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

Héctor Bahamonde

Assistant Professor, O'Higgins University (Chile)

September 3, 2020

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

- *Acta Politica* (WOS), 2020.
- Under review since June 2019, and accepted for publication in July 2020.
- About: clientelism; vote buying.

Acta Politica
https://doi.org/10.1057/s41269-020-00174-4
ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Still for sale: the micro-dynamics of vote selling in the United States, evidence from a list experiment

Héctor Bahamonde[1]

Abstract
In nineteenth-century United States politics, vote buying was commonplace. Nowadays, vote buying seems to have declined. The quantitative empirical literature emphasizes vote buying, ignoring the micro-dynamics of vote selling. We seem to know that vote buyers can no longer afford this strategy; however, we do not know what American voters would do if offered the chance to sell their vote. Would they sell, and at what price, or would they consistently opt out of vote selling? A novel experimental dataset representative at the national level comprises 1479 US voters who participated in an online list experiment in 2016, and the results are striking: Approximately 25% would sell their vote for a minimum payment of $418. Democrats and Liberals are more likely to sell, while education or income levels do not seem to impact the likelihood of vote selling.

Keywords Vote buying · Vote selling · Clientelism · List experiments · United States

Vote sellers and vote buyers

Prior research on clientelism usually focuses on whether parties have attempted to buy votes (Vicente and Wantchekon 2009; Vicente 2014; Rueda 2015, 2017; Reynolds 1980; Nichter 2014; de Jonge 2015; Finan and Schechter 2012; González-Ocantos et al. 2014; Diaz-Cayeros et al. 2012; Brusco et al. 2004). Unfortunately, while this is an important question, it overlooks the conditions under which citizens would sell their vote. In fact, Nichter and Peress (2017) explain that studies continue to view clientelism typically as a top-down process, generally overlooking citizens’

Héctor Bahamonde
hector.bahamonde@uoh.cl
https://www.HectorBahamonde.com

1 Instituto de Ciencias Sociales, O’Higgins University, Rancagua, Chile

Published online: 22 July 2020

Summary

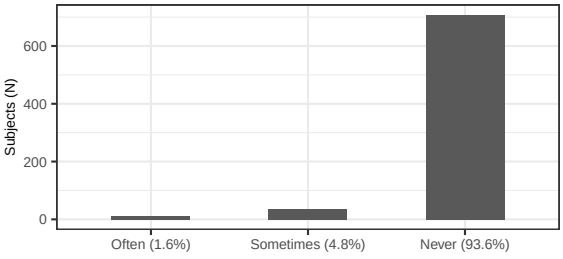
- Using a least-likely case design (U.S.), the paper studies voter's willingness to sell their vote in exchange for money.
- Data are novel and are representative at the country level (N = 1,479).
- List experiment (survey experiment).

Summary

- Using a least-likely case design (U.S.), the paper studies voter's willingness to sell their vote in exchange for money.
- Data are novel and are representative at the country level (N = 1,479).
- List experiment (survey experiment).
- Findings:
  1. Approximately 25% of voters in the U.S. would sell their vote.
  2. They would sell it for a minimum payment of $418.
  3. Democrats and Liberals are more likely to sell.
  4. Education or income levels do not seem to impact the likelihood of vote selling.

Wrong Impressions: From *Did* you to *Would* you

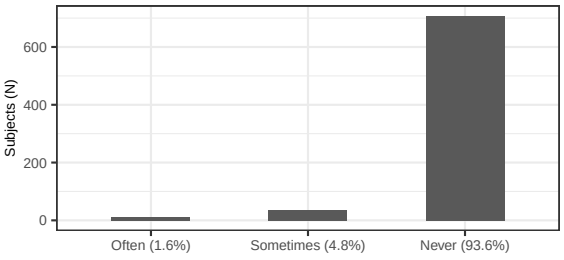
- Americans have rarely been offered the chance to sell their vote.
- However, the question stands: *Would they?*
- **Does this question matter?**



Source: LAPOP 2010.

Wrong Impressions: From *Did* you to *Would* you

- Americans have rarely been offered the chance to sell their vote.
- However, the question stands: *Would they?*
- **Does this question matter?** It *does*: the figure it gives the wrong impression that US voters systematically "oppose" vote buying, "thus" rarely engaging in it.



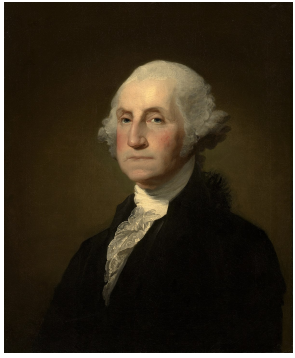
Source: LAPOP 2010.

Literature Suffers from Selection Bias

- Clientelism literature has focused on realized transactions only: developing countries.
- Unfortunately, studying only cases where the outcome of interest is produced, causes selection bias (Geddes, 1990).
  - Studying actual behaviors only limits both the questions and causal inferences.
- My paper fills these gaps by studying hypothetical behaviors (willingness to sell) in a developed country: U.S.
  "Least-likely case design."

Vote Buying Was Very Common in the U.S.

- George Washington spent 40 pounds (a considerable sum for the day) on gallons of rum, wine, brandy, and beer; all used to buy votes.
- Party tickets.
- Institutions: the *viva voce* and *Australian ballot* methods.



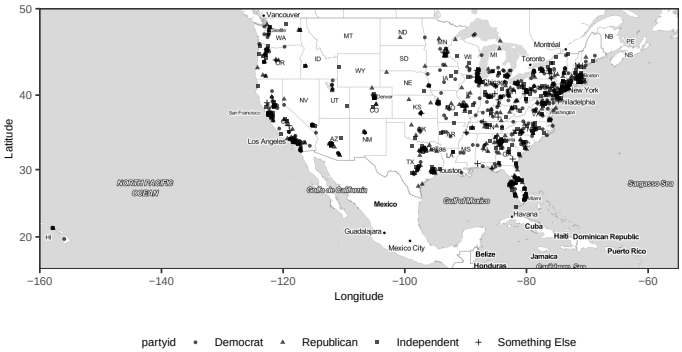
Now Vote Buying is Rare

- Two competing hypotheses:
  1. **Kitschelt**: shrinkage of the state.
  2. **Stokes**: industrialization drove up the electorate's median income, making vote buying more expensive for party machines.

Now Vote Buying is Rare

- Two competing hypotheses:
  1. **Kitschelt**: shrinkage of the state.
  2. **Stokes**: industrialization drove up the electorate's median income, making vote buying more expensive for party machines.
- My paper does *not* test nor does it explore the causes of decayed clientelism in the U.S.

- **Research Question**: *What is the willingness to sell of American voters when offered the chance to sell their votes?*
- **Data**: Online panel (N=1,479) representative at the country level. Re-sampling of gender and party ID.



The Study of Vote Selling Introduces Social Desirability Bias

- Directly asking respondents whether they would sell their votes will cause **social desirability bias**.
- Respondents might feel ashamed admitting doing something socially condemnable.

The Use of List Experiments Overcomes Social Desirability Bias

- **List experiments** designed to study illegal/uncommon behaviors (drug consumption, corruption, sexual behaviors).
- **Mechanics**:
  - Two lists (control, treatment). Both are *exactly* the same.
  - The treatment has an extra item, the **sensitive** one.
  - **Respondent's task**: declare how many items (not which ones) s/he would endorse.
- **Easy estimation**: since both lists are assigned at random, any difference in means between the **item count** of the treatment and control lists should be attributed to the sensitive item *only*.

List Experiment: Endorsement Task

Control	Treatment
• Non-sensitive item 1 • Non-sensitive item 2 • Non-sensitive item 3	• Non-sensitive item 1 • Non-sensitive item 2 • Non-sensitive item 3 • Sensitive item

"How many items (NOT WHICH ONES), if any, would you endorse?"

List Experiment: Endorsement Task

Control	Treatment
• Smoke a cigarette • Drink a beer • Dance	• Smoke a cigarette • Drink a beer • Dance • Inhale cocaine

"How many items (NOT WHICH ONES), if any, would you endorse?"

List Experiment: Endorsement Task

Control

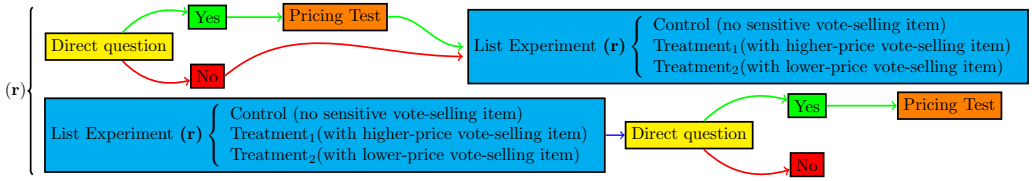
- Steal an iPod from a large department store
- Speed on the highway because you're late for work/school
- Download your favorite music from the Internet illegally

Treatment

- Steal an iPod from a large department store
- Speed on the highway because you're late for work/school
- Download your favorite music from the Internet illegally
- Sell your vote to a candidate for $500

"How many things (NOT WHICH ONES), if any, would you do?"

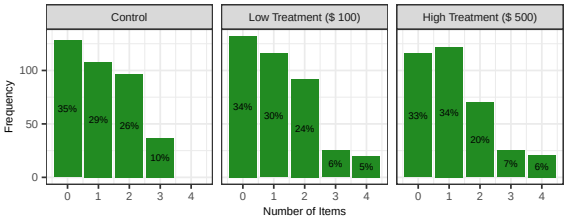
My Experimental Design: Controlling for Ordering Effects



Dependent Variable

- Item count for subject i, broken by experimental regime.
- Two treatments were administered ("cheap"/"expensive"): they account for possible elasticities.

  Hard to price a vote.



Modeling Individual Probabilities of Vote Selling

- While list experiments are straightforward, difference in means analyses are:
  - inefficient (wide confidence intervals).
  - unable to tell us anything about individual preferences toward vote buying.

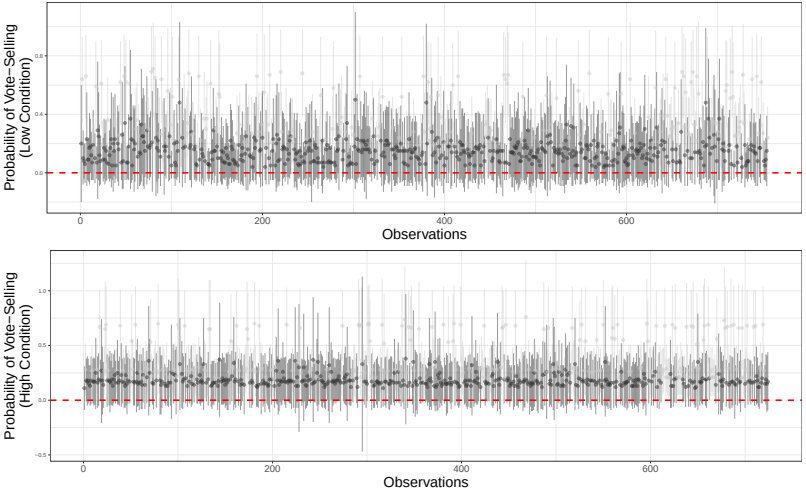
Modeling Individual Probabilities of Vote Selling

- While list experiments are straightforward, difference in means analyses are:
  - inefficient (wide confidence intervals).
  - unable to tell us anything about individual preferences toward vote buying.
- **Multivariate approach**: Estimate what we cannot observe (vote selling) using information that we do observe (socio-economic questionnaire).

Modeling Individual Probabilities of Vote Selling

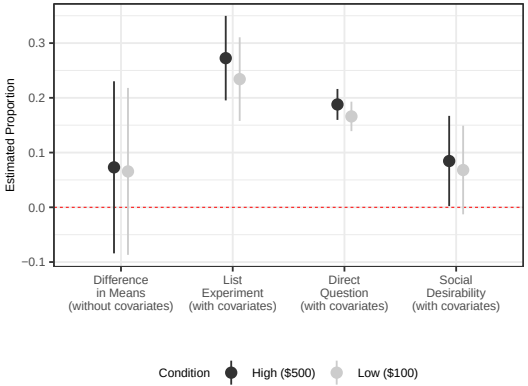
- While list experiments are straightforward, difference in means analyses are:
  - inefficient (wide confidence intervals).
  - unable to tell us anything about individual preferences toward vote buying.
- **Multivariate approach**: Estimate what we cannot observe (vote selling) using information that we do observe (socio-economic questionnaire).
  - **Poisson-Binomial distribution**: questionnaire is used to build via MLE estimators a profile of subject types "1", "2," "3" and "4."
  - **Potential outcomes framework**: statistically infer who *would* have answered "4" (vote selling).

Individual Results

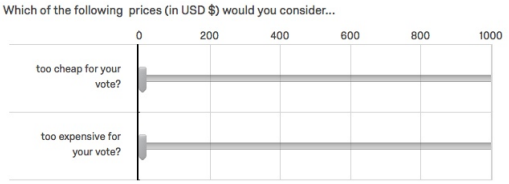


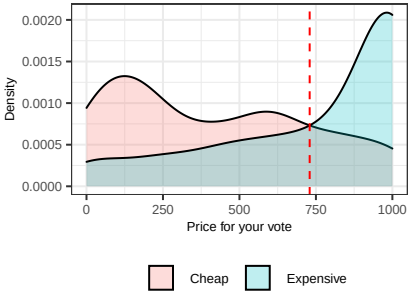
Results: Who wants to sell and who's lying?

- Dif in means: inefficient.
- List experiment: 25% would be willing to sell their vote.
- Only 18% sells when directly asked.
- 7% lied (due to social desirability bias).

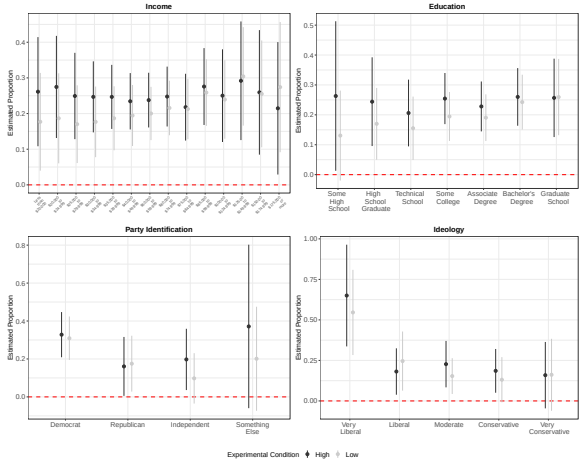


Price Test: In USD $1 Increments





Profiling Vote Sellers



What this Talk Was About: Main Findings

1. Descriptive paper: *why* and *how* were left for future iterations.
2. Least-likely case design.
3. Biases: *selection* and *social desirability*.
4. **Findings**.

What this Talk Was About: Main Findings

1. Descriptive paper: *why* and *how* were left for future iterations.
2. Least-likely case design.
3. Biases: *selection* and *social desirability*.
4. **Findings**.
   - Approximately 25% of voters in the U.S. would sell their vote.
   - They would sell it for a minimum payment of $418.
   - Democrats and Liberals are more likely to sell (*why*?).
   - Education or income levels do not seem to impact the likelihood of vote selling.

What's Ahead

Future research:

1. *Paper*(s) y experimento(s) junto a Andrea Cánales: economía experimental.
2. *Paper* junto a Cristóbal Quiñinao usando misma base de datos, pero con un *conjoint experiment*. Uso machine learning para subclasificar *vote-sellers*.
3. Furura expansión de este experimento via un *Fondecyt*, pero usando metodo comparado (incluir otros paises, por lo pronto, Chile).
4. **Otros?**

Gracias

www.HectorBahamonde.com

Priming Subjects before the Study

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.

Distractor Paragraph: Direct Question (I)

All subjects read the next paragraph, and then all 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.

Distractor Paragraph: Direct Question (II)

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.