

## **What Is Vote Buying?**

### **The Limits of the Market Model**

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## **Abstract**

Many scholars view vote buying as a simple economic transaction: parties and candidates distribute material benefits to individual citizens in exchange for support at the ballot box. Drawing upon a variety of comparative experiences, this paper argues, however, that the commercial aspirations of vote buyers often run into objective as well as intersubjective barriers. On the objective side, seller compliance is uncertain as vote buying does not take place within a “normal” market protected by social and legal norms. On the intersubjective side, electoral practices that outside observers describe as “vote buying” may carry very different meanings in different cultural contexts. To assess empirical claims as well as normative judgments about vote buying, the paper concludes, we need to be aware of the potential gap between our idealized, commercial model of vote buying and the way it actually works in the world.

Vote buying, in its literal sense, is a simple economic exchange. Candidates “buy” and citizens “sell” votes, as they buy and sell apples, shoes, or television sets. The act of vote buying by this view is a contract, or perhaps an auction, in which voters sell their votes to the highest bidder. This market model finds expression in our everyday language, as in the English *vote buying*, the Spanish *compra de votos*, the French *achat de voix*, or the German *Stimmenkauf*. It figures prominently in scholarly treatments of the phenomenon as well.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the simple market model of vote buying needs to be tempered. Parties and candidates who offer particularistic material benefits to voters may generally aspire to purchase political support at the ballot box in accordance with the idea of market exchange. Their commercial aspirations, however, may run into objective as well as intersubjective barriers. On the objective side, seller compliance is uncertain, as vote buying is an illicit business and as such does not take place within a “normal” market protected by social and legal norms. On the intersubjective side, empirical accounts of participant perspectives reveal that those electoral practices we describe as “vote buying” may carry different meanings in different cultural contexts.

### **Vote Buying as Market Exchange**

In principle, the core notion of trading (buying and selling) seems unproblematic. It refers to a commercial transaction, the exchange of goods and services for money (or other forms of payment) - a routine operation that competent inhabitants of the modern capitalist understand without difficulty. The commodity that changes hands in acts of vote trading carries a well-defined institutional meaning too. Votes are formalized expressions of preference by individual members of decision-making bodies. Broadly speaking, vote trading propositions may target either electoral choices or electoral participation. They may be intended to persuade individuals to vote in certain ways, or to vote or to not vote in the

first place. Strategies to alter turnout may focus on demobilizing active opponents or on mobilizing passive supporters. As the former is often described as “negative” vote buying or “abstention buying;” we may think of the latter as “participation buying.”

Although instances of “vote buying” have been identified in contexts as dissimilar as national legislatures (such as the Brazilian) and the U.N. Security council, the present paper deals with popular elections to public office only. Overall, then, if we embrace a literal understanding of the term anchored in the world of economic exchange, we may define the purchase of votes in the electoral arena as a market transaction in which parties, candidates, or intermediaries pay (in cash or kind) for “electoral services” delivered by individual citizens - a favorable vote or a favorable abstention.

The logic of trade demands that (a) the actors involved (buyers and sellers) engage in effective exchanges of money for goods or services. In the absence of mutual exchange, if buyers don’t pay or sellers don’t deliver, we do not speak of acts of trade but instances of fraud or robbery. The logic of commercial transactions further demands that (b) buyers and sellers understand what they are doing: that they enter a reciprocal relationship of exchange. Trade involves a *quid pro quo*, objectively as well as intersubjectively.<sup>2</sup>

(a) Buying something means acquiring some valued, scarce good or service the buyer would not get otherwise. It makes little sense (to the practical linguistic knowledge of average customers in modern market economies) to say someone “buys” something if she pays for products or services she would get anyway (without the expense of money). Depending on the context, we may think of such an unsolicited payment as a donation, reward, mistake, or offense, but hardly a purchase. In an analogous way, if candidates distribute material benefits to individual voters, they must get something in return for their electoral investment. Otherwise we would not recognize their campaign spending as part of

a trade relationship. If voters accept the money, but vote as they had planned to do anyway, they do not take part in an act of exchange. They are not selling their votes, but earning unilateral gains.

(b) In addition, if buyers and sellers in a monetary economy buy and sell goods and services, they are assumed to understand the nature of the transaction in which they are taking part. They are assumed to understand the social meaning of trade, to know, for example, that buying a thing is different from stealing it or receiving it as a gift. If participants lack such a common understanding, they will have difficulties completing their transaction without friction. Analogously, if politicians hand out cash or goods to voters, their offer represents the opening act of an exchange relationship only if both sides understand it as such. If either one fails to conceive it as an offer whose acceptance commits the recipient to an either explicit or implicit *quid pro quo*, it is not a commercial transaction we observe but “something else,” like the exchange of gifts or a simple misunderstanding (in case givers and receivers adopt incongruent interpretations).

In sum, a literal understanding of vote buying as a market exchange imposes restrictive conditions on the use of the term. If we talk about vote buying and *mean* vote buying – in its narrow sense grounded in the world of commercial transactions – we put forward two related empirical claims, be it explicitly or tacitly. First, we claim that both sides actually trade something valuable - electoral services that would have been unavailable to the buyer in the absence of payment. Only if politicians buy something with their money, rather than squandering it without consequences, do we witness instances of commercial exchange (the objective side of vote buying). Second, be it explicitly or tacitly, we also claim that both politicians and citizens read their relationship as a relation of exchange (the intersubjective side of vote buying).

Both aspects are problematic, however. On the objective side, voters may fail to deliver their votes at election time. On the intersubjective side, voters may fail to read the overtures made to them as commercial offers.

### **Uncertain Compliance**

Prospective vote buyers typically have no guarantees that voters who accept their material offers shall dutifully reciprocate on election day. This uncertainty is due to the fact that vote buying, even when akin to a commercial transaction, takes place in a non-licensed “black” market of illicit exchange, rather than a “normal” consumer market embedded in a network of legal safeguards. Securing the compliance of voters thus tends to be problematic for four reasons that are inherent to most vote trading arrangements, but absent in most consumer market transactions:

*Problematic enforcement.* The enforcement of “contractual” vote trading obligations is inherently problematic. Vote buying typically creates the commitment problems that come along with the deferred delivery of goods and services. As vote buyers and sellers do not engage in instant exchanges of merchandise and money, the former face the challenging task of making the latter honor their future obligations; and they have to accomplish it without recourse to legal action. While licit consumer markets are institutionalized spheres of exchange created and protected by the law, markets for votes are neither regulated nor sanctioned by formal rules. If voters just grab the money, vote their conscience, and run, parties and candidates have no legal sanctions at their disposal to punish them.

*Problematic monitoring.* From the perspective of buyers, the business of vote trading involves problems of surveillance as deep and troubling as the problems of

enforcement. Most consumer markets are transparent insofar as contract compliance is relatively easy to verify. One needs only to look whether a trading partner has delivered goods and services of the specified amount and quality. Markets for votes, in contrast, are opaque. Under the veil of secret voting, voter behavior is shielded from direct inspection. Vote buyers may have great difficulty knowing whether presumptive vote sellers actually honor their commitments on election day.

*Countervailing norms.* Consumer markets are, for the most part, morally legitimate spheres of action that license the free exchange of commodities. In many contemporary settings, however, votes do not belong to the universe of legitimate commodities. The explicit purchase of votes runs counter to prevalent norms of democratic liberty and equality. Consequently, the social conventions and other “non-contractual” bases of contractual relations described by Durkheim ([1893] 1984) as so important to deterring opportunism and cheating in consumer markets are often weak or absent when it comes to vote trading.

*Countervailing laws.* Consumer markets are legal markets. Vote buying, even when consonant with local norms, is still illegal. Where laws against vote buying are enforced, and especially where hefty rewards are given to citizens who reveal the identities of vote buyers to police, givers need to worry that buyers will not only defect, but turn them in.

In sum, what may look like a simple economic exchange is never quite so simple since vote buyers cannot rely on social norms of fair exchange and the threat of legal sanctions that typically sustain licit market transactions. To be successful, vote buyers have to resolve intricate problems of monitoring and enforcement, and they may have to surmount, too, the obstacle of countervailing democratic norms as well as the risk of prosecution. Given the

systematic uncertainties of compliance they face, they may be reluctant to bet their financial and political fortunes on the fragile resource of personal trust. If they wish to ensure the effective delivery of the electoral services they demand, they must turn to a range of supplementary strategies that effectively transform the incentive and information structures of vote trading. They must transform vote buying from an uncertain investment contaminated by high risks of voter defection into a profitable business that offers reasonable chances of contract compliance. Four common strategies designed to bolster voter compliance are personalized normative inducements, electoral surveillance, informal sanctions, and contingency payments.

#### Personalized Normative Inducements

To compensate for the weakness of generalized norms of fair economic exchange, vote buyers may invoke personalized social norms to make recipients honor their contracts in the voting booth. More specifically, they may seek to (a) activate norms of personal obligation, and (b) reinforce the weight of those obligations through the personal delivery of rewards.

(a) Clientelist exchanges of material rewards against political support are, in general, fed by expectations of reciprocity. When clientelism takes the form of patronage, patrons help their clients, grant them favors, and give them presents, and expect to be paid back later with the currency of political support. The ongoing dispensation of help, favors, and gifts creates moral debts.<sup>3</sup> In the more ephemeral and election-centered exchanges that distinguish vote trading, buyers may also strive to create moral obligations of reciprocity to be honored in the polling booth. They may accomplish this by casting the (election-time) distribution of material rewards not as contractual payments but as gifts or favors freely and generously bestowed. Locales where episodic, election-related gift giving or favor

rendering is common include Benin, Taiwan, Japan, northern Portugal, and the slums of Metro Manila.<sup>4</sup>

Moral debts can be created in more oblique manners as well. Vote seekers may try, for instance, to create social obligations of reciprocity by paying the recipient wages for rendering some nominal service for the candidate (poll watching, distributing ballots, hanging posters, delivering messages, playing music), the goal of which is to generate gratitude towards the candidate or cognitive dissonance were the recipient to vote for another candidate. As one Filipino observer noted:

Once a candidate has sworn in a registered voter as a partisan poll watcher, he or she can expect that the latter will vote for him or her. Our Filipino trait of *utang na loob* [debt of gratitude] is evident on this case. Once a person has granted us something, a favor, we would do everything to pay that favor back to him or her, sometimes even at the expense of ourselves. We tend to view persons who did us some good things as benefactors, and we view ourselves as beneficiaries who can please them by doing the same for them (Bava 1998).

This practice, sometimes called “indirect” vote buying (as it rests upon payoffs that are not directly and explicitly tied to reciprocity in the polling booth), was also known in 19th century England and early 20th century France, and is common today in the Philippines and in the squatter settlements of Quito, Ecuador (Seymour 1915, 181; Knaub 1970, 33; Burgwal 1995, 116).

(b) Parties and candidates may try to reinforce norms of reciprocal obligation by managing the purchase of votes through established social networks and personal relations, rather than organizing anonymous, impersonal exchanges as they take place in large consumer

markets. By personalizing the trade relationship they may instill in recipients a sense of personal obligation whose motivational force surpasses the seductive pull of material rewards as well as the faint calling of generic social norms. Accordingly, candidates often recruit intermediaries who are respected members of their communities, or others to whom recipients feel bonds of personal accountability. In Taiwan, vote brokers typically approach only relatives, friends, and neighbors. A similar tactic is commonly employed in Thailand. In the 1992 election, for instance, campaign workers for one candidate sought in each village “to recruit the person best placed to deliver support, generally someone with significant social status in the village. Other qualifications include being respectable, well-known, a local leader (either official or unofficial), the candidate’s relative or close friend, or some other characteristics that would make people honour their vote promises” (Callahan 2000, 25).

### Informal Sanctions

To make up for the unavailability of legal sanctions, parties, candidates, and their agents may seek to impose informal sanctions on voters who refuse material offers, or who do not vote as instructed. Wayward voters expose themselves, among other things, to the risk of ostracism. In the Philippines, as one vote seller explained, “refusing an offer like that might be construed to be an act in defiance of the candidate’s goodwill. It would also identify you as a voter against the candidate. You would also be seen as going against the flow.” Or as another Filipino vote seller put it more pithily, “it’s about keeping good relations” (Schaffer 2002a). Defiant voters also become vulnerable to more concrete forms of retribution. Vote brokers in both Peru and Mexico, for instance, made it clear to voters in past elections that behaving incorrectly would cause them to lose their access to social programs (Pfeiffer 2004, 77).

## Electoral Surveillance

The imposition of informal sanctions is dependent on the prior ability to discern instances of non-compliance. Surveillance and punishment, to use the vocabulary introduced by Michel Foucault (1979) in his history of modern prison systems, are mutually constitutive core elements of any exercise of power. Surveillance provides the epistemic conditions to dispense punishment. Sanctions rest upon knowledge about misbehavior. Thus, to generate or reinforce compliance, givers often strive to monitor electoral behavior by lifting (discretely) the veil of electoral secrecy. In doing so, they may target either individuals or communities.

Givers may monitor how *individuals* vote as either a condition for post-voting payment, or as a prelude to post-voting retribution if the recipient does not do as instructed. Sometimes election officials can be counted on to observe how voters fill out their ballots, as they commonly did in early 20th century Adams County, Ohio (Gish 1961, 63). Even when direct observation is not possible, there are a number of ways to monitor how individual ballots are cast. Where voters write in names on the ballot, they might be given carbon paper to record how they voted, as in the Philippines. Or they might be instructed to fold the ballot in a distinctive way, or to put a pinhole in one corner of the ballot, as happens in Corsica.<sup>5</sup> Another way is to give a voter a fake or stolen filled-in ballot before entering the polling station. The voter casts the filled-in ballot, and gives the blank official ballot he or she received in the polling station to another voter waiting outside. This voter then fills out the official ballot to the buyer's satisfaction, goes into the polling place, and repeats the process. The practice, called "the caterpillar" in Russia, and "*lanzadera*" (Spanish for "shuttle") in the Philippines, was also common in 19th century Australia and United States where it was known as the "Tasmanian dodge" (Borisova 2000; Schaffer 2002b). In a more modern twist, vote buyers in Italy send voters into the polling booth with cellphone

videocameras, which the voters use to send back images of the properly filled out ballot.<sup>6</sup> In locales where there are dense social networks, as in some urban areas of Argentina, it is also often possible for givers to make “reliable inferences” about those who accepted their offers without openly violating the secret vote (Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2004, 84).

A further strategy to ease problems of monitoring is to pay voters for abstaining from voting altogether, thereby preventing them from casting ballots for one’s opponent. *Turnout* is much easier to watch than voting. “Negative” vote buying proliferated in late 19th century Maryland and rural New York (Argersinger 1987, 234; Cox and Kousser 1981). It has also been used in Guyana, where agents campaigning for the ruling party in the 1997 election bought voter identification cards of the opposition’s supporters. In Western Australia, poor indigenous voters are lured away from the polls by free-flowing liquor (Orr 2003, 134). In the Philippines, party workers hire buses to take voters on out-of-town excursions on election day, or pay registered voters to disqualify themselves from voting by dipping their index fingers in indelible ink, as voters are required to do after casting their ballots (Schaffer 2002b). Similar practices have been reported in Mexico (Cornelius 2004, 53) and Venezuela (Kornblith 2002).

Givers can also monitor the *aggregate turnout* of villages or neighborhoods. This strategy is especially relevant in places where candidates and their agents distribute material incentives widely within entire villages or neighborhoods, as happened in parts of England after the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, and in Taiwan in the late 1980s, among other places (Seymour 1915, 438; Rigger 1994, 13). Collective monitoring is made easier when votes are counted at the precinct level, as in India, Senegal, and Thailand prior to the 1997 reforms (Schaffer 2002b, 78-79; Schaffer 1998, 136; Callahan 2002, 7).<sup>7</sup>

## Contingency Payments

In the purchase of votes, instrumental motives alone are rarely sufficient. Even if recipients change their electoral behavior in exchange for tangible benefits, economic rewards are almost always accompanied and reinforced by non-economic inducements. However, vote buyers may indeed achieve something close to purely instrumental compliance when they overcome the problem of deferred delivery. They may do so by postponing payment and dispensing it conditionally upon the right candidate winning. Rather than offering advance payments and suffer the tortuous uncertainties of deferred delivery, vote buyers may thus offer contingency payments that make the provision of rewards to individual voters dependent on aggregate election results.<sup>8</sup>

In early 20th century France, givers sometimes distributed half a banknote prior to the election, and provided the other half only if their candidate won (Knaub 1970, 33). The same strategy has been carried out in other places with pairs of shoes. In a more sophisticated variant, Kuomintang (National Party) officials in the 2000 Taiwan election used a gambling scheme to provide monetary incentives for voters to turn out in favor of the party's presidential candidate. As one journalist explained:

Organizers for the ruling National Party and local gangsters are offering heavily loaded odds to lure votes to Lien Chan, the party's candidate. Although opinion polls indicate that support is evenly divided in the three-way race, they are promising to pay the equivalent of Pounds 10 for every Pounds 1 bet on a win for Mr. Lien. The odds being offered for the other two candidates are just 80p for every Pounds 1 bet.<sup>9</sup>

A similar tactic is used in Thailand, where operatives sell election lottery tickets (Callahan and McCargo 1996, 387).

To improve the odds of voter compliance, then, buyers may pursue a host of supplementary strategies. They may strive to compensate for the lack of formal sanctions by mobilizing personalized norms and informal sanctions; they may try to solve their information deficits by breaking into the secrecy of the vote; or they may aim at overcoming the risks of deferred delivery by making their payments contingent on electoral outcomes. Yet, the structural uncertainties of vote trading are not limited to its objective side (the presumption of effective exchange), but extend to its intersubjective side (the presumption of shared meaning).

### **Multiple Meanings**

As an illicit activity, vote buying is largely hidden from public inspection. Most of the steps it involves are not readily observable. Often, it is only the opening tender we can actually see. The rest remains shut off from observation by outsiders - be it electoral authorities, competing parties, fellow citizens, the press, or academic writers. If voter compliance is uncertain to the extent that it is withdrawn from the public eye, the same is true for the social meaning voters attach to the material offers they receive. Indeed, money interpreted by external observers as constituting a binding payment may be understood by voters themselves in manifold ways. They may view it, for instance, as a non-binding gift, a show of virtue, a veiled threat, or a sign of corruption, to name just a few possibilities. This potential disjuncture between what is observed and what is experienced makes it important to explore the range of meanings an offer may hold for recipients. A catalogue of such meanings would have to include the following:

*An advance payment.* Citizens who place themselves within the parameters of the classical market model may perceive material offers as advance payments for electoral services. Such payments are part of a commercial relationship. If voters accept the material offer, they know they are expected to deliver their part of the deal at the polling station. As one voter in rural Mexico expressed the straightforward logic of commercial exchange: “Here, if you give someone a chicken, he will vote for the chicken” (Schedler 2004, 84).

*A wage.* Citizens may understand material campaign offers not as initiating an exchange relationship but as concluding one. In such circumstances, payments usually come in the form of wages earned for performing nominal concrete services during the campaign or on election day, such as poster hanging or poll watching.

*A gift.* Gifts (as well as small favors) are unilateral transfers that do not create an explicit obligation to reciprocate at the ballot box. For example, Rigger (1994, 219) explains how Taiwanese vote brokers bear “gifts” when they visit people’s homes to make pitches for their candidates.

Interpreting material offers as advance payment, wage, and gift places such offers within the realm of mutual exchange. But offers can also carry a range of more symbolic or implicit meanings to recipients, including the following:

*A reparation.* An offer might be understood as amends for wrongs suffered in the past. In Benin, for instance, offers are seen by many voters as opportunities to get back money that politicians have stolen (Banégas 1998, 78-79). Villagers in the Philippines see offers as “practically their only opportunity to get anything from people in government” (Kerkvliet 1991, 231). Accepting an offer is, in other words,

a way for poor Filipinos to stake a rightful claim to the resources of those higher up. It is a momentary opportunity for the ordinary citizen to transform unequal, sometimes coercive, relationships into something more equal and just. It is an arrangement that allows the voter not only to gain materially, but also achieve a measure of dignity (Ibana 1996, 130-31).

*An affront.* An offer may cause offense. To accept the offer would damage one's self-respect. Many poor voters in rural Mexico "perceive the sale of political rights as an attack on personal dignity" (Schedler 2004, 88). Some poor urban Filipinos similarly see accepting payment as "surrendering one's right to vote" or "selling one's principles" (Schaffer 2002a).

*A threat.* Some offers cannot be refused safely. Declining it generates fear of retaliation from candidate or operative. In Metro Manila, for instance, money offered as a gesture of goodwill comes with implicit pressure to accept it, lest the recipient be branded as someone defiant (Schaffer 2002a). What is presented like a generous gesture carries the mark of extortion.

*A sign of virtue.* Not all payments are part of a quid pro quo. Citizens may understand material offers less in instrumental than in expressive terms. The practical utility of goods and services are less important than their *informational value*. Citizens may take them as pieces of information that reveal the positive personal qualities of the giver, such as generosity, politeness, responsiveness, and respect. In Taiwan, for instance, "gift-giving demonstrates respect for the recipient; to give someone a gift is to give that person face" (Rigger 1994, 219). The dispensation of gifts may thus lead citizens to believe that the candidate is good or worthy.

*A sign of vice.* If voters, by contrast, dislike the gesture of giving out cash and goodies, they may take electoral largesse as a sign not of virtue but of personal defect on the part of the giver, such as arrogance and disrespect. The offer (which may or may not have been accepted) may send a signal to voters that the candidate is morally wrong, politically dumb, or the like. For example, in rural Mexico, citizens described efforts to buy their votes as deceptive, manipulative, and exploitative (Schedler 2004, 81 and 85).

*A sign of strength.* An offer can signal that the candidate is confident of winning. The public display of wealth creates expectations of electoral success. In Nigeria, “citizens who wish to support a winner will view the payment as evidence that the candidate is very powerful or has the support of powerful forces” (van de Walle 2002, 16). Such information is of great value to voters insofar as backing a loser might result in a loss of access to state resources. The effect is circular, as in many games of expectation: candidates win because voters expect them to win.

To individual voters, then, receiving and responding to an offer may hold a variety of social meanings. They may understand their interaction with the respective party, candidate, or intermediary in manifold ways. Participants may view themselves as engaging in a simple economic exchange, in accordance with the market model, or they may situate themselves outside the logic of commercial exchange and conceive themselves as (among other things) securing amends, receiving a gift, recognizing power, or acknowledging goodwill. Thus in accepting or rejecting offers, or in changing or not changing their electoral behavior, citizens may be moved by a variety of motives. They may act out of material self-interest, or they may act instead out of fear, duty, gratitude, indignation, and the like.<sup>10</sup>

Some of these intersubjective meanings are likely develop in response to the objective uncertainties involved in vote buying. To bolster compliance outside the framework of a normal market, as we have seen, vote buyers adopt a range of enforcement strategies that may generate, be it intentionally or counter-intentionally, the particular meanings citizens attach to vote buying. For instance, the need for personalized normative strategies (to compensate for weak norms of fair exchange) can transform payments into gifts, while the need for informal sanctions (to make up for the absence of legal sanctions) can turn them into extortionary threats.

Whatever their origins, we may expect such intersubjective differences in the meaning of material rewards to be consequential for the objective success of vote trading. All things being equal we might conjecture, for instance, that a voter who views an offer as an expression of caring or benevolence will be more prone to vote for the designated candidate than a voter who views the same offer as amends for previous wrongs, or a voter who sees it as an attack on her dignity. In addition, differences in social meaning are likely to have implications for the relationship between citizens and their representatives. In general, we may expect vote trading to diminish the programmatic accountability of parties and politicians. Still, different conceptions of vote buying may lead voters to embrace somewhat different conceptions of political accountability. Attitudes towards elected officeholders are likely to diverge, for instance, between citizens who literally sell their votes for a drink and those who reward what they perceive to be the personal benevolence of a candidate. In the former case, accountability may extend no further than the demand for the intermittent electoral payoff. In the latter case, the politician may be subject to ongoing demands for help. In the slums of Buenos Aires, where material offers often take the form of favor doing, residents see politicians as an essential part of their everyday “problem-solving network.” Before as well as after elections, local politicians face a daily stream of requests for food, medicine, clothing, emergency home repairs, and more

(Auyero 1999). In short, how voters understand the offers they receive at election time may have far reaching implications for their political expectations and behavior between elections.

## **Conclusion**

The distributive activities we conventionally describe as “vote buying” - vote seekers handing out fistfuls of cash to individual citizens - at first blush look like simple market transactions. Voters, it seems, driven by a simple calculus of economic gain, sell their electoral services to the highest bidder. Yet, what seems to be a straightforward commodification of voting rights is often anything but. Vote trading, understood literally, is a demanding business whose objective and intersubjective requirements are difficult to meet. On the objective side, the purchase of votes demands that citizens effectively change their voting behavior in response to and in accordance with the particularistic material offers they receive. Unless voters accept and reciprocate the offers they receive, the commercial transaction remains truncated. On the intersubjective side, vote trading demands that both business partners comprehend their interaction as a commercial relationship. While it presupposes that recipients vote in accordance with the electoral preferences of givers, it demands furthermore that they understand their electoral choice as a payment delivered in exchange for money or other personal benefits they received (or have been promised to receive) from a party, a candidate, or their intermediaries. More often than not, the empirical realities of “vote buying” diverge from one of these two core assumptions of the market model.

To vote buyers, the lack of formal sanctions, the opacity of the voting act, the weight of countervailing norms, and the illegal nature of vote buying render the enforcement of voter compliance a much trickier endeavor than it would be under “normal” market conditions.

The remedial strategies they may devise - invoking social norms of reciprocity, violating the secret vote, monitoring turnout, devising informal sanctions, or introducing contingency payments - tend to ameliorate the problem of voter defection, although almost invariably they fall short of *guaranteeing* the compliance of voters.

To vote sellers, the exchange of money for votes can carry a host of meanings, many of which extend beyond the realm of market trade. It is little we know about the empirical distribution of popular attitudes towards vote buying in the new democracies of the developing world. Yet, it may well be the case that the simple idea of selling off hard-won suffrage rights to the highest bidder is alien to most citizens targeted by aspiring vote buyers. In terms of intersubjective understandings, the marketization of votes may well be a rare and rather exceptional phenomenon.

The further away politicians and voters move from a simple commercial transaction, a “normal” act of trade, the less plausible (and the less exact) it is to describe their relationship on the basis of the market model, and to speak of the “purchase” of votes, “vote buying,” a “market” for votes, and the like. The market transaction may provide an idealized model of what transpires between giver and recipient, and a convenient set of categories to use. Yet it too easily makes us overlook what we cannot readily observe: the degree of compliance on behalf of voters as well as the range of meanings they attach to the offers they receive.

This is not to argue that the market model has no analytic utility. On the contrary, it allows us to identify the specific ways in which concrete vote buying practices really do approximate straightforward market transactions, and to identify the range of consequences which should ensue as a result. Still, to assess empirical claims as well as normative judgments about vote buying, we need to be aware of the gap which so often appears

between the entailments of the market model and the way vote buying really works, and is judged, around the world. To answer key questions about the causes and consequences of vote buying, we need to gather more systematic factual knowledge about the manifold strategies of electoral mobilization or manipulation which political and academic observers are often too quick to describe as “vote buying.” In particular, if we wish to know whether the instances of “vote buying” we observe are straightforward commercial transactions or “something else,” we need to dig beneath the surface of facile appearances. We need richer and deeper understandings of their institutional and cultural contexts. We need, that is, to generate robust empirical accounts of both their objective and intersubjective foundations.

## Notes

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- 1 Among others, see Cox and Thies 2000, Orr 2003, Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2004, Cornelius 2004, and Pfeiffer 2004.
- 2 Here we sidestep the issue of whether vote buying has to be an individual transaction or whether it can also be “collective.” Both are consistent with a market model. I can buy something from you, or my association can buy something from you. For the sake of simplicity, we limit our attention to individual transactions. This allows us to bracket the whole range of principal-agent problems that arise when political entrepreneurs step into the market of votes by negotiating “package deals” with parties and candidates that commit the votes of their followers.
- 3 On the “unequal reciprocity” involved in clientelist exchanges, see Scott (1972, 93-4), Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984, 250-63), Putnam (1993, 172), and Mainwaring (1999, 178).
- 4 See Banégas 1998; Bosco 1994, 39-41; Rigger 1994, 219; Cox and Thies 2000, 39; Silva 1994, 39.
- 5 Frederic Charles Schaffer, interview with the President of the Tribunal Administratif de Bastia, January 1999.

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- 6 “Mafia Turns to 3G Video Phones,” *BBC News*, May 16, 2003 ([news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/technology/3033551.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/technology/3033551.stm)).
- 7 Note that monitoring individual votes is but one strategy available to candidates and their operatives to increase the likelihood that voters will cast their ballots in the desired way. Some scholars argue that effective vote buying requires an ability to observe how individual recipients vote (Rusk 1974, 1041-1042; Gerber 1994, 136; Heckelman 1995). This assessment is in need of serious qualification. Even where an individual is able to vote secretly, givers may still have a smorgasbord of options available to them, depending on the cultural, social, and institutional circumstances they find themselves in. Only under certain circumstances will the disruption of individual vote monitoring lead to the abandonment of vote buying.
- 8 For some brief observations on contingency payments in the legal profession and the insurance business, within a larger conceptual discussion of political contingency, see Schedler (forthcoming).
- 9 “Betting Alters the Odds in Close Taiwan Election,” *Times of London*, March 15, 2000.
- 10 Naturally, there can be significant diversity in how members who live or work in a community view the same actions of a giver. We see significant variation, not only across different locales, but also within a single community (Auyero 1999, 305–6; Schaffer 2002a).

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