What Is Vote Buying?

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Preface

Consumer warning: The present paper is not a paper properly speaking. If offers a handful of introductory notes, tentative and incomplete, on the concept of vote buying. It still lacks empirical as well as bibliographical illustrations, and it was written without the benefit of having been able to read the papers to be presented at the conference. Originally, these notes were intended to lead towards a joint introduction co-authored by the two of us, the conference conveners, Frederic Schaffer and myself. In the end, we did not have the time anymore to turn our long-distance deliberations into a common document. Thus, we present separate introductions even of, incidentally (!), under exactly the same title. Still, the reflections presented here bear many traces of the fruitful discussions we entertained over the past months, even if responsibility for the (perhaps) polemical approach offered below is, of course, entirely mine.

Defining Vote Buying

At first sight, the notion of vote buying seems to be clear and self-explanatory. If we look at its actual use in political debate, however, it turns problematic. In countries like Mexico, where vote buying has become a focus of harsh controversy in election times, political observers as well as political actors use the term to designate a broad variety of phenomena. In the political arena, the denunciatory term “vote buying” covers activities like the distribution of food bags, the purchase of vote cards, the targeting of social transfers, and the delivery of public services to local communities. What do those phenomena have in common? One may doubt they share anything but a loose “family resemblance” (Wittgenstein) without a common core. Whatever they have in common, though, must be something fairly abstract.
Distributive Campaigning

I expect one could show through ordinary language analysis that all uses of “vote buying” intelligible to us, inhabitants of global capitalism, refer to: apparent efforts by parties or candidates to influence electoral choices through the delivery or promise of material benefits to voters. Usually, in cases described as vote buying, it is private material benefits that politicians provide on the basis of particularistic criteria, not public goods or collective entitlements accessible on universalistic grounds. Such a wide notion of “vote buying” is “intelligible” since it is still, at least vaguely and metaphorically, related to the idea of a commercial transaction: material favors are granted to obtain electoral support.

This notion of “vote buying” broadly and abstractly conceived corresponds to what we may call “distributive” strategies of electoral mobilization – as different from “communicative” campaign strategies. In the former case, parties and candidates distribute material goods, in the latter, they disseminate symbolic messages (written, verbal, or visual). The idea of “distributive” campaign strategies is akin to conventional notions of clientelism understood as “the exchange of private material benefits for political support” (Etzioni-Halevy 1989: 287). But, critically, it is broader, more open, and thus more neutral. It does not prejudge the meaning actors ascribe to the material goods and services put into electoral circulation. It allows for the possibility that acts of exchange are taking place, with citizens trading their vote for material benefits. But it does not assume such quasi-commercial transactions to take place.

The notion of “distributive” campaign strategies puts emphasis on observational evidence: It describes our empirical starting point as external observers. This is what
we see: politicians channeling material benefits to citizens during election campaigns. The broad concept of “distributive” strategies captures such observable flows of goods and services from political elites to voters. But it does not pretend we already know what is “really” going on. Vote trading is just one of several possibilities. Beneath the thin surface of observable facts there is more variation than we often assume. What we see may indeed look very much like vote buying. But not everything that looks like an act of vote buying actually is an act of vote buying.

The Range of Meanings

Voters who are offered private goods and services from campaigning politicians may comprehend those material offers at least in four different ways. They may take them as payment, gift, retribution, or sign.

(a) *Payments* are part of an commercial relationship in which partners trade equivalent values. Here, the commodity citizens trade with are their votes. If they accept the material offer, they know they are expected to deliver their part of the deal at the polling station.

(b) *Gifts* are voluntary unilateral transfers that do not originate legitimate expectations of reciprocity (except in the long run). Accepting a gift does not create any obligations in the voting booth. Voters may take it and vote their consciousness without bothering about the giver.

(c) *Retributions* are payments for services rendered outside the “electoral connection”. Under this perspective, voters take material campaign offers not as initiating an exchange relationship but as concluding one. For example, politicians may be thought to compensate them for campaign work, for their contributions as taxpayers, or even more generically, for the unjust distribution
of assets and incomes in the country. Again, such retributive payments do not commit voters’ electoral choices (Schaffer).

(d) Signs, finally, are not at all part of a quid pro quo. Citizens may understand material offers less in instrumental than in expressive terms. More than the practical utility of the goods and services they receive they may asses their informational value. They may take them as pieces of information that reveal positive personal qualities of the giver, such as generosity, personal respect, and politeness (Lindberg, Rigger, Schaffer, van de Walle).²

The Range of Consequences

Whatever the meaning citizens attribute to material campaign offers, their consequences are in principle uncertain. They may be effective means of electoral mobilization, but they may also be without consequences, or even turn counterproductive. How can we know? It is not sufficient to know the electoral choice the recipient takes after receiving some material favor. At the very least we need two additional pieces of information: the willingness to vote and the electoral preferences the voter displayed prior to coming under the influence of “distributive” campaigns.

In principle, distributive campaigns may act upon turnout or upon electoral choices. In the former case, when trying to influence participation, they may try to mobilize abstainers or to demobilize active citizens (often described as “negative” vote buying or “abstention buying”). In latter case, when trying to influence voting decisions, private material offers may target anyone of three broad groups of voters: (a) the partisans of the giver, (b) the indifferent and undecided, and (c) the partisans of competing parties or candidates. In case of partisan voters (a + c), such offers may
reinforce given preferences, change them, or make voters vote against their genuine preferences.

Quite some possibilities to toy with. Table 1 combines them to indicate that effective vote buying may not be necessarily successful vote buying. Vote buyers may be “effective” in inducing voters to do what they wish them to do. But whether the resulting decisions represent success or failure or some uncertain mix, depends on voters’ original electoral preferences as well as on their participatory inclinations (see appendix). If voters end up doing what they intended to do anyway, or if they reach a decision that hurts the spender, the material offer cannot be considered a success. In sum, whether particular exercises of distributive campaigning should be considered successful, inconsequential, or counterproductive, cannot be read from voter decisions taken in isolation. It is only in the light of citizens’ previous electoral choices that we can make meaningful causal inferences.

The Boundaries of Vote Trading

If we scratch the surface of distributive campaigns we can see that its meaning as well as its consequences show a range of potential variation that the simple economic metaphor of “vote buying” tends to obscure. If we put the label “vote buying” on just everything that happens under the broad umbrella of “distributive” electoral campaigns, we risk committing the twin sins of conceptual lumping and conceptual stretching. One the one hand, if there are some relevant distinctions to be drawn, we should use a vocabulary fine enough to express them. If we employ “vote buying” as a conceptual container for any kind of distributive campaign activity, we may end up blurring some “differences that make a difference” (Bateson).
On the other hand, only a subset of “distributive” campaign activities come close to constituting what ordinary language would recognize as a trade relationship. In the economic realm, the notions of “buying” and “selling” do not refer to any kind of situation where money or material goods change hands. They refer more specifically to the exchange of goods for money. If we wish to stay close to the common meaning of trading, we should apply the term “vote trading” only to those distributive strategies of voter mobilization that actually do resemble market transactions.

Arguably, such a more literal understanding of vote trading demands two things: voters must actually understand that material offers form part of a trade relationship; and they must actually deliver their vote in exchange.

*Shared understanding.* If buyers and sellers in a monetary economy buy and sell goods and services, they are assumed to understand the nature of the transaction they are taking part in. They are assumed to understand the social meaning of trade, to know, for example, that buying a thing is different from robbing it or from receiving it as a gift. If participants lack such a common understanding, they will have difficulties to complete their transaction without friction. If their expectations do not coincide (as with the shoplifter who thanks the proprietor for her munificence) they will usually see the “misunderstanding” and correct it immediately. Analogously, if politicians offer cash or goods to voters, their offer represent an instance of “vote buying” only if both sides understand it as such. If either one conceives the economic offer not as the opening act of an exchange relationship, coupled with an either explicit or implicit quid pro quo, but as a gift, retribution, or sign, it is not trade, not a quasi-commercial transaction, we observe but “something else” (which may be a simple “misunderstanding” if givers and receivers adopt incongruent interpretations).
**Effective exchange.** For distributive campaigns to constitute exercises in vote buying, a shared understanding to that effect is not enough. To form an act of vote buying (rather than a mere purchasing offer), it must culminate in an act of exchange. The giver must get something in return for her electoral investment. That’s the way trade works. Buying something means acquiring some valued, scarce good or service the buyer would not get for free. It makes little sense (to the practical linguistic knowledge of average customers in modern capitalism) to say someone “buys” something if he pays for products or services he would get anyway (without the expense of money). Depending on context, we may think of such unsolicited payment as a donation, a reward, a mistake, or an offense, but hardly a purchase. In an analogous way, if a politician pays a citizen to vote \( x \), we may speak of a genuine vote buying only if the citizen (a) actually votes \( x \) and (b) would not have voted \( x \) anyway. In other words, only successful vote buying is genuine vote buying. Material campaign offers that either induce no change in voting behavior or trigger adverse changes (from the givers’ point of view) may be described as “vote buying” only at the price of elevating the notions of selling and buying to metaphorical heights that are detached from our ordinary understanding of market exchanges.

**Measuring Vote Buying**

To sum up our previous discussion: If we observe instances of “distributive campaigning” in which parties and candidates channel private material benefits to individual voters, we should not prejudge that it is “vote buying” what we see. If voters comprehend the electoral flows of money, goods, or services differently, or if those flows do not influence voting behavior to the benefit of the giver, the common analogy of market exchange (“vote trading”) may obscure more than it reveals. This restrictive definition pretends to anchor the idea of vote trading in our
commonsensical understanding of trade relationships in market economies. However, drawing narrow conceptual boundaries carries a cost: it makes it more expensive to observe vote trading. It is not sufficient anymore to register the fact of distributive campaign activities. In order know whether it is vote buying or “something else” which is going on, we need to learn something about its meaning as well as its consequences. To establish the former, we need to know how both givers and recipients conceive the electoral dispensation of money or goods. To establish the latter, we need to know how citizens actually voted, but also how they might have voted in the absence of distributive campaigning.

Thus, we are safe as long as we can uphold the assumption that distributive campaigns reliably and validly indicate vote buying. But as soon as we drop that simplifying assumption in order to establish empirically whether something close to an “exchange of votes for material favors” (Robert Gay) is actually taking place, we need to know quite some things we usually ignore. I expect our deliberations during the upcoming conference to enrich our set of tools for creating better knowledge on the various empirical facets of “vote buying.”

Naturally, we scholars are not the only ones to carry a heavy burden of ignorance when it comes to “operationalizing” vote buying. Potential vote buyers, too, face dizzying informational demands as they make their investment decisions. To avoid wasting their money, they have to identify “available” voters, but to establish voter availability, they have to know (following our previous line of reasoning) quite some things. They have to gauge the social meaning citizens attach to distributive campaigns; they have to identify followers and adversaries, as well as indifferent and undecided citizens; they have to distinguish between participants and abstainers (to
target their efforts at negative vote buying); and they have to calculate the prospects of enforcement.\(^3\)

**Framing Vote Buying**

The preceding notes offer something like a restrictive proposal to “legislate” (Sartori) the “proper” use of the term vote buying. We should not let the notion fly off into metaphorical heights, but keep close to the semantic ground of market transactions, close to the literal meaning of “buying” and “selling” in the economic realm. I expect this proposal to be controversial. Everyone will agree that definitions matter. Depending on the ways we define the empirical phenomenon we study we will tread diverging paths of research. Yet, not everyone will support my pretension of narrowing down the meaning of “vote buying” to only those “distributive” campaign activities that constitute genuine exchange relationships.

However, whether we resolve the issue of definition this or that way, we still have to tackle another, larger issue: the problem of framing. What are cases of vote buying cases of? How do we comprehend vote buying in more abstract terms? Once we have laid out the concrete picture, what kind of analytical frame should put around? Into which theoretical wall should we drive our nails to hang the painting? Once we have decided what kind of phenomena to call vote buying, where do get to if we climb up the ladder of abstraction? In which thematic field of research do we situate whatever we think constitutes vote buying?

The wider the notion of vote buying we choose, the larger the number of plausible options we will have to frame the phenomenon. Yet, even the narrow conception of vote buying I propose looks quite open and indeterminate when it comes to more
abstract framing decisions. The full range of alternatives is wider, but the major, the most prominent, options to frame vote buying are three: electoral clientelism, electoral corruption, and electoral fraud.

Those frames are not neutral. Whether we comprehend vote buying as a form of clientelism, corruption, or fraud bears profound implications for empirical research, theory building, and normative evaluation. We are quite literally looking at different things depending on the analytical frame we adopt. Exaggerating a bit (and apologizing for the playful paraphrase), we may say: frame is fate. Our analytical frame determines the very nature of the transaction we are studying under the heading of vote buying. It defines its guiding distinction, its participants, its underlying conception of agency and responsibility, its normative status, and, last but not least, the theoretical and practical puzzles it poses (see Table 2 in the appendix). For lack of time, I do not go here beyond the minimalist exercise presented in the table. The table hints at some ways in which the three alternative frames – clientelism, corruption, and fraud – mold our perspectives on vote buying. It represents no more than a first step in a discussion I expect we will carry forward, vividly, thoughtfully, creatively, during the two days of our conference.

Xilometla, 23 August 2002
Notes

1 I exclude here the problem of permanent campaigns as well as of material promises to be delivered after elections.

2 If voters dislike the gesture of giving out cash and goodies, though, they may the take electoral largesse as a sign not of virtue but of personal defects on behalf of the giver, such as arrogance and disrespect.

3 Since vote buying usually does not involve an act of immediate exchange, but a transaction with deferred delivery, vote buyers must know that compliance is problematic. They must worry about the possibility that compliance may not be forthcoming voluntarily. On “instrumental,” “coercive,” and “normative” motives of voter compliance, see Schaffer.
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Follower = citizens who votes for giver regardless of payment  
Adversary = citizen who would not vote for giver without payment  
Participant = citizen who planned to turn out  
Abstainer = citizen who planned to stay at home

Positive VB = effective positive vote buying (voter votes for the giver)  
Negative VB = effective abstention buying (voter stays at home)  
Success = positive electoral payoff for giver (in comparison to baseline)  
Failure = electoral cost or zero benefit for giver (in comparison to baseline)
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