Chapter 6

Is Vote Buying Undemocratic?

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Vote Buying is Undemocratic: An Unexamined Hunch

Most of us have a gut instinct that vote buying is undemocratic. Whether he is an early 19th-century English gentleman-candidate “feasting” local constituents, or a late 20th-century PRI operative in Mexico regaling voters with everything from tortillas to washing machines, the figure of the politician trying to buy the support of individual voters strikes us as violating democracy in profound and harmful ways. Yet, surprisingly, few have attempted to explain why.¹ We lack a full explanation of why this is many people’s intuition, and, more crucially, whether the intuition holds up upon deeper reflection. This chapter is too brief to do more than suggest answers to these questions. Furthermore, whether vote buying is undemocratic depends on one’s empirical model of vote buying: one’s account of why it can be a useful strategy for politicians, and why voters acquiesce to sell their votes. We are far from a consensus on an empirical model. Instead I briefly sketch one empirical model of vote buying, and then explain why, if this is a good model, vote buying is indeed undemocratic.² The answer has to do with the introduction of social and economic inequalities into the realm of politics. Vote buying allows politicians and governments to ignore the interests of poor people, and it can undermine the autonomy of vote sellers.

¹For normative treatments, see Epstein (1985), Karlan (1994), and Kochin and Kochin (1998). The question is not whether vote buying is incompatible with a formal, Schumpeterian definition of democracy. Rather the hunch of many, which I flesh out in the final sections of the chapter, is that it conflicts with a richer understanding of democracy, as laid out by theorists such as Dahl. This richer understanding incorporates the basic equality of voters’ political rights, including an equal right to express preferences regarding public policies.

²I do not claim that my model necessarily accounts for vote buying in all settings. It is driven by my own research in Latin America, and by secondary accounts of vote buying in other regions. There are two senses in which my model may not “travel.” First, it amounts to a series of if-then propositions, and the conditions (if’s) generating the outcomes (then’s) may not be present in all settings. Second, it is possible that the same conditions will generate different outcomes in different settings, if, for example, some contextual features also need to be present for a particular condition to have the effect I predict.
A Model of Vote Buying

I take it as axiomatic that the value people derive from consuming something depends (among other things) on how wealthy they are. A poor person who finds a dollar on the street will be made happier by finding it than will a wealthy person; we experience diminishing marginal utility of income. Consider a society in which people’s incomes are unequal, and imagine that we can locate everyone in that society on a dimension of income, from the poorest to the richest. Assume that a political party can secure a person’s vote by giving her something that she values sufficiently highly. It follows that the same outlay of resources by the party will buy more votes among poor than among wealthy voters.3 A party that wants to win enough votes to get elected at the lowest possible cost would start by giving the poorest person something, then the next poorest, and so on until the party has purchased just enough votes to win. Vote buying starts at the bottom, not the top, of the income distribution (see Dixit and Londregan, 1996). And as the party moves up the income distribution, each next voter’s support has to be purchased at a higher price.4

Now let’s assume that if our party started with the poorest voter and bought votes one by one until its money gave out it would run out of money before it got to the voter whose support would put it over the top. There is another strategy that will allow it to add the votes of some

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3 Note that the mechanism I specify here linking vote buying to poverty – the diminishing marginal utility of income – is different than one frequently specified, poor voters’ presumed risk aversion and the presumed inherent uncertainty of public goods. Desposato in this volume, for instance, focuses on the latter mechanism. Ultimately the appropriateness of one or the other mechanism will have to be decided empirically. As an initial proposition I find the diminishing marginal utility of income the more psychologically tenable one – poor people’s life experiences probably train them to be patient and to tolerate a lot of uncertainty.

4 A preponderance of empirical studies associate vote buying with poverty. My own research in Argentina (Brusco et al., 2004) finds that low incomes, low educational achievement, and poor housing quality (as assessed by survey interviewers) all powerfully increase the probability that a person will be the target of vote buying. Yet some studies find contrary evidence. Schaffer (2004), for example, reports survey evidence suggesting candidates for office in the Philippines offer money to voters in roughly the same proportions across income groups. Schaffer notes that Filipino parties are weak organizationally; it may be that they lack the level of insertion into social networks to monitor voters, and that therefore vote buying there is necessarily less strategically targeted.
wealthier voters: programmatic mobilization. Programmatic mobilization means promising (and, once in office, delivering) public goods (e.g., national security, clean air), or redistributive goods that go to all members of some abstractly defined category of citizens, regardless of their vote (e.g., all unemployed people get unemployment insurance, all elderly retirees get old-age pensions). 5

Both vote buying and programmatic mobilization have disadvantages from the perspective of parties thirsting for power. Vote buying, as we have seen, can become prohibitively expensive when extended to wealthier voters. But programmatic mobilization is not a sure thing. Because (by definition) the people who benefit from public goods get these goods whether they vote for the party providing them or not, beneficiaries have weaker incentives to cast their vote for the party. Therefore the parties that provide public goods (or promise them in campaigns) and hope they will generate electoral support are taking a leap of faith. If people made their voting decisions by a strict calculation of costs and benefits (which obviously most do not), programmatic mobilization would be a weak strategy, both for the often-observed reason that a person’s vote almost never makes a difference in the outcome of the election, and for the less-often-observed reason that he reaps the benefits of the party’s program, whether or not he voted for it.

At first glance vote buying appears to be an even shakier proposition. If the ballot is secret, and vote sellers therefore can take their payments and vote as they choose, why does vote buying work at all? Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes’s (2004) answer is that certain kinds of parties – call them clientelist parties – can overcome the secret ballot and make fairly accurate inferences about whether people whom they “paid” actually voted for them. Clientelist parties

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5 Vote buying as I use the term here encompasses Schaffer’s useful sub-categories of allocational policies, pork-barrel spending, patronage, and vote buying; see his Introduction to this volume.
have certain distinguishing structural features. They are bottom-heavy and rely on an army of local-level organizers, people who live in the neighborhoods under their political responsibility, know everyone’s name, know who went to the polls and who didn’t, and know who was able to look them in the eye the day after the election. Clientelist parties use this fine-grained information – this “tremendous local knowledge” as Wang and Kurzman (this volume) put it in reference to vote buying in Taiwan – to make inferences about how individuals voted, extending favors to voters for whom they believe these inducements really matter, and punishing voters who they think have defected from the implicit clientelist bargain. When asked what happens to neighbors who have received her help but then didn’t attend a party event, a Peronist organizer in a working-class neighborhood in Argentina gave the pregnant answer, “We take it into account.” She continued, “You have to apply discipline (poner correctivo), because otherwise they’ll do whatever they want.” When asked what happens when she suspects that someone in her political orbit voted for another party, she responded, “He’s dead. He died, forever.”

Hence we have an asymmetry: the person who exchanges her vote for a personal “payment” only benefits from an on-going flow of goods if she continues to vote for the benefactor-party, whereas everyone gets public goods, whether they voted for the party providing them or not. This asymmetry suggests that, all else equal, vote buying can be a more powerful inducement to return the favor with a vote than is programmatic mobilization. In the language of probabilities, direct “payment” for a vote increases the probability of compliance.

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6 Strictly speaking, vote buying need not rely on clientelist parties. As long as there are grassroots actors who have the capacity to monitor voters and enforce the vote-buying contract, they can sell their service to candidates from different parties. “Freelancing” by grassroots monitors has been observed in some settings (see Schaeffer, 2004). Parties probably prefer “in-house” to freelance monitors because agency problems arise between candidates and monitors, and it is less costly for parties to monitor party than freelance operatives. For one thing, party operatives who are imbued with loyalty to the party and zeal for its ideology and program are less likely to shirk; for another, parties can offer their grassroots operatives promotion within the party in return for efficient monitoring, whereas freelancers might be indifferent to such incentives.

7 Interview with Ana, a pseudonymous Peronist organizer in the city of Córdoba, conducted in January, 2003 by Valeria Brusco, Marcelo Nazareno, and Susan Stokes. My translation.
with the exchange more than do diffuse “payments” of public and programmatic goods. Faced with a party that gives him goods conditional on his (inferred) support and a party that offers programmatic benefits, a voter might well vote for the former. If the latter’s program were sufficiently appealing he would vote for the former and hope that the latter wins.

To draw attention to the contrast between vote buying and mobilization with programmatic goods, Brusco, Nazarenko, and Stokes label theirs a probabilistic selective incentives (PSI) approach to clientelism or vote buying. Mancur Olson (1965) defined selective incentives as goods that could be extended to people who contributed to the provision of a public good and denied to people who didn’t contribute. Individualized payments for votes are probabilistic selective incentives because, as long individuals’ votes are not fully observable, politicians will inevitably make some mistakes of inference, and sometimes punish people who actually supported them and reward those who didn’t. In contrast to Olson’s selective incentives, which encourage people to contribute to the provision of public goods, payments for votes as probabilistic selective incentives have the opposite effect, of reducing the incentives for politicians and governments to provide public goods (see below).

Both vote buying and programmatic mobilization entail exchanges; in both, parties can be thought of as paying a price per vote. The basic advantage of vote buying is its more fine-grained targeting of benefits to likely voters. The basic advantage of programmatic mobilization is its ability to reach large swaths of the electorate. Vote buying thus has advantages of precision and leverage; programmatic mobilization has advantages of scope.

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8The number of type I and type II errors grows as parties move away from individual and toward collective payoffs and punishments. In 1985, in response to electoral advances by the opposition, the National Development minister from Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) explained that districts that had supported the PAP would benefit from public-housing upgrades, whereas districts that had voted for the opposition would not. “This is a very practical political decision…I make no apologies for it. As a PAP government, we must look after PAP constituencies first because the majority of people supported us.” When an opposition MP pointed out the unfairness of the policy to PAP supporters in opposition-majority constituencies, the minister replied, “It’s regrettable, but it can’t be helped.” Cited in Tam 2003:14.
In many political systems one observes a mix of vote buying and programmatic appeals, not to mention the many other methods of political mobilization (ideological, charismatic, identity-based, etc.). Even individual parties use a mix of strategies. What determines the mix of vote buying and programmatic strategies? To answer this question we must consider the advantages and disadvantages, the costs of benefits, of each, and how these vary as a function of other factors.

The main costs of vote-buying are in maintaining a network of party organizers who can help detect who has stuck with the bargain and who may have defected, and the costs of the items actually used to purchase the vote – the cash, the food and drink, the building materials, the articles of clothing, and so on (see chapter 5 of this volume). The costs of the programmatic strategy are those of communicating programmatic appeals to voters: maintaining a party press, advertising, etc. Programmatic parties have to communicate both when they are in the opposition and want to win office, and when they are incumbents and want to retain office. In the first case they must announce to voters what programs they will provide if elected; in the second, they must give their “spin” on the programs and achievements of their tenure. Programmatic strategies also impose costs on parties of generating or acquiring the knowledge to devise programs. As for the costs of public programs themselves, in some political systems we can assume that these are borne by the public at large. In others, however, where politicians are prone to pocket money from the treasury, expenditures on public goods and programs can cut into the politicians’ personal wealth. There may be more subtle political costs, such as the loss of

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9 My assumption here is that what a government has done is not self-evident to voters; if it were, incumbents would not have to invest in communicating their achievements. This is true if voters are “rationally ignorant” of the details of governments’ actions: it may not be worth it to them to make the substantial investment in acquiring information that it would take to know this in detail (see Stigler 1975). Or they may not be able to handle the information cognitively or just not care.
of support from some constituents who oppose programs aimed at others; a party that emphasizes old-age pensions may have to pay or work harder for the votes of young people.

We saw earlier that, assuming declining marginal utility of income, parties will try to buy the votes of the poor. This suggests that the degree of inequality is central to determining the relative effectiveness of vote buying versus programmatic appeals. All else equal, we expect that the more unequal the distribution of income, the more prevalent vote buying. Let’s assume that the amount of resources parties and governments have at their disposal with which to buy votes is a direct function of the country’s per-capita (average) income. In a country with high income inequality, where the gap between those below and those above the average is large, the party will have to pay relatively little to win many (relatively) poor people’s votes. In a country where the gap between those below and those above average is small, the party will have to pay more to win the same number of votes.\textsuperscript{10} Because, generally speaking, the poorer the country the more unequal its income distribution (Deininger and Squire 1996), it follows that the poorer the country, the more prevalent vote buying.

Another factor influencing the relative advantages of vote buying and programmatic strategies is party organization. An important dimension of party organization in this regard is the degree of centralization. Hicken (this volume) notes that decentralized parties promote personalized candidacies, which he links to clientelist appeals. Decentralized, machine-like party organizations also have a greater capacity to efficiently deliver goods in exchange for votes.

\textsuperscript{10} A simple numeric example: Country A has three inhabitants, whose incomes are 1, 5, and 12. Country B has three inhabitants whose incomes are 5, 6, and 7. Although inequality is greater in A than in B, the two have the same total (18) and hence average (6) incomes. Assume that a party has, as the total amount it can spend on buying votes, 1/3 of the average income, or 2, and that to win a person’s vote the party’s payment has to increase the voter’s income by at least 20%. In country A the party gives one to 1 and one to 5, thus increasing their incomes by 100% and 20% respectively. It wins both of their votes and the election. In country B the party gives one to 5, the poorest voter, increasing her income by 20% and winning her vote. It gives the remaining one to 6 and increases his income by about 17%, failing to win his vote. Vote buying succeeds in the more unequal but fails in the more equal country.
Highly decentralized party organizations are crucial for vote buying because organization is what allows parties to monitor voters and punish defectors (see Stokes 2005, and Wang and Kurzman, this volume). My guess is that these organizational costs are higher in wealthy countries than in poor ones, relative to the resources that parties command, and that this is one reason why vote buying today is mainly a phenomenon of the developing world. The party operatives and ward heelers who make vote buying work are relatively skilled, savvy people who, as a country develops, find more remunerative outlets for their skills.

The organizational costs I was just describing are operational or on-going costs. But there are substantial set-up or “sunk” costs as well. Once a party has ingratiated itself into local social networks – indeed, helped create these local networks – there is a certain stability to its presence in a community. A party that is not already involved in local networks would have to make this investment \textit{de novo} if it were to pursue vote buying. Hence the price of “buying” a vote with personalized handouts will be higher for the party that has not already made such investments. The history of Argentina’s Peronist party is instructive in how parties may acquire the capacity to monitor as a byproduct of earlier charismatic or class appeals. In the 1940s through the 1970s, the Peronist party derived support from the charisma of Juan and Eva Peron, from its strong backing by labor unions, and from its ideological appeal to the poor and \textit{descamisados} or “shirtless ones.” Early Peronism’s working-class orientation helped it create strong loyalties and strong networks in working-class communities. After the death of its charismatic leaders and after its 1990s programmatic reorientation toward neoliberalism, the party stanched a potential outflow of working-class support by shifting toward clientelism (Levitsky 2003). In doing so it relied heavily on social networks inherited from the earlier era.
Without this inheritance, the cost of a shift to vote buying would have been much more substantial.

We have seen that mass communications are a major cost for programmatic parties. The lower the costs of broadcasting one’s program and accomplishments, all else equal, the more attractive the programmatic versus the vote-buying strategy. The costs of mass communications fall as countries modernize: one has only to think of the Anatolian Chief in Daniel Lerner’s (1958) parable of modernization, forced to bring one product of modernity, a radio, into his home. Higher education tends to become more widespread as countries develop, hence reducing the knowledge-costs associated with programmatic mobilization.

I have suggested that there are economies of scale in the provision of public goods. A government that invests in reducing air pollution may have to spend a lot, materially and politically, to provide this good, but the number of beneficiaries is vast, and the cost small on a per-head basis. (This is the flip side of the disadvantage, mentioned earlier, that a party or government can’t exclude non-supporters from access to public goods.) In contrast, the amount that a party must spend on buying votes increases as the number of constituents increases (assuming, as I am, that there are no economies of scale so that the average price of the vote does not fall). Hence (as usual, all else equal) vote buying will decline, and programmatic mobilization increase, as constituency size grows.¹¹ Constituencies can grow with population growth, or with extensions of the franchise, or with changes in districting.

Gary Cox has made just this point regarding 19th-century Britain, where subsequent reform bills eliminated small rotten boroughs and folded their constituents into larger districts,

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¹¹ Of course, all else may not be equal. Lahoucq (this volume) proposes that, in 19th century Britain, candidates turned to vote buying when they could not use their prestige or influence to capture votes, and that prestige and influence were more effective in small constituencies. Hence his proposition, that the smaller the constituency, the less the vote buying.
and where the expansion of the franchise enlarged many constituencies. These changes led MPs to shift from “bribery and influence” to a focus on national issues. Cox writes,

“The reason for the lesser reliance on bribery and influence in the larger boroughs seems to be that these electoral strategies were simply less effective there – at least relative to the strategy of taking stands on matters of national policy. Certainly a fixed amount of money would buy a smaller proportion of the total votes in larger towns if the average price of votes was not less.” (1987:57).

As an all-else-equal proposition, the idea that vote buying decreases as constituency size grows is sound. Yet we know from many studies that parties try to buy votes even when the constituency is enormous, as in presidential elections. To explain why vote buying is not just a phenomenon of local elections in small towns, or of elections of representatives to national bodies from small constituencies (e.g., the MP from the tiny rotten borough), one must bear in mind the greater potential for a party to nail down vote, as it were, with a payoff (a selective incentive) than with a program (a public good). Assuming some secrecy of the vote (an inappropriate assumption in Britain, as Cox notes, until after 1872), what parties buy is not votes but expected votes. Because of less-than-full certainty that either strategy will work, it takes greater outlays to buy one expected vote than it would to buy a vote if there were no uncertainty. If a given investment in a program increased the probability less of landing the vote, the effective cost of the vote per head would be higher than under vote buying. In effect, uncertainty of results can raise the average price per vote of programmatic mobilization.

The effect of constituency size on the relative costs and effectiveness of vote buying and programmatic mobilization should not be confused with the effect of the population size of the community in which the voter lives. In general, parties can monitor votes more easily in small communities than in large ones, whether they are trying to monitor votes for the national president or for the local dogcatcher. This is because social relations in small communities are
multifaceted: one’s dentist is also one’s brother-in-law and fellow-church-member and neighbor. Multifaceted social relations make it easier for party operatives to keep track of who went to the polls and who didn’t, in the company of whom, and to use disaggregated election returns to sort out likely cooperators from likely defectors. My research in Argentina turns up robust evidence that, whether a voter is wealthy or poor, sympathizes with Peronists, with Radicals, or with some other party or with no party, whether male or female, young or old, the smaller the population size of the municipality in which he or she lives, the more likely he or she is to accept minor handouts during election campaigns and to acknowledge that these handouts influenced her vote (Brusco et al. 2004).

My frequent use of the “all-else-equal” formula in this discussion is meant to underscore that, to understand the mix of strategies that parties deploy in any given setting, one would have to bring all relevant factors simultaneously into play. To illustrate, in the United States today, an incumbent president may spend $200 million trying to get reelected. Even if vote buying were not illegal in the U.S., it’s hard to imagine him deploying these resources principally toward vote buying. Subtracting the costs of maintaining the kind of organization that would be required to monitor voters, if he were to divide the remainder into cash payments for the 60 million or so voters whose support he needs, the amounts would be tiny and probably few voters would be swayed. Deploying a large portion of these funds to air major-market television advertisements is much more effective. Here we have four factors converging to make vote buying unlikely: the wealth of the population, its large size and the large size of the constituency, and the ready availability of technologies of mass communication.

No discussion of the relative costs and effectiveness of vote buying versus programmatic mobilization would be complete without mention of electoral technologies, which shape how
people cast votes. All technological features that affect the transparency of the vote affect the
effectiveness of vote buying. One can think of secrecy as a continuum, from voice voting, where
a person’s vote is perfectly transparent,\(^{12}\) to voting in a big anonymous city with a voting
machine. There are many gradations in between: people can have the ballot but be forced to
cast it at an open table, within the range of vision of party operatives; ballots can be
distinguishable by color or by the weight of the paper; and numeric codes can allow a ballot to be
traced to the individuals who cast it. Countries can have the secret ballot but not the Australian
ballot: one produced by public authorities at public expense, distributed through carefully
controlled channels on or soon before election day, and in which all candidates for a given office
are listed simultaneously. Instead they may use party-issued ballots. In three Latin American
countries today, Argentina, Panama, and Uruguay, people still vote with ballots that are issued
by political parties. In Colombia until 1991 one could only vote with ballots issued and
distributed by political parties. In Argentina one can acquire a ballot from a party operative in
the weeks leading up to the election, or one can acquire it inside the voting booth. Brusco,
Nazareno, and Stokes show that the poorer an Argentine voter, the more likely she is to vote with
a ballot that a party operative gave her. And we show that, whatever her income, a person who
votes with a party-distributed ballot is more likely to have received some other handout during
the campaign, and more likely than people who received handouts but not ballots to say that the
handout influenced her vote. Our explanation is that when clientelist parties distribute ballots
and handouts simultaneously, they send the message that if people expect handouts in the future
they had better vote for the party.

\(^{12}\) Even with voice voting, a party that wants to monitor individuals’ votes so that it can influence them with
inducements needs organizational capacity to keep track of who voted how.
If the parties’ strategists have studied economics, they deploy their resources toward each strategy to the point where an additional dollar (peso, yen) buys it the same (expected) number of votes as that same additional dollar (peso, yen) would buy using the other strategy. If their studies are in the realm of applied politics, they are more likely to use rules of thumb that roughly approximate this calculation.  

I have sketched a model in which parties buy votes as part of an overall strategy to win elections. They pay for poor people’s votes before attempting to buy the votes of wealthier people; they can pay poor voters a relatively modest price, whereas they would have to pay wealthier voters more. The proportions of the electorate whose votes parties attempt to buy with personal payments, or to solicit with programs, depends on levels of economic development and inequality, on organizational capacities to monitor the vote, on the availability of mass communications, on constituency size and population size, and on the technologies of voting.

The probabilistic selective incentives model is not the only conceivable one of vote buying. Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes describe two others. One we call a norms-of-reciprocity model. The fundamental difference between the norms-of-reciprocity approach and the PSI approach is that in the former, in the absence of enforceable contracts, vote-buying parties rely on people’s feelings of obligation to return the favor with their vote, rather than, as in the PSI approach, relying on people’s fears that, were they to defect, the party operative would withhold valuable payments in the future (see also chapters 2 and 5 of this volume). In settings where norms of reciprocity generate compliance with the clientelist bargain, we would expect

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13 All of this treats parties as unified actors. But in many settings the mix of program and vote buying seems in part driven by struggles within parties. Local organizers control the information needed to monitor voters and to channel payments appropriately; to the extent that their party relies on vote buying, their position is enhanced. Turning to party leaders, as long as their ability to win office is not compromised, they prefer more centralized organizational structures, direct communication with voters unmediated by local bosses and operatives, and programs that make use of the intellectual talents that abound at the apex and are less prevalent at the grassroots. Hence, for example, when mass communications become cheaper, party leaders may jump at the opportunity to shift from vote buying to programmatic appeals.
organization to be somewhat less important for parties that buy votes. They still need organizations through which to channel gifts, but they don’t need them to monitor voters’ choices; the norm of reciprocity makes their compliance spontaneous. In another way the PSI and norms of reciprocity models are quite similar. Presumably the power of the gift to induce the recipient to reciprocate with her vote is greater the more the recipient values the gift, and, by the logic of diminishing marginal utility of income, gifts have more force among the poor. Hence the norms-of-reciprocity model, like PSI, predicts that parties will buy the votes of the poor before trying to buy those of the wealthy.

A more distinctive approach that we outline is the high-discount-rate model. It relies centrally on two ideas. First, that vote buying is effective among voters who discount programmatic promises at an especially high rate. They may heavily discount programmatic promises because their circumstances lead them to prefer a less valuable reward now over a more valuable reward later. Even if a person would be willing to wait for a valuable reward, if she is skeptical that the future reward will actually materialize, she will also prefer the lesser but certain immediate payoff. The second central idea is that poor people are most likely both to employ high discount rates and to be uncertain about future promised benefits (see Scott 1969, Kitschelt 2000).

Social scientists are only beginning to build causal models of vote buying and clientelism, let alone test these models against one another empirically. In our research in Argentina, the PSI model better explained data from surveys we conducted than did either of the other two models. Below I consider the normative implications of PSI, norms of reciprocity, and of the high-discount rates models.
The Implications of Models of Vote Buying for Democracy

To begin to understand the essential conflict between vote buying and democracy, we must focus on the centrality of equality to democratic theory. Equality is at the center of democracy, both in theory and in practice. This is not to say that democratic theorists generally believe that, for a political system to be a democracy, its members must be on an equal economic footing. No contemporary treatment of democracy that I know of insists that democracy does not exist, in a definitional sense, if people in it have unequal incomes or assets or even opportunities (although some would say that economic inequalities can have consequences that are harmful to democracy; indeed that is the direction in which this essay is headed).

Democratic theorists, instead, insist that citizens in a democracy have, or ought to have, political rights and political opportunities in common and in equal proportion. Robert Dahl (1971, 1987) contends that in democracies nearly all citizens ought to have the right to vote and to have their votes counted equally, independent of who casts them. This right flows from what he calls the Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests: “...during processes of collective decision-making, the interests of every person who is subject to the decision must (within the limits of feasibility) be accurately interpreted and made known” (1987:86).

Under vote buying as PSI, the right to vote is equally shared, and no one’s vote is given more weight than anyone else’s in deciding which candidate or party wins. But in a crucial sense vote buying violates Dahl’s Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests. Vote sellers’ votes carry little information about their interests. Hence their interests are not made known and cannot be accurately interpreted. How big should the state be? What are the appropriate dimensions of income transfers, and how should they be carried out? Should abortion be legal? Should we go to war? Did the current incumbent do a good job? The votes
of vote sellers contain no information about their views on these matters. Their interests and preferences do not help shape policy mandates. Nor are their views included in collective assessments of how an incumbent has performed. A person whose vote is purchased for an individualized payment is, for all practical purposes, lost to the process of collective deliberation, mandate-making, and retrospective evaluations of governments.

The violation of democratic equality is exacerbated by the fact that it is not people at random whose voices will not be heard by politicians on matters of collective concern. Not random members of the polity but poor members of the polity will tend to have their voices muted. The essence of the violation of democracy represented by vote buying can hence be summarized thus: because of their material poverty, a sub-set of the citizenry is deprived of effective participation in collective decisions to which they will be subject. In what follows I show that the violation holds whether one thinks of elections as prospective affairs, generating mandates for policies, or as retrospective affairs, generating collective judgments of incumbents’ performance. And I show that, whether elections create mandates or offer retrospective judgments (or some mix of the two), vote buying as PSI reduces the power of elections to induce responsiveness in politicians.

**Vote buying and mandate making.** One way to think about elections is that candidates in campaigns make policy pronouncements, people vote for the candidate whose policy pronouncements they like best, and the candidate with the most popular policy pronouncements wins. The winner then carries out the promised policies. This mandate interpretation of elections is in the tradition of Anthony Downs (1957). Downs showed that, under certain conditions, the policy that the winner pursues is the one preferred by the median voter. These
conditions turned out to be very restrictive indeed. Yet unless one believes that policy making is chaotic (see below), it is fair to say that generations of revisions to Downs leave more or less in tact the insight that policy makers will often feel a strong tug toward the middle of the distribution of what voters prefer.

With the spatial model in mind, a highly stylized example gives a sense of the distorting effect of vote buying. Assume that people’s preferred level of public services, and hence of taxation, depends on their incomes. Poor people prefer higher taxes and more services, wealthy people prefer lower taxes and fewer services. The preferred tax level of the median voter is, say, 30% of the gross domestic product. But vote buying effectively lops off a large bottom portion of the income distribution in the electorate. The preferred tax level of median voter among the remaining voters, those who vote for the party with the best tax policy, is, say, 15%. A vote-buying party that wins by handing out goodies to the poor and appealing to the others with a popular tax policy wins with a mandate to set taxes at 15% of GDP.

Someone might object that mandates are, for several reasons, elusive. Voters often don’t know the policy positions that candidates adopt, in part because candidates are often deliberately vague (but see Alvarez 1997). There are too many dimensions to politics to know what a person’s vote means – did he vote for the candidate because he wanted lower taxes, or because he favored gun control, or because he’s a Catholic? And if politics is multidimensional, then even if the public’s mood on each issue could be discerned from its vote, politicians can make

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14 The list is familiar: voters’ policy preferences must be single-peaked; if there is more than one policy dimension then voters’ preferences must be symmetrical; and spatial models only make sense if voters can be arrayed, according to their preferences, along a continuous dimension. This last condition is violated, for example, if issues have “valence” – everyone wants them (prosperity) or everyone doesn’t want them (corruption; see D. Stokes 1966) – or “sides” – everyone knows which side of an issue they’re on but not where they are on a dimension (see Rabinowitz and McDonald 1987).
policies cycle and remain basically unconstrained by the preferences of the median voter on any dimension (McKelvey 1976).

I have laid out elsewhere why I believe that mandates are meaningful in democracies, despite these objections (Stokes 2001). But even if mandates are weak, hard to define, and prone to being subverted by issue cycling, it’s not hard to see that muffling the voice of a segment of the electorate by buying their votes just makes mandates weaker. For example, one could contend with some justification that the lower voter turnout, the less clear the mandate that an election produces: the new leadership has effectively heard from only a portion of the electorate. Something very similar is true when vote buying (as PSI) is widespread: although turnout may be very high, the significance of the policy message the new leadership receives is reduced by the failure of vote sellers to contribute with their votes to this message.

**Vote buying and retrospective judgments**. Another way of looking at elections is that they give voters an opportunity to make a consequential statement about the performance of incumbents. In this interpretation, a government is elected and serves its term. Voters set a threshold of performance and, at the end of the term, if the government has reached this threshold they vote to reelect, if not they vote for the opposition. A long line of democratic theorists, normative and empirical, from James Madison (1788) to David Mayhew (1974) to Morris Fiorina (1981) to Bernard Manin (1997), contend that these retrospective judgments do more than satisfy an urge to get back at politicians, and in fact make governments function better. Politicians’ *anticipation of the future retrospective judgment of voters*, in Manin’s phrase, induces them to perform responsively during their term.

The retrospective or accountability interpretation of elections is not without difficulties. Given the many dimensions on which people can judge an incumbent’s performance, it is also
subject to a cycling problem, and Ferejohn (1986) shows that voters need to adopt a common yardstick for their evaluation (e.g., they should pay attention to the GDP growth rate and not their own incomes). Term limits tend to interfere with people’s efforts to hold politicians accountable, especially in settings where political parties are weak: if the incumbent can’t run and his party won’t punish him for bad performance, voters can’t hold him accountable (see Cleary 2003; Carey 1996). Mandate and accountability mechanisms can interfere with one another. A voter who uses both prospective (mandate) and retrospective (accountability) mechanisms will sometimes find himself voting to reelect a bad incumbent or voting for an unappealing opponent (see Fearon 1999). Still, positive political theory, not to mention the intuition of most voters, does not disconfirm the idea that past performance is one element explaining how people vote, and that when voters can cast consequential retrospective judgments they are better able to induce their political leaders to be responsive.

Because holding incumbents accountable is itself a public good, vote buying vitiates elections as moments of retrospective judgment. People who vote for a party because they believe they are in danger of losing particularistic benefits will not be inclined to use their ballots to cast retrospective judgment on the government’s performance. Hence one problem with vote buying as PSI is that, with the future choices of a sub-set of the electorate captured by minor inducements, the instrument of accountability is wielded by fewer voters and is proportionally weakened.

Vote buying violates Dahl’s Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests in elections in which people hold governments accountable just as it does in elections where people give mandates. The assessed quality of a government’s performance frequently depends on one’s interests and preferences. Vote buying truncates the range of economic interests shaping
retrospective judgments of incumbents, quieting the voices of those judges among the citizenry who are poor.

Thus we have seen that, whether we think of elections as sending mandates or as holding politicians accountable, vote buying deprives a sub-set of the citizenry of having their interests “accurately interpreted and made known.” We have also seen that vote buying reduces the effectiveness of elections as an instrument of responsiveness.

Vote buying and efficiency. One might be tempted to think that the disadvantage of depriving people of having their interests interpreted and made known is balanced by some efficiency gains. Vote buying is indeed efficient for politicians. It allows them to more efficiently allocate their resources as they compete for office. There may be good reasons to want to reduce the amount of money and other resources politicians expend gaining office, but when one considers the inefficiencies that vote buying imposes on some citizens and on societies at large (not to mention the other problems laid out earlier), one concludes that there must be better ways to reduce these expenditures. What are the inefficiencies? First, for the vote sellers. Even in the PSI model, they are selling their votes because, in a narrow sense, doing so yields greater value to them than they would get from conditioning their vote on programs or government performance. But notice that they may sell their vote to one party, hoping that another party wins.\textsuperscript{15} An unemployed woman who lives in a country with no unemployment insurance might sell her vote for a bag of food and hope that a different party, one that promises to deliver unemployment insurance, wins. Furthermore, against the narrow sense in which vote sellers benefit, one must weigh the loss of consideration of the interests of this voter and of the class of others who are likely to have similar interests. Vote buying, for reasons I have explained, tends to have the effect of lopping off the lower end of the income distribution from

\textsuperscript{15} For an even starker example, see Kochin and Kochin, 1998.
effective exercise of citizenship, thus skewing public policy in a direction that hurts vote sellers. Selling their votes for minor payoffs is in their interests only in a second-best sense. The first-best outcome for vote sellers would be to force parties to compete with programs and performance.

The last source of inefficiency that vote buying as PSI imposes is that it can contribute to the undersupply of public goods. Consider a setting in which a party wins every election by buying 51% of the votes with personal payments. The government has no (electoral) incentive whatsoever to pursue national defense or clean air or transportation infrastructure. All it needs to do is have enough in its coffers to pay off half of the electorate at the next election.

The Normative Implications of Alternative Models of Vote Buying

**Norms of reciprocity.** I alluded earlier to an alternative approach to vote buying, where not the fear of losing particularistic benefits but the desire to reciprocate drives sellers to return the favor with a vote. Just as in the case of vote buying driven by probabilistic selective incentives, vote buying driven by norms of reciprocity deprives citizens of having their interests interpreted and made known. This model may appear less coercive because the voters’ behavior is driven not by fear of retribution but by a norm, and one that seems to enhance social cooperation. Yet if parties use and promote this norm as a way of encouraging voters to support them even though withholding that support might be in their interest, the norm itself appears fairly coercive. And social psychologists have shown that people feel obliged to reciprocate even to unsolicited and unwanted favors (Regan 1971, Cialdini 1984).

**High discount rates.** In another alternative model, poor voters prefer smaller rewards now over larger ones later, either because they discount future consumption heavily or because
future rewards are less certain than ones they can collect now. If voters sell their votes because, with discounting, programmatic benefits are simply of less value to them, does vote buying violate Dahl’s Principle of Equal Consideration of Interests? In a sense, it does not. The vote seller’s interest is in a quick, certain payoff right now, and that interest is being accurately interpreted by the party that buys the vote. Yet from a broader vantage point, democracy would be improved by finding other ways of dealing with the conditions that make vote selling appealing. Democracy suffers because the vote seller’s interest in an immediate and certain payoff induces her not to weigh in, for example, on which public policies she would prefer were she able to afford the luxury of waiting for them. Even if vote sellers are really revealing their immediate interests, society as a whole suffers from efficiency losses of the kind described in the last section. It would be better for potential vote sellers to be paid, anonymously and from public monies, the equivalent of the price of their vote, in exchange for their using elections to voice preferences for public policies (see Karlan, 1994)

Why Isn’t the Use of Programs to Cultivate Constituents Equally Undemocratic?

If politicians use programs to appeal to voters, is vote buying really any less democratic than programmatic politics? To answer this question, first we need a clear rule-of-thumb to distinguish whether a personalized benefit is simply a public program delivered to an individual, or is in fact a “payment” for a vote. To decide we must answer the questions, Does the benefactor-party choose the recipient only because, if given the favor, she is likely to vote for it? Or does the benefactor-party choose recipients because they fall into some more abstract category? If the answer to the first question is ‘yes’ and the second ‘no,’ then the party is buying the vote.
Clearly, political parties frequently hijack purported “programs” for the purpose of buying votes. The programmatic justification becomes mere window dressing, and a misleading description of how resources are really distributed. Several studies rigorously document this hijacking, or political manipulation, of public programs. Schady (2000) shows that the Fujimori administration in Peru directed anti-poverty programs toward communities, not because their poverty made them eligible but because around 50% of their voters supported the official party in the last election (they were, hence, “marginal” districts). Pérez Yarahuán (2002), and Diaz-Cayeros and Magaloni (2003), show that the Salinas administration in Mexico diverted funds from the massive PRONASOL program to individuals and communities that did not deserve them or deserved them less than others. Tam (2003) shows how the ruling party in Singapore used public-housing funds to reward its supporters. It would be naive to think that political manipulation of programmatic resources is a phenomenon only of the developing world. Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002) document the political manipulation of public expenditures in the United States, where counties whose electorates favored the state governor’s party received disproportionate funds.

These situations allow for an easy answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this section: to the extent that unemployment insurance is redirected to the pockets of employed people, or anti-poverty funds to communities that do not best fit the fund’s criteria, these cease to be programs and become efforts to buy people’s votes.

Here’s the tougher question: political parties have constituencies with certain abstractly definable characteristics, and they devise programs aimed at people with these characteristics in order to cultivate electoral support. Labor parties try to increase wages, business-oriented parties
to reduce regulation; regional parties attempt to channel resources toward their regions. Do these practices not undermine democracy just as vote buying does?

Vote buying and cultivating categories of constituents with programs are similar but not identical. One difference is that to channel programmatic benefits to the kind of people who support that party, its leaders have to justify the programs by enunciating general, universalistic, and public policy-oriented reasons for them. A politician who wants to increase the minimum wage, or one who wants to reduce regulation, can’t simply say “we should do this because it will help me get reelected.” He has to appeal to principles of fairness or efficiency or to the good consequence of the proposed programs. He must say things like, “raising the minimum wage will lead to a fairer distribution of income,” or “reducing regulation will lead to economic growth.” These imperatives improve the deliberative quality of democracy and may make actors more other-regarding (see, e.g., Cohen 1998). More relevant here, the beneficiaries of public programs are not trapped into supporting the benefactor-party. Like the vote seller, who is forced to condition his vote narrowly on the prospect of retaining or losing a valued payment, the beneficiary of a public program may well wish to vote for his benefactor. But because on-going benefits don’t ride on his particular vote, he is likely to consider the full range of a party’s policies, actions, and performance. In this sense, the deployment of public programs to garner support among particular constituents leaves these constituents more autonomous decision-makers than does vote buying.

The hunch that we started with, then, has held up fairly well: vote buying is undemocratic. It is undemocratic whether voters sell their votes out of a fear of losing minor payoffs, or out of a feeling of obligation to reciprocate, or out of a desire to be sure of securing a
desired benefit now; it is undemocratic whether elections are thought of as prospective moments of mandate-definition or as retrospective moments of accountability; it is undemocratic in that it keeps vote sellers from having their interests accurately interpreted and made known, and in that it leaves them less autonomous than are the recipients of politically motivated public programs. In addition to being undemocratic, it has bad consequences, skewing public policy, creating inefficiencies, and reducing the supply of public goods. In light of these conclusions, the imperative is to search for ways to reduce vote buying in today’s developing democracies.
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