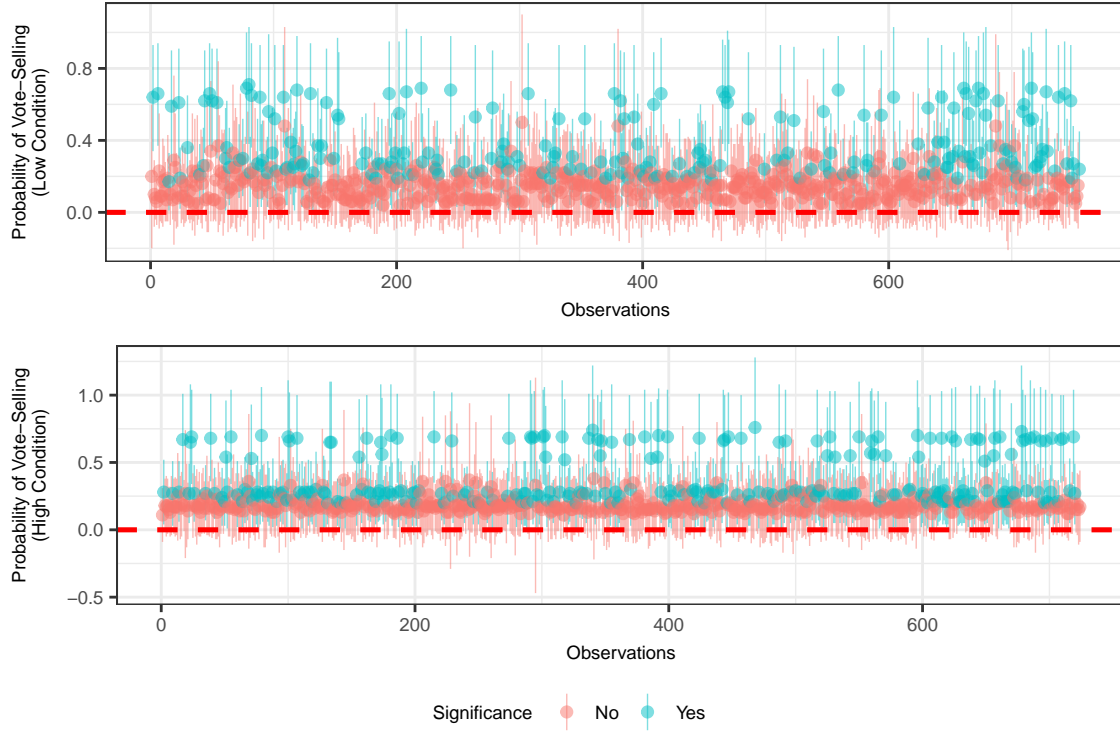


Figure A2: Individual Estimated Probabilities of Vote-Selling.

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 et al. \[2015\]](#), 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

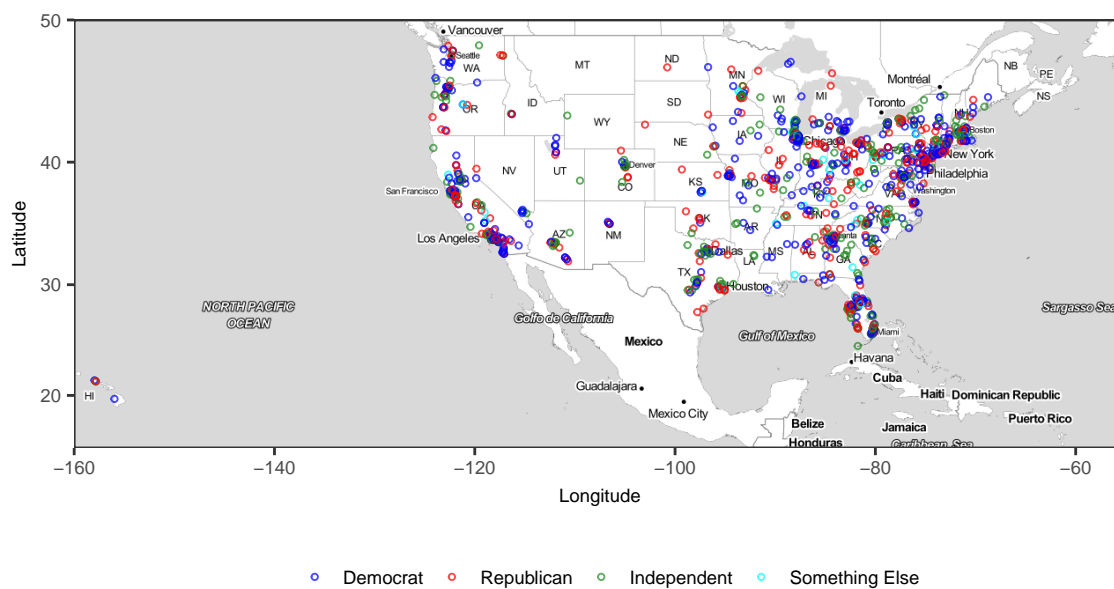


Figure OA1: *Geographical Distribution of Survey Respondents broken by Party Identification*

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