

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

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Abstract

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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. 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, 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 and generalized occurrence.⁵ However, nowadays vote-buying seemed to have declined considerably. For instance, Stokes et al. [2013, 201] has shown that industrialization has driven up the median income of the electorate, making vote-buying a more expensive strategy 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

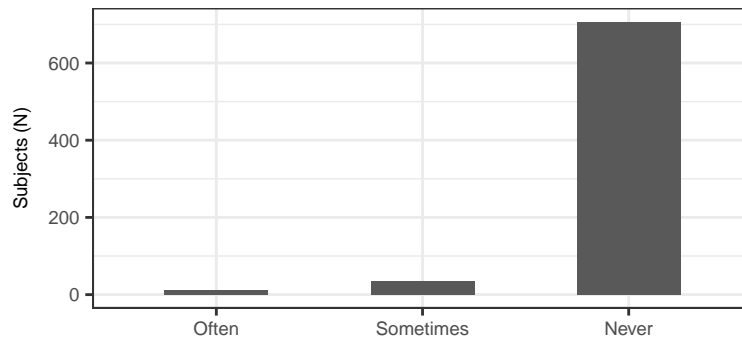


Figure 1: *Frequency of Clientelism*

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?

¹Stokes et al. [2013, 200].

²In Stokes et al. [2013, 227].

³Erie [1990, 2].

⁴Erie [1990, 2].

⁵See particularly Benseal [2004] and Campbell [2005].

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.

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. 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 the emphasis so far has been on *vote-buying*, prior studies do not offer answers to these questions.⁸ That is, often times studies usually focus on whether *parties* have attempted to buy votes, overlooking whether voters have attempted to *sell* their votes. For instance, [Figure 1](#) shows responses to whether *a candidate or someone from a political party* has offered something in exchange for people's votes. I contend that this *demand-side bias* gives an incomplete picture. For one, it might give the falsely optimistic impression that U.S. voters have *healthier* democratic values, "thus" engaging almost *never* in clientelism. Moreover, demand-side studies of clientelism have traditionally studied, except for a number of exceptions,⁹ *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.¹⁰ 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. 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 to criticize the *vote-buying* literature.

I collected a novel dataset representative at the national level, where a total of 1,479 U.S. voters participated in both a list experiment, and a conjoint experiment, between March 2nd and March 6th in 2016. Leveraging these two experimental designs, I was able to identify the conditions under which U.S. voters were more likely to sell their votes, at what price, whether they would systematically lie about it, and which democratic values should stop operating to make voters more *vote-sellers* likely. It is worth noting that the author is not aware of any other study where voters in an advanced democracy are asked (via an experimental design) whether they would sell their votes. Thus, this paper advances our knowledge about *vote-selling*, bridging the gap between what we know about *vote-buying*, and what happens on the supply side, e.g., the ones that sell their votes. Exploiting variation from the list-experiment, I am able to predict individual likelihoods of *vote-selling*. Next, I paired those individual predictions with a battery of experimental questions

⁸Hicken et al. [2014, 2015] constitute two very important exceptions.

⁹Notably, Zarazaga [2015] interviewed 120 brokers in Argentina.

¹⁰Gonzalez-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."

embedded in a conjoint experiment. This portion of the study was designed to learn about subject's democratic attitudes, particularly, paying attention to the multi-dimensional aspects of "support for democracy." Building on the literature about quantitative measurements of democracy support,¹¹ I designed a conjoint experiment to capture which democratic dimension should fail to predict likely vote-sellers. Leveraging the theoretical typology of what constitutes a democracy, famously established in Dahl [1971], and expanded by O'Donnell [2001],¹² I am able to disentangle the micro-level dynamics of democratic support, and its relationship with vote-selling.

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Leaving aside concerns of social desirability bias (which this paper does address via an experimental design), while it seems clear that parties in the U.S. "never" buy people's votes, *Would voters still sell them to party machines?* This

Moreover, *Are U.S. voters interested in selling their right to vote, and at what price?*

II. THE DEMOCRATIC DISCONNECT

¹¹Carlin [2006], Carlin and Singer [2011], Carlin [2017], Kiewiet de Jonge [2016] and Linde and Ekman [2003].

¹²See particularly Luna [2006].

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III. 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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