

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

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June 12, 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.

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

*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, p. 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, p. 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

¹Stokes et al. 2013, p. 200.

²In Stokes et al. 2013, p. 227.

³Erie 1990, p. 2.

⁴Erie 1990, p. 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, p. 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.

⁹Hicken et al. 2015a; Hicken et al. 2018 constitute two very important exceptions.

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 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.

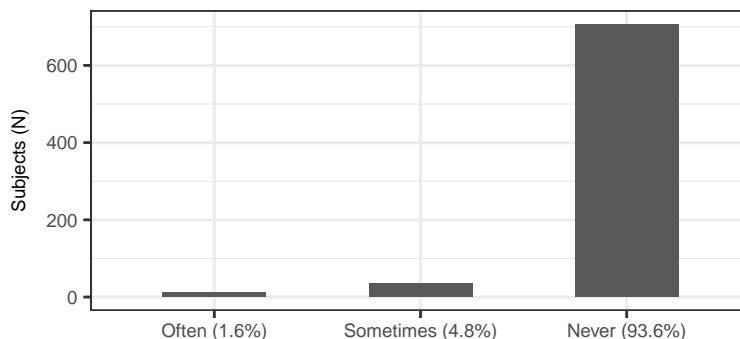


Figure 1: Frequency of Clientelism.

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

Source: [LAPOP](#), 2010 wave for the United States. Question is `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?’

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](#); Hicken et al. [2018](#)), and Nigeria (Bratton [2008](#)).

¹¹Actually suggesting that the number of *never(s)* should be larger. See Gonzalez-Ocantos, Jonge, 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.”

In 2016 a novel dataset representative at the national level was collected. 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. 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—and that this is not a convenient sample—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 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/reporting on a social phenomena—such as the micro-dynamics of vote-selling—is still a valuable exercise *per se*, it is more so if done it by leveraging a “crucial case” design, specifically, the “least-likely” design. As Levy 2008, p. 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.” 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, make these paper’s efforts worth pursuing. 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.

We believe the literature needs a descriptive exercise such as the one carried out in this paper. The vote-buying literature (which is mostly about developing countries) describes vote-sellers as

poor,¹² uneducated,¹³ and undemocratic.¹⁴ *What do we know about contemporary likely vote-sellers in the U.S.?* Unfortunately, the literature has overlooked this important question.

In a highly controversial pair of articles, Foa and Mounk 2016, p. 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 elections.”¹⁵ 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?*

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, p. 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

¹²Weitz-Shapiro 2014, p. 12 explains that “[a]lmost universally, scholars of clientelism treat and analyze [this] practice as an exchange between politicians and their poor clients.”

¹³Gonzalez-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014 find that schooling plays a negative role on clientelism.

¹⁴Carlin and Moseley 2015 argue that citizens endowed with more democratic values feel more “moral repugnance” to clientelism.

¹⁵Foa and Mounk 2016, p. 10. See also Foa and Mounk 2017.

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,¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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,”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

Weak institutions, poor bureaucracies, and bad-quality record-keeping²⁰ 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.²¹ Historians frequently report that judges at polling places had a hard time figuring out not only the age of the potential voter,²² but also whether the prospective voter was a U.S. citizen, especially in cases that involved newly naturalized immigrants, who had strong foreign accents.²³ Consequently, often times it was at the judge’s discretion whether to let prospective voters cast a ballot. Since judges were party appointees,²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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

¹⁶Bensel 2004, p. 59.

¹⁷Bensel 2004, p. 59.

¹⁸Campbell 2005, p. 6.

¹⁹Campbell 2005, p. 6.

²⁰For 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, p. 680).

²¹Argersinger 1985, p. 672.

²²Judges used as a rough proxy whether the prospective voter had the ability to grow a beard. In Bensel 2004, p. 20.

²³Bensel 2004, p. 20.

²⁴Argersinger 1985, p. 672.

²⁵Bensel 2004, p. 54.

office.”²⁶ 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.²⁷

However, the “party strip” or “unofficial” ballot system,²⁸ 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.”²⁹ Since party workers were hired to monitor the surroundings of the voting window,³⁰ 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.³¹ In addition, higher levels of electoral competition drove up the unit price of each vote.³² 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.”³³ Moreover, tickets had to be printed by each party, and handed on an individual-basis outside the polls, and throughout the entire country. All these factors combined made political campaigns very expensive enterprises.³⁴ Consequently, to perform well at all these tasks, political parties developed well-oiled national machines. To contextualize the amount of work needed in

²⁶Bensel 2004, p. 54.

²⁷This 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, p. 56 puts it, “it was logistical necessity, not the integrity of voting, that motivated the change from voice voting to tickets.”

²⁸Rusk 1970, p. 1221.

²⁹Argersinger 1985, p. 672, emphasis is mine. Rusk 1970, p. 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, p. 836 as well.

³⁰Argersinger 1985, p. 672.

³¹Reynolds 1980, p. 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, p. 678.

³²Every 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, p. 196). Vote-buyers, anticipating this, would target extra resources to these districts. For instance, Reynolds 1980, pp. 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, p. 679).

³³Rusk 1970, p. 1221. Emphasis is mine.

³⁴Camp, Dixit, and Stokes 2014, p. 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.

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.³⁵ The remainder received more money. In total, somewhere between six and eight hundred dollars had been spent employing men in the campaign.³⁶

Political machines were not only oiled with money. On the one hand, many "ticket peddlers"³⁷ were volunteers,³⁸ 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."³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

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."⁴² Moreover, party machines would make sure that "liquor was both freely available and consumed to excess."⁴³ "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."⁴⁴ 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."⁴⁵ In summary, the environment outside the voting window was pitiful. Crowds were so drunk that not only voters were accustomed

³⁵\$154 in 2017 U.S. dollars. Conversion based on Williamson 2018.

³⁶See Bensel 2004, p. 65. In 2017 U.S. Dollars, somewhere between \$18,400 and \$24,600 (Williamson 2018).

³⁷Argersinger 1985, p. 672.

³⁸Bensel 2004, p. 17.

³⁹Bensel 2004, p. 17.

⁴⁰In Reynolds 1980, p. 197.

⁴¹Reynolds 1980, p. 197.

⁴²Bensel 2004, p. 57.

⁴³Bensel 2004, p. 20.

⁴⁴Bensel 2004, p. 20.

⁴⁵Campbell 2005, p. 5.

to fights outside the polls,⁴⁶ but also “were thoroughly inebriated by the time they turned in their ticket.”⁴⁷

The Australian ballot system lowered the frequency of most of these malpractices significantly.⁴⁸ However, as vote-selling and vote-buying were so embedded into what was considered normal,⁴⁹ the immediate effect of the Australian system was to lower turnout levels.⁵⁰

Even while the *modus operandi* of clientelism has changed, and both the frequency of vote-buying and the importance of party machines have declined,⁵¹ there are still some contemporary accounts of vote-buying in American elections. For instance, Campbell 2005, pp. 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.’”⁵² 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.”⁵³

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?*

⁴⁶Argersinger 1985, p. 685 and Campbell 2005, p. 3. In turn, Bense 2004, p. 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.”

⁴⁷Bense 2004, p. 57.

⁴⁸Rusk 1970, p. 1221 and Reynolds and McCormick 1986, p. 836.

⁴⁹Reynolds 1980, p. 195 explains that during “the Gilded Age (1877-1896) parties had so integrated vote buying into their operations that the transactions were common everywhere.”

⁵⁰Reynolds and McCormick 1986, p. 851.

⁵¹Stokes et al. 2013, p. 230 explain that “party machines are a thing of the past.”

⁵²Campbell 2005, p. 262.

⁵³Campbell 2005, p. 275.

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,⁵⁴ 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,⁵⁵ drug use,⁵⁶ sexual preferences,⁵⁷ attitudes towards race,⁵⁸ among others.

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-

⁵⁴See for a review Blair 2015.

⁵⁵Gonzalez-Ocantos, Jonge, et al. 2012; Hicken et al. 2018; Corstange 2012; Corstange 2008; Blair and Imai 2012.

⁵⁶Druckman et al. 2015.

⁵⁷LaBrie and Earleywine 2000.

⁵⁸Kuklinski et al. 1997; Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Franko 2010.

in-means estimator, and [do] not provide a measure of the sensitive item for each respondent.”⁵⁹ Fortunately, Blair and Imai 2012 and Imai, Park, and Greene 2015 explain that when the two assumptions hold, and given that the item count for types $y = 0$ and $y = 4$ are fully observed,⁶⁰ 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, 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.⁶¹ 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. Before splitting the subject pool into their respective experimental conditions, participants were

⁵⁹Glynn 2013, p. 159.

⁶⁰For an hypothetical treatment list of four items.

⁶¹The 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.

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.⁶²

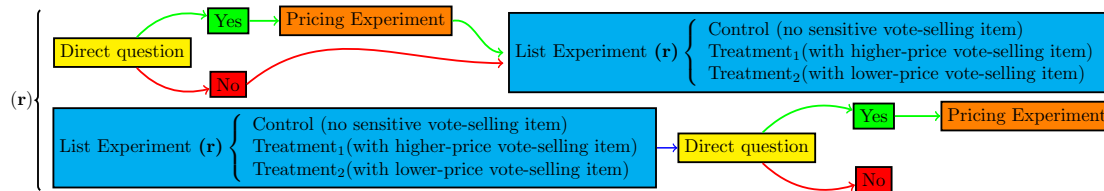


Figure 2: Experimental Flow.

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,⁶³ and as suggested in **Figure 2**, the order in which experimental subjects answered the **direct question** and the list experiment was randomized. 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

⁶²According to several pre-studies that were conducted, it was noticed that the concept of “vote-selling” was not common knowledge.

⁶³Blair and Imai 2012, p. 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.⁶⁴

Moving forward, subjects randomly assigned to the control condition⁶⁵ 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

⁶⁴Holland and Palmer-Rubin 2015, p. 1189 explain that “the poor are thought to be more susceptible to vote buying.”

⁶⁵This 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.

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 \$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.⁶⁶ 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.”⁶⁷

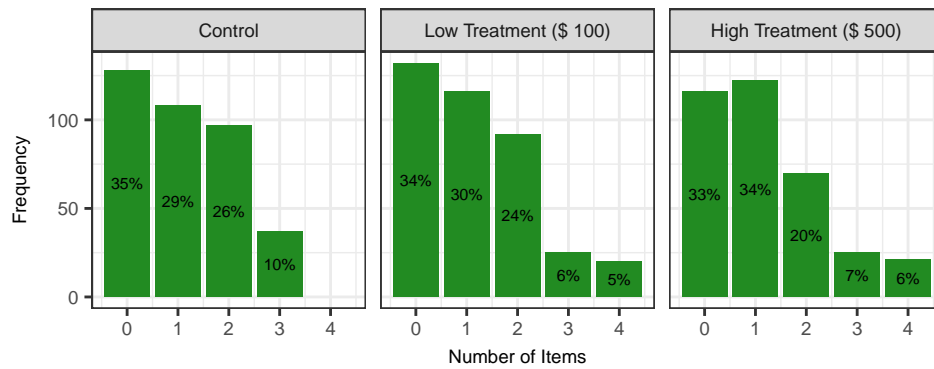


Figure 3: Frequency and Percentages of Subjects Declaring How Many (if Any) Illegal Things They Would Do.

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

⁶⁶The experimental design passes the standard tests for design effects (floor and ceiling effects). See Table A2.

⁶⁷Morton and Williams 2010, p. 98 explain that the treatment should be invariant, or stable.

of cells considerably.⁶⁸ 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, Blair, and Park 2014, the list data were analyzed using a statistical multivariate approach.⁶⁹ 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.”

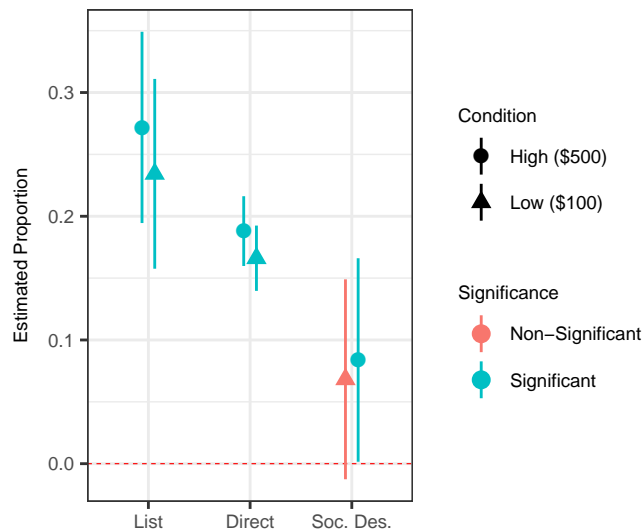


Figure 4: Declared and Predicted Vote-Sellers.

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

⁶⁸To $3 \times 2 \times 3 = 18$ 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.

⁶⁹Table A1 shows the regression table.

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.⁷⁰ While a considerable proportion answered the direct question affirmatively (18%),⁷¹ which is surprising, the analyses still suggest that survey respondents systematically under-reported their true answers. Around 8% of the nationally representative sample lied about it.⁷² 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.

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 “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.

⁷⁰This number was calculated averaging over the “high” (27%) and “low” (23%) conditions.

⁷¹This number was calculated averaging over the “high” (19%) and “low” (17%) conditions.

⁷²This 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.

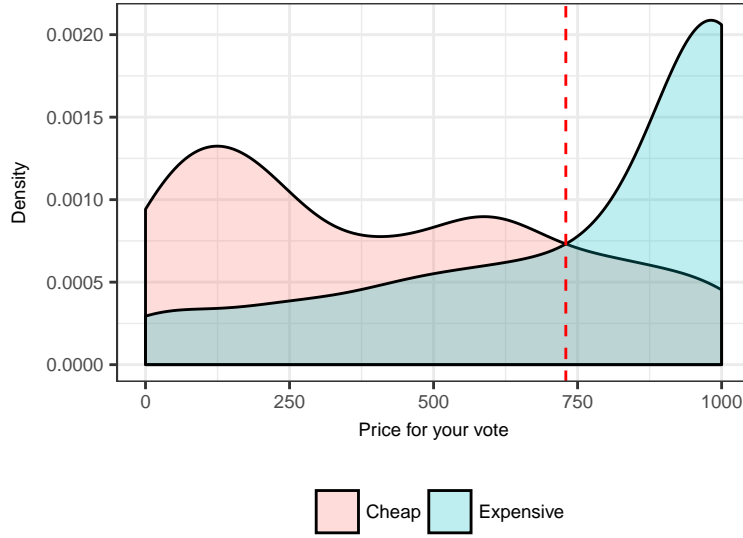


Figure 5: Pricing Experiment: Ideal Selling Price.

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 ‘to 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.

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.⁷³ 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.

⁷³Since 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.

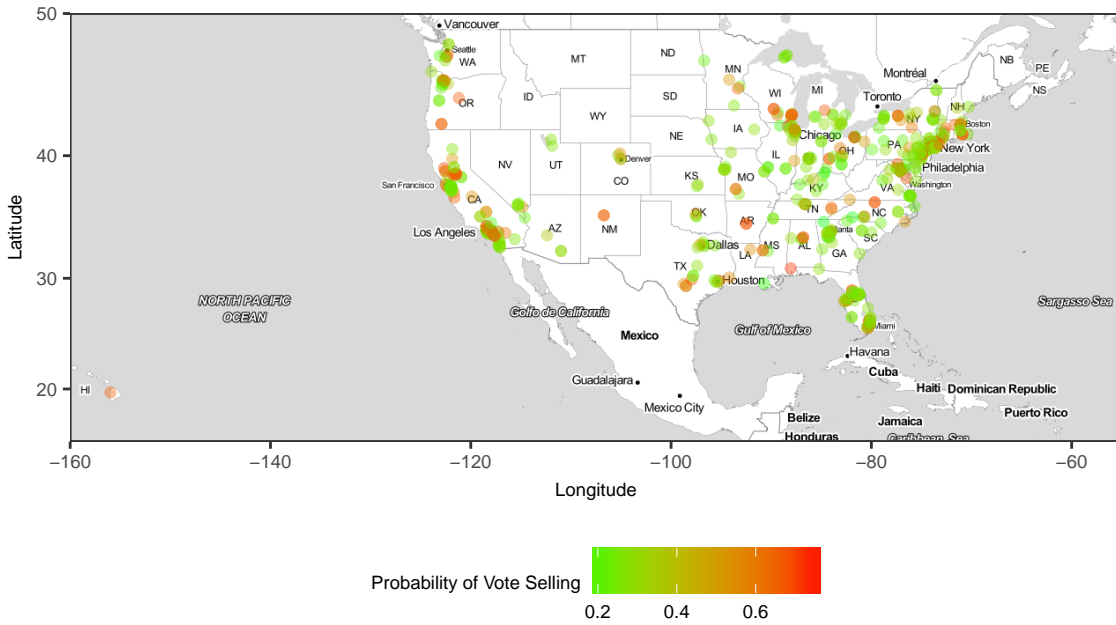


Figure 6: Mapping (Predicted) Vote-Sellers.

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 ($N = 501$).

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.⁷⁴ 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

⁷⁴The R package `list` was used (Blair, Imai, 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.

ideology. These variables have been widely considered in the clientelism literature.⁷⁵ Each variable was estimated twice, i.e. one model per treatment (“low”/“high”).⁷⁶

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 important both the authority/respect and the purity/sanctity dyads.⁷⁷ 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, p. 7 explain that conservatives “see impure violations as relatively more wrong,” 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.⁷⁸ 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, p. 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 Gonzalez-Ocantos, Jonge, 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.⁷⁹ 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

⁷⁵Nazareno, Brusco, and Stokes 2008; Gonzalez-Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014. But also see Bahamonde 2018 and Weitz-Shapiro 2012.

⁷⁶The regression table is Table A1.

⁷⁷Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009, p. 1029.

⁷⁸See Calvo and Murillo 2004; Weitz-Shapiro 2012, Kitschelt 2000 and Kitschelt and Altamirano in Carlin, Singer, and Zechmeister 2015, ch. 10.

⁷⁹Leveraging 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.

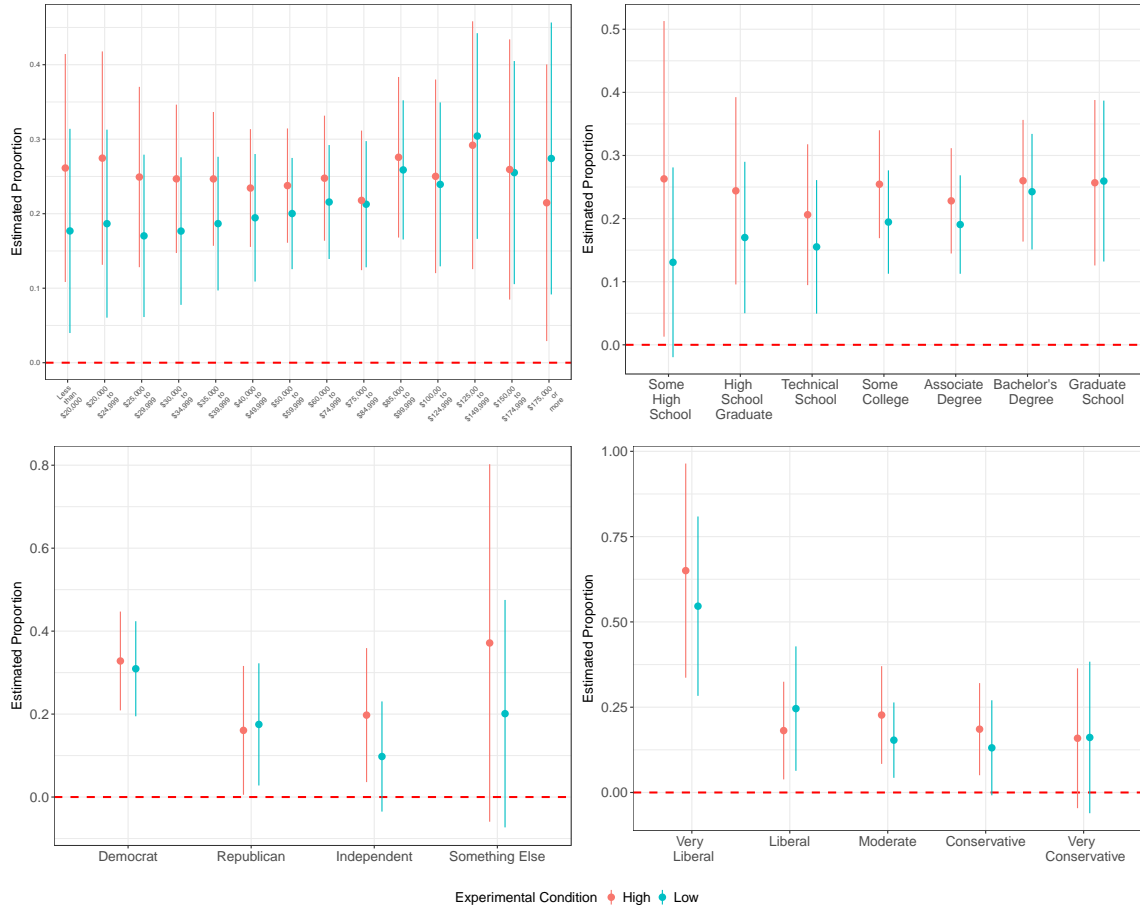


Figure 7: Predicting Vote-Selling: Individual Characteristics.

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.

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.”⁸⁰ 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, 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, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014, p. 205 and Corstange 2012, p. 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, p. 131 explains all the well-known

⁸⁰Riley and Chow 1992, p. 32.

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, 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.

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, Jonge, et al. 2012, p. 210 find that 24% of Nicaraguan votes were bought. In turn, the findings presented in this paper are below of what Corstange 2012, p. 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,⁸¹ possibly denoting a structural democratic legitimacy crisis.

Future research should also consider different values placed on different offices.⁸² 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

⁸¹Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, pp. 61,185. They argue that “no major presidential candidate had cast such doubt on the democratic system since 1860.”

⁸²I owe this point to Chris Chambers-Ju.

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.⁸³ 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.

⁸³Republican/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...

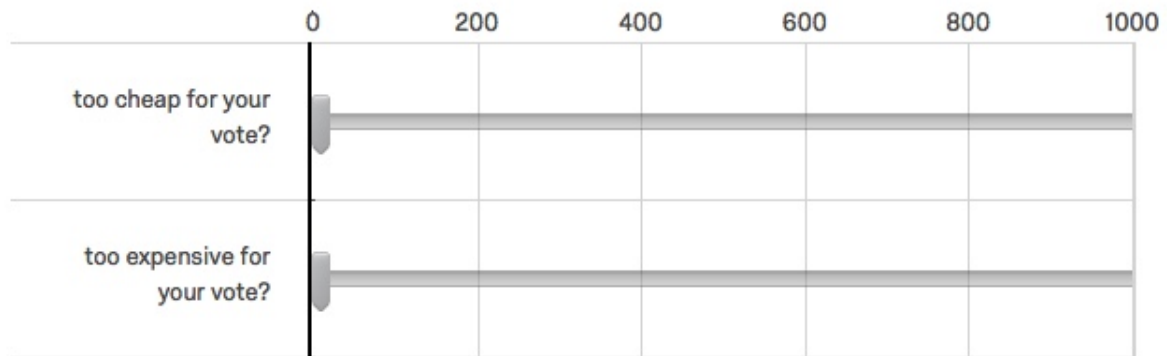


Figure A1: *Pricing Experiment*

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			
	<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

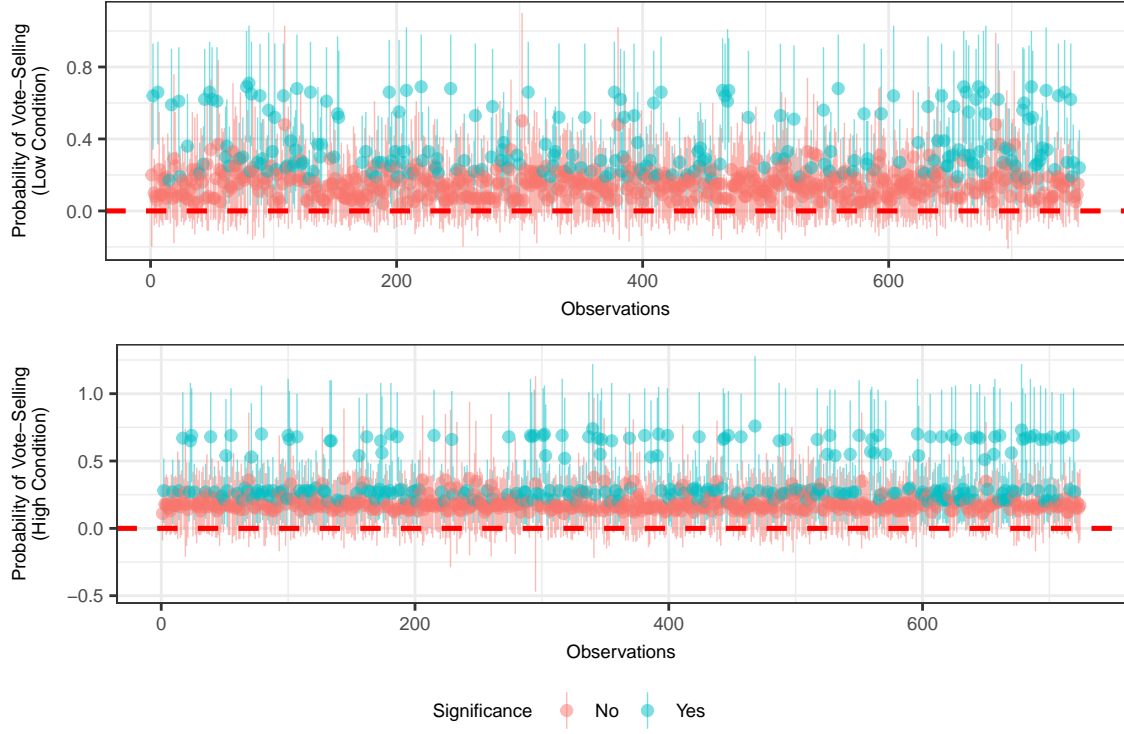


Figure A2: Individual Estimated Probabilities of Vote-Selling.

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

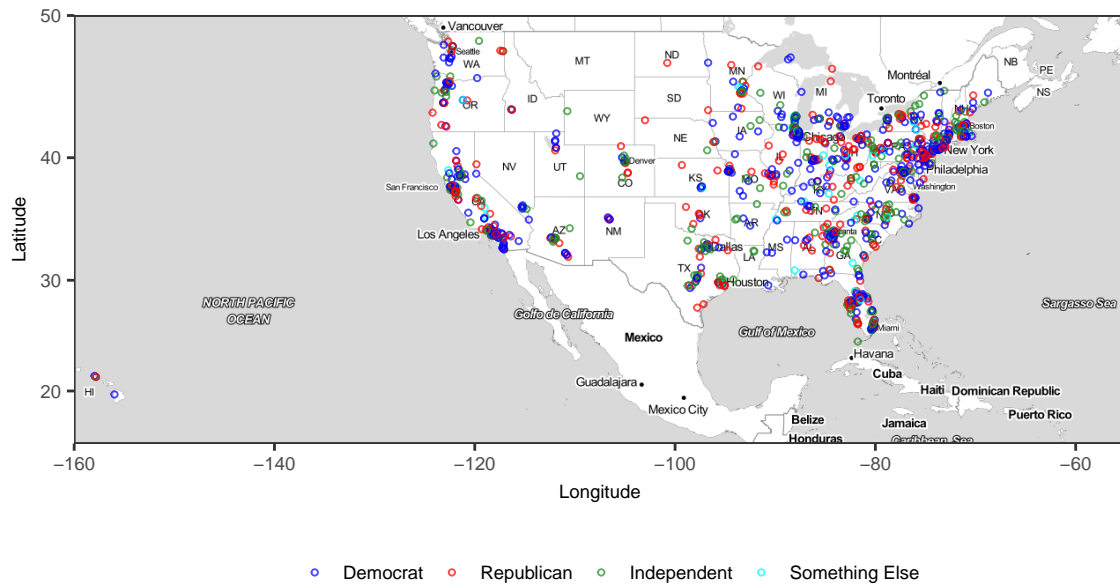


Figure OA1: *Geographical Distribution of Survey Respondents broken by Party Identification*