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Conceptualizing vote buying



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the concept of vote buying, with a particular focus on its usage in research on clientelism. Vote buying is often poorly defined. Such conceptual ambiguity may distort descriptive findings and threaten the validity of causal claims. Qualitative analysis suggests that researchers often employ the concept of vote buying differently, and regressions from Nigeria and Mexico suggest that using alternative definitions can yield divergent empirical results. This diverse usage also poses the risk of conceptual stretching, because scholars often use vote buying to describe other phenomena. To improve future research, analysts should pay close attention to the conceptualization of vote buying.

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1. Introduction

Use of the term “vote buying” has increased sharply in recent decades. Its mention in published books has quintupled since 1980 (see Fig. 1), and over 10,000 recent academic articles and unpublished manuscripts mention the term.¹ This study investigates the concept of vote buying, with a particular focus on its usage in research on clientelism. We build on influential qualitative work that reveals how conceptual ambiguity can undermine scholarly research (e.g., Sartori, 1970; Collier and Levitsky, 1997; Levitsky, 1998). Although many recent studies continue to advance our understanding of clientelism, they are often imprecise about what constitutes vote buying. This lack of conceptual clarity may distort descriptive findings and threaten the validity of causal claims. Our qualitative analysis suggests that researchers often employ the concept of vote buying differently, and regressions from

Nigeria and Mexico suggest that using alternative definitions can yield divergent empirical results.

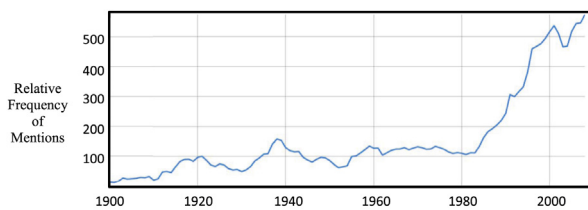
Diverse use of the term “vote buying” also poses the risk of conceptual stretching (Sartori, 1970). Scholars employ the term to describe various political phenomena, such as paying cash to voters on Election Day (Lehoucq, 2007), inducing legislators to support NAFTA (Evans, 2004), increasing pensions for all elderly citizens (Thames, 2001), and paving roads in co-ethnic districts (Burgess et al., 2012). We develop a typology of four distinct ways in which vote buying is used in the scholarly literature, and argue that two of these categories involve conceptual stretching. Studies should clarify how they use vote buying in order to reduce conceptual ambiguity, as well as to improve descriptive and causal inference. They should also pay close attention to potential heterogeneity, as predictions and findings do not necessarily apply across categories of vote buying.

The present article aims to alleviate conceptual ambiguity about vote buying, with a particular focus on how the concept is used in the field of clientelism. To this end, we: (1) identify key differences in how recent studies define clientelist vote buying; (2) examine how these different definitions can affect empirical results; (3) develop a typology of the broader usage of vote buying in political

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¹ The caption of Fig. 1 describes the data about the growth in usage of the term “vote buying.” The number of scholarly works using the term is from Google Scholar (March 2014).



Note: Relative frequency of mentions based on data from Google N-grams, and represents the number of times the phrase "vote buying" was printed in scanned books in each given year, per 10 billion two-word phrases ("bigrams") printed in the respective year. For example, in books published in 2000, the phrase "vote buying" represented approximately 500 per 10 billion bigrams. Data are from 5.2 million scanned books. Annual fluctuations are smoothed using a three-year moving average (default option).

Fig. 1. Relative frequency of "vote buying" mentions in books.

science; (4) discuss the risk of conceptual stretching and potential heterogeneity; and (5) emphasize the need to differentiate clientelist vote buying from other forms of clientelism.

2. Clientelist vote buying: unpacking the concept

Many studies employ the concept of vote buying when discussing clientelist linkages between elites and citizens. During campaigns in many countries, clientelist parties (or political machines) deliver material inducements to individual or small groups of citizens in exchange for political support. As *Kitschelt and Wilkinson (2007)* emphasize, a defining characteristic of clientelistic exchanges is that "the politician's delivery of a benefit is *contingent upon* the actions of specific members of the electorate" (10, italics in original). Studies of clientelism that use the term "vote buying" often underscore that the contingency of benefits requires parties to overcome the threat of opportunistic defection by voters (e.g., *Schaffer and Schedler, 2007: 20; Vicente and Wantchekon, 2009: 301*).² In order to ensure that recipients actually comply with vote-buying agreements, analysts frequently contend that machines engage in monitoring and enforcement once they distribute selective benefits.

An example of a study that focuses on clientelist vote buying is *Stokes (2005)*. Stokes argues that during elections in Argentina, the Peronist party distributes rewards to weakly opposed voters in exchange for switching their vote choices. She closely examines mechanisms that facilitate these contingent exchanges. Stokes argues that the Peronist party uses its "deep insertion in voters' social networks" to violate the secret ballot, and is therefore able to enforce compliance when buying citizens' votes (315). Similarly, *Lehoucq's (2007)* study of clientelist vote buying in nine countries highlights the importance of enforcing contingent exchanges. Lehoucq argues that "due to the principal-agent problems inherent in vote buying," parties will only engage in vote buying if they can monitor how citizens vote in order to "ensure that bargains are kept" (42). Numerous

additional examples of studies examining clientelist vote buying are discussed below.

Before investigating how other studies define clientelist vote buying, we first emphasize two key points of this paper: (1) scholars should make conscious decisions about what attributes to include and exclude in their own definitions of clientelist vote buying, and (2) they should provide clear and explicit definitions. At the outset, we follow this guidance by providing our own systematized concept³:

Clientelist vote buying is the distribution of rewards to individuals or small groups during elections in contingent exchange for vote choices. Rewards are defined as cash, goods (including food and drink), and services. Post-election benefits, employment, public programs, and transportation to the polls are not considered rewards.

As explored below, the attributes included in our definition are mentioned in many – but by no means all – existing studies. Future studies on the topic would ideally share a common systematized concept of clientelist vote buying. If scholars do not adopt a mutually agreed-upon systematized concept, they should at least be explicit about how they define vote buying and discuss potential implications.

Unfortunately, conceptual ambiguity is common in the study of clientelist vote buying. At a most basic level, studies of clientelism often report survey or fieldwork evidence about the relative prevalence of clientelist vote buying, but it is sometimes unclear what specific attributes of benefits are considered. For example, does clientelist vote buying refer strictly to the payment of cash, or does the contingent distribution of goods, services, public program benefits and even employment qualify? With the goal of improving future research on the topic, this section examines the existing literature and highlights key similarities and differences in how researchers define the term.

Fig. 2 provides an overview of the defining attributes employed by 15 studies. Given that vote buying is only considered "clientelist" if recipients agree to deliver votes in exchange for selective benefits, studies are only included if their definition of vote buying involves contingent exchange. Although these studies are not in any rigorous sense a representative sample of research on clientelist vote buying, they include works by all contributors to *Frederic Schaffer's (2007)* edited volume on the topic, as well as other recent and/or frequently cited works. Given that these authors' definitions of clientelist vote buying are sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, the total counts for each row and column should not be taken as a precise summary. Rather, they are intended to provide an overall sense of the number of attributes considered by these particular authors, and the approximate importance of different attributes in the broader discussion of

² It should be emphasized that the present article focuses exclusively on studies that *explicitly* refer to vote buying. Some scholars who study clientelism, but eschew the concept of vote buying, do not have a strong focus on opportunistic defection. Examples include *Auyero (2000)* and *Levitsky (2003)*, who never employ the term "vote buying."

³ A "systematized concept" refers to "the specific formulation of a concept adopted by a particular researcher or group of researchers" (*Adcock and Collier, 2001: 530*).

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