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Poverty and vote buying: Survey-based evidence from Africa

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ABSTRACT

Alongside the spread of democracy in the developing world, vote buying has emerged as an integral part of election campaigns. Yet, we know little about the causes of vote buying in young democracies. In this paper, we analyse the sources of vote buying in sub-Saharan African. Using data from the *Afrobarometer*, we focus on the impact of poverty on vote buying at the individual- and country-level. Results from multilevel regressions show that poor voters are significantly more likely to be targets of vote buying than wealthier voters. This effect increases when elections are highly competitive. Thus, micro-level poverty seems to be an important source of vote buying in Africa and has major implications for the way electoral democracy operates.

1. Introduction

Vote markets used to be widespread during the early stages of democracy in Western Europe, but largely seemed to disappear with economic development (Aidt and Jensen, 2012). In recent decades, new waves of democratization have occurred around the globe, bringing democracy well beyond the borders of the Western world. While these transitions are usually celebrated, they have also lead to renewed debate about the operation of democracy in developing countries. Indeed, alongside transitions to democracy, vote buying – understood as the direct exchange of money or gifts for votes – has made a powerful return to the scene of democratic politics. Reports of vote buying come from most regions of the world, including Asia (Hicken, 2007), Africa (Bratton, 2008; Vicente and Wantchekon, 2009), the Middle East (Blaydes, 2006), and Latin America (Brusco et al., 2004; Stokes, 2005; Gonzales-Ocantos et al., 2012). Thus, vote buying seems to be an integral feature of electoral politics in new democracies across the world. In this paper we contribute to this literature by providing new evidence on how vote markets operate in elections with *de jure* secret ballot, with a particular focus on the relationship between poverty and voters' experience with being offered pre-election rewards in return for votes.

Vote buying is a particular form of political clientelism, i.e. the direct exchange at the individual level of rewards and material goods by political patrons in return for electoral support by voters (Stokes, 2007a; Hicken, 2011; Linos, 2013; Robinson and Verdier, 2013). It is widely accepted that clientelistic politics create economic inefficiencies, reduce the supply of public goods, and bias public policy in favour of elites (Stokes, 2007a; Vicente and Wantchekon, 2009; Robinson and Verdier, 2013). Vote buying also raises questions about the character of democracy. While elections involving vote buying may be 'free' – allowing voters to choose between multiple candidates in elections with universal suffrage – they collide with standards of democratic 'fairness', because the interests of some voters are bought by parties before the election, and may

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therefore be ignored by political representatives after the election (cf. Elklit and Svensson, 1997). According to Stokes (2007b: 96), the undemocratic nature of vote buying arises precisely because ‘ … it keeps vote sellers from having their interests accurately interpreted and made known, and in that it makes them less autonomous than are the recipients of politically motivated public programs’. This tends to weaken or even reverse the accountability link between voters and politicians (Stokes, 2005, 2007b).

Despite its consequences, empirical evidence suggests that vote buying may contribute to increase electoral support (Wantchekon, 2003; Brusco et al., 2004; Blaydes, 2006; Vicente and Wantchekon, 2009). In new democracies in particular, parties often rely on existing patron-client networks and pre-election transfers to mobilize support (Keefer, 2007). However, there are good reasons to suspect that political parties do not distribute their vote buying efforts randomly across the electorate. Theoretical priors suggest that vote buying parties systematically target specific groups in the electorate based on their socio-economic characteristics. Poverty in particular has been emphasized as an important source of vote buying that enables political parties to exploit the material needs of deprived voter groups by trading rewards for votes (Stokes, 2005, 2007a, 2007b; Blaydes, 2006).

In this paper, we contribute to the study of vote buying by empirically examining how poverty affects the likelihood that voters are targeted by vote buyers in a cross-section of African democracies. In doing so, we follow the tradition of the seminal contributions in political science by Scott (1969) and Lemarchand and Legg (1972), who analysed how modernization in new post-colonial states affects – and ultimately undermines – patron-client networks in general and vote markets more specifically. More recently, these issues have also been addressed in formal models in political economy (Stokes, 2005; Aidt and Jensen, 2012; Robinson and Verdier, 2013). In this paper, we focus on sub-Saharan African since democratic politics has only recently become the norm in this region (Van de Walle, 2007). In fact, no less than 40 African countries held their first competitive election in a generation during the early 1990s (Bratton and van de Walle, 1997). However, while multiparty politics and competitive elections have gained prominence, many African countries are yet to complete their democratic transitions, some have reverted back into non-democracy, and still others are plagued by violence and coups, as witnessed most recently in Mali. Moreover – as we document later – vote buying is widespread in many countries that have continued along the path towards democracy.

We make two contributions to the literature. First, while the relationship between vote buying and poverty has been studied in Nigeria (Bratton, 2008), Kenya (Kramon, 2009), and Malawi and Mozambique (Birch, 2011), this paper appears to be the first to provide a comprehensive analysis of how poverty affects individuals' propensity of being targeted by vote buyers across African democracies, and, therefore, how vote markets operate during election campaigns in Africa. Second, to the best of our knowledge, this study constitutes the most extensive cross-country examination of vote buying to date, and the first attempt to study vote buying across a larger set of African countries. Indeed, in a recent review of the literature, Stokes (2007a: 618) emphasizes that there is a general lack of quantitative cross-country analyses of clientelism and vote buying. We start to fill this gap by analyzing micro-level data on vote buying from 18 countries in sub-Saharan African. Specifically, we use data from the third round (2005–2006) of the *Afrobarometer* survey. This provides a unique source of data on vote buying in Africa, since it is so far the only round of the *Afrobarometer* that contains information on voters' experience with vote buying during elections.

The fact that our study draws on data for a broader set of African countries has at least two advantages. First, while the existing literature contains analyses of clientelism and vote buying in a number of African countries, such as Benin (Wantchekon, 2003; Koter, 2013), Ghana (Lindberg, 2003), Sao Tome and Principe (Vicente, 2013), Nigeria (Bratton, 2008), Kenya (Kramon, 2009), Malawi and Mozambique (Birch, 2011) and Senegal (Koter, 2013), using data for a larger set of countries allows for more general inferences. Second, since the data contain micro-level survey information from 18 countries, we are able to take account of the fact that voters vary in their individual characteristics within countries and that cross-country differences may affect average levels of vote buying between countries. In this way, we can both take into account the contextual factors that Birch (2011: 106–107) emphasizes as important and investigate the role of inherently interesting country characteristics such as electoral competitiveness. We do so by both conducting a set of multilevel regressions and by controlling for country fixed effects which capture the influence of country-level variables.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The following section provides a brief overview of voters' experiences with being targets of vote buying in 18 African countries, as well as qualitative accounts of vote buying in Africa. After that, we briefly outline the theory relating poverty to vote buying. Next, we describe the econometric model and data we use in the empirical part. The next section presents empirical results from multilevel regressions, and the final section concludes on the main findings.

2. Vote buying in Africa

The importance of vote markets in Africa is shown in Fig. 1, which plots the percentage of voters who report being targeted by vote buyers during the most recent presidential or parliamentary elections for the 18 countries in our sample.

Fig. 1 shows that vote buying is pervasive in Kenya, Uganda, Benin, Madagascar, Nigeria, and Mali; less widespread in a small group of countries including Senegal, Tanzania and South Africa; and almost absent in Botswana and Lesotho.

Qualitative accounts of elections in 1990s and 2000s corroborate that vote buying is a common electoral phenomenon in Kenya. Foeken and Dietz (2000) note that the