Broken Democratic Values and Individual Propensities of Vote-Selling: A Conjoint Experiment in the United States

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Abstract

Many advanced democracies were first very clientelistic political systems. Eventually, vote-buyers could not afford this strategy any longer, not at least in a massive scale, thus making vote-buying a rare event. However, several questions remain unanswered. Most of them pertain to vote-sellers. Has the decline in vote-buying in the United States been paired with improvements in voters' democratic values? What would voters do, if offered the chance to sell their votes? Would they sell their votes (and what price), or would they consciously opt-out of vote-selling because they oppose vote-selling? Given that the emphasis so far has been on vote-buying, prior studies do not offer answers to these questions. I collected a novel dataset of U.S. voters representative at the national level, and performed a list experiment and a conjoint experiment. The results suggest that U.S. voters are very much willing to sell their votes, and that they systematically lie about it. I contend that overlooking the supply side gives the falsely optimistic impression that U.S. voters have healthier democratic values.

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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. Bensel 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, it was "the major urban political institution in the late nineteenth century"[3] in "one-half of the nation's twenty largest cities"[4] in the United States. Other 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 seemed 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—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. Has the decline in vote-buying in the United States been paired with improvements in voters' democratic values? What would voters do, if offered the chance to sell their votes? Would they sell their votes (and at what price), or would they consciously opt-out of vote-selling because they* **oppose** *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 whether voters have attempted to *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

[1] Stokes et al. [2013, 200].
[2] In Stokes et al. [2013, 227].
[3] Erie [1990, 2].
[4] Erie [1990, 2].
[5] See particularly Bensel [2004] and Campbell [2005].
[6] However, see Kitschelt and Wilkinson [2006, 320], who explain that "it is not economic development that accounts for the emergence and decline of varying linkage practices and not even the nature of formal democratic institutions," but higher levels of "[s]tate involvement in the public sector."
[7] A very small percentage (4.8%) reports to have received some kind of clientelistic offer from a political party.
[8] In 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. [2014, 2015] constitute two very important exceptions.

votes, completely ignoring the *supply* side. The figure, in fact, represents the canon in how to research clientelism, begging the question about whether *survey respondents answering "never" are in fact* **against** *vote-selling*. 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 have *healthier* democratic values, "thus" engaging almost *never* in clientelism (as Figure 1 strongly suggests). Moreover, demand-side studies of clientelism have traditionally focused, except for a few exceptions,[10] 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] actually suggesting that the number *never*(s) should be larger, double biasing these results. Also, *indirect learning* (i.e., learning about what parties do by asking voters) is inevitable confounded with the respondent's frustrations and/or positive opinions about political parties, and politics in general.

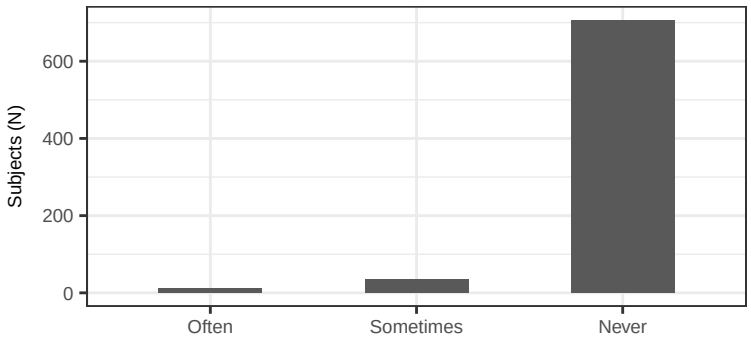

Figure 1: *Frequency of Clientelism*
Note*: Figure shows the frequency of survey respondents. N = 755.*
Source*: LAPOP, 2010 wave for the United States. Question is* `clien1`*:* In recent years and thinking about election campaigns, has a candidate or someone from a political party offered you something, like a favor, food, or any other benefit or object in return for your vote or support? Has this happened often, sometimes or never?

Ultimately, this paper is an attempt to bridge the gap between vote-*sellers* and vote-*buyers*, by concentrating where the supply meets the demand, not by criticizing the vote-*buying* literature *per se*. Particularly, the paper advances our knowledge about the determinants of vote-*selling* by exploiting variation from a list and conjoint experiments, from which I am able to predict individual likelihoods of vote-selling, price elasticity on the willingness to sell, and its connection with democratic support. It is worth noting that the author is not aware of any other study where voters of an advanced

[10] Notably, Zarazaga [2015] interviewed 120 brokers in Argentina.
[11] Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. [2012]. Unfortunately, their focus is on vote-*buying*, overlooking vote-*selling*. They ask whether "candidates or activists gave [voters] a gift or did a favor."

democracy are asked (via an experimental design) whether they would sell their votes.

I collected a novel dataset representative at the national level, where a total of 1,479 U.S. voters participated, between March 2nd and March 6th in 2016, in both a list experiment and a conjoint experiments (see Figure 2). Leveraging these two experimental designs, I was able to identify the demographic factors that make U.S. voters more likely to sell their votes, at what price, whether they would systematically lie about whether they would sell their right to vote freely, and which democratic values should fail to make voters likely vote-sellers. Importantly, the conjoint experiment was designed to learn about the micro dynamics of "democratic support," paying special attention to the multi-dimensional aspects of this concept. Building on the literature about the measurement of democratic support,[12] and leveraging the contributions of democracy theorists,[13] a conjoint experiment was designed. "Support for democracy" was divided into three overarching dimensions, i.e. *democratic*, *liberal*, and *republican*. Each dimension has its own battery of questions (see Table 1). Ultimately, the experiment shed light on which dimension(s) should fail to predict individual vote-selling. Importantly, the experimental design answers this question in an unbiased way, properly capturing the multi-dimensionality of the concept of "democratic support." The results are striking, suggesting that U.S. voters are very much willing to sell their votes (approximately 25% of the nationally representative sample), they would sell it at an optimal price of $730, and that they systematically lie about it (approximately 8% of the nationally representative sample). Given that these data are representative at the national level, these findings are striking, going against the standard optimistic panorama offered by analysts of the vote-*buying* approach (exemplified in Figure 1), reflecting a possible democratic crisis among the electorate. Democrats, liberals, and lower-income individuals are systematically more likely to sell than the rest. Education levels do not seem to have a systematic impact on vote-selling. As of the conjoint portion, I find that the democratic component is systematically associated with vote-selling in both different and interesting ways. While individuals who think that that "citizens can *run* for elections" increases the chances of vote-selling, individuals who think that "citizens can *vote*" decreases vote-selling. I advance a working hypothesis where I explain that ?

Next section gives an account of vote-buying in the U.S. from a historical perspective. This section is also an effort to link the early evidence on vote-selling, with a more current account on the possible democratic crisis in the U.S. (and other industrialized democracies too), the so called "democratic disconnect" literature. The following section explains the measurement and experimental strategies pursued in this paper. Finally, I offer some working hypotheses, and possible lines for

[12] Carlin [2006], Carlin and Singer [2011], Carlin [2017], Kiewiet de Jonge [2016] and Linde and Ekman [2003].
[13] Mainly Dahl [1971] and O'Donnell [2001]. See also Luna [2006].

future research.

II. The Democratic Disconnect: Early and Current Accounts

III. Vote-Selling in an Experimental Context: List and Conjoint Experiments

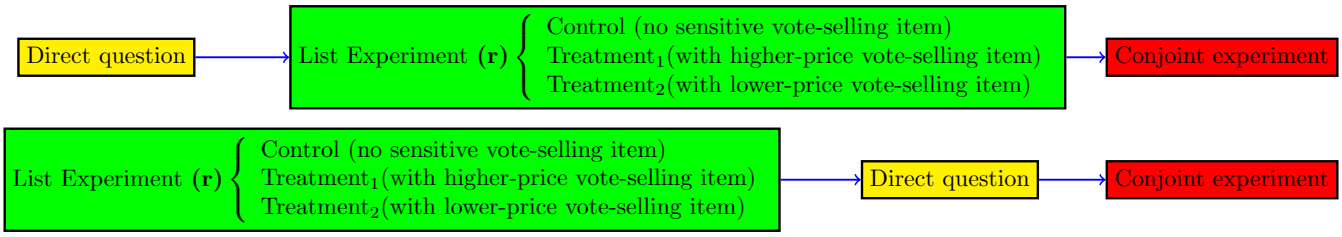

Figure 2: *Experimental Design*

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

Table 1: *Dahl's Dimensions of the Polyarchy, and Dimensions Covered in the Conjoint Experiment*

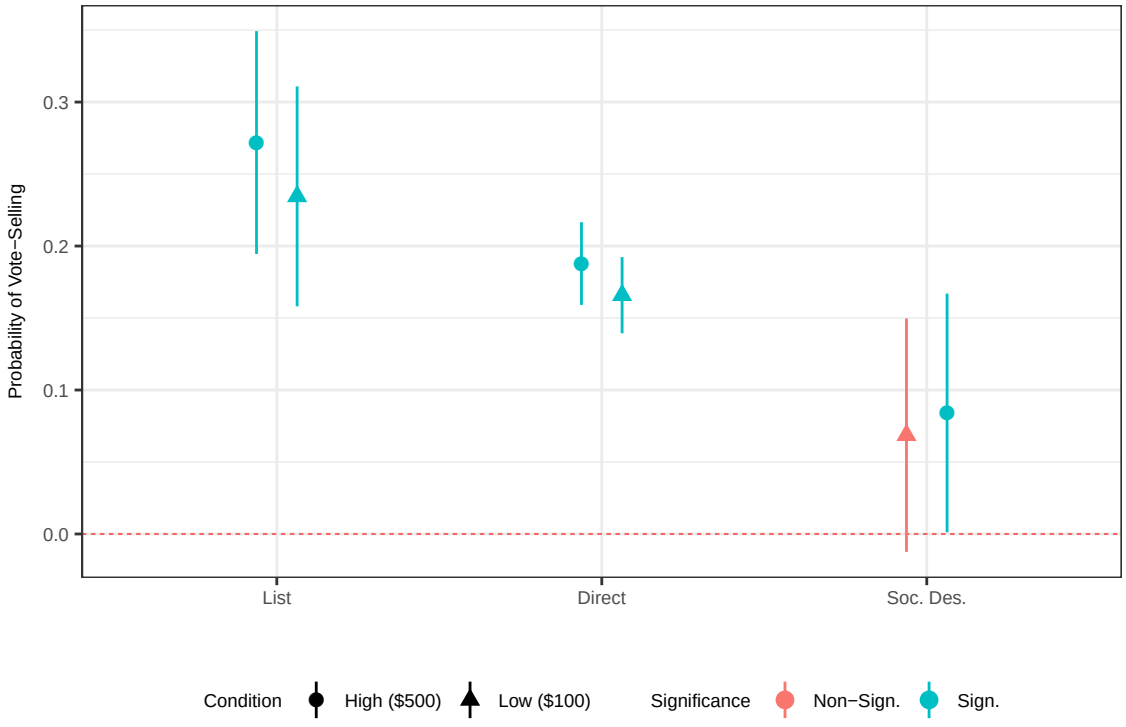

Figure 3: *Declared and Predicted Vote-Sellers*
Note*: Figure shows the frequency of declared and predicted vote-sellers, and its difference, or liars*

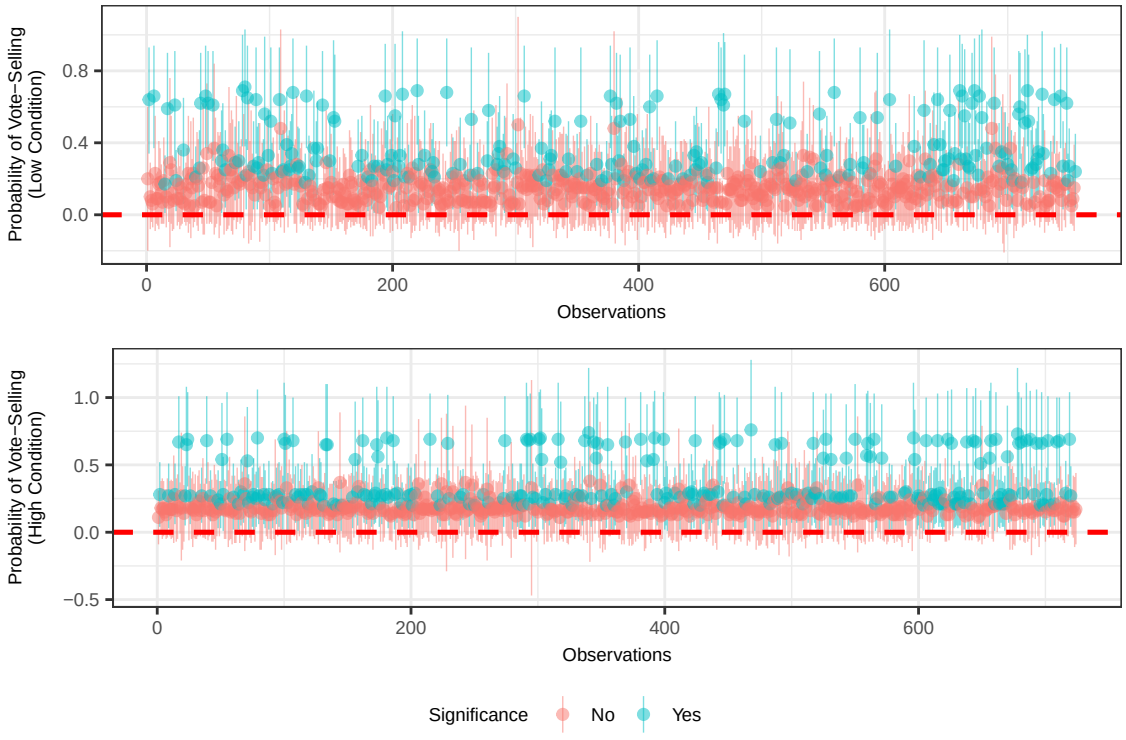

Figure 4: *Individual Estimated Probabilities of Vote-Selling*
Note*: Figure shows the individual probability of vote-selling, under the 'low' and 'high' conditions, i.e. when they were asked in the list experiment whether they would sell their vote for $100 or $ 500. Then, these individual prediction were paired with the conjoint data.*

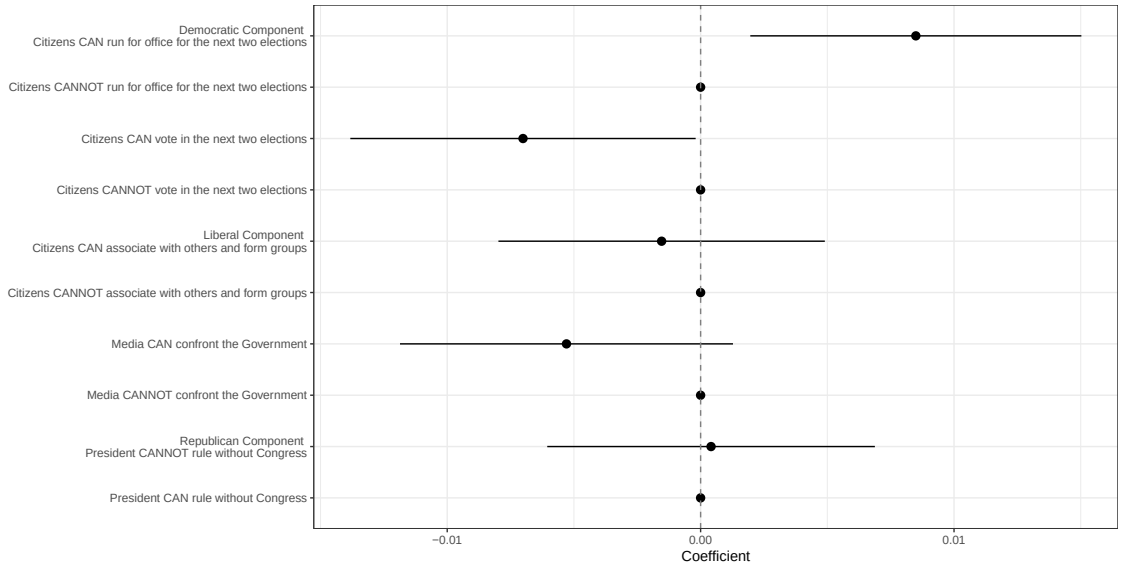

Figure 5: *Predicting Vote Selling: Broken Democratic Dimensions*
Note*: Figure shows the estimated dimension associated with vote-selling. After estimating the individual propensities for vote-selling via the list experiment (**??**), those estimations became the dependent variable in the conjoint portion. The plot shows which of Dahl's dimensions are associated with vote-selling.*

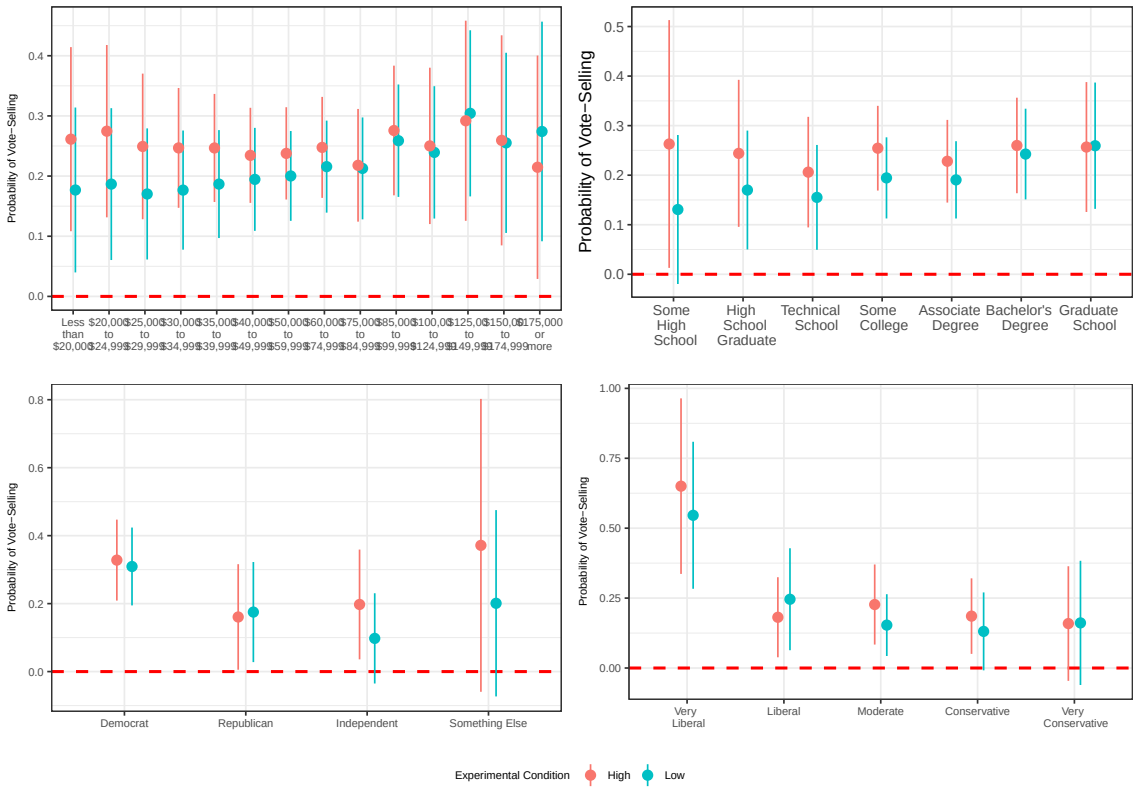

Figure 6: *Predicting Vote-Selling*

IV. Discussion

Word count: 2,039

V. Appendix

I. Experimental Manipulations and Vignettes

Before splitting the subject pool into their respective experimental scenarios, all subjects were told to read the next paragraph. The idea was to frame the experiment as a study about crime in the U.S., not as a study about vote-buying. Additionally, in several pre-studies that were conducted, it was noticed that the concept of "vote-selling" was not common knowledge. Consequently, the secondary purpose of the framing paragraph was to define this concept.

```
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 Next, all subjects read the following paragraph:

```
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.
```

Despite faking a random assignment, *all* subjects in the control condition read the following paragraph, where they were directly asked whether they would sell their votes.

```
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.
```

Next, they read the following paragraph:

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

too cheap for your vote? [slider going from $ 0 to $ 1000]
too expensive for your vote? [slider going from $ 0 to $ 1000]
```

List Experiment Next, subjects were randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. There were three manipulations: one control (without the sensitive vote-selling item), and two treatments, each with different vote-selling prices.

Subjects assigned to the control condition answered the following question:

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

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

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

Subjects assigned to the treatment condition answering one of the following two treatments. Each treatment condition had different vote-selling prices.

The low price vote-selling list experiment read as follows:

```
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.
```

while the high price vote-selling list experiment read as follows:

```
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 $500
(4) download your favorite music from the internet illegally

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

It is important to add that the ordering of the direct question and list experiment portions were randomized. Next, the entire subject pool answered the conjoint experiment.

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