



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

The Social Science Journal

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/soscij



“I can’t do it if you’re watching” monitoring and reciprocity in clientelism

Han Il Chang¹

New York University Abu Dhabi, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 June 2016

Received in revised form 25 January 2017

Accepted 25 January 2017

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Vote buying

Clientelism

Lab experiment

Reciprocity

ABSTRACT

This study experimentally examines whether or not a private transfer can induce a voter to change an electoral choice based on reciprocity. It also explores whether or not the reciprocal effects of providing a private transfer vary according to the scope and quality of monitoring technologies. The study finds that reciprocity operates under both turnout monitoring and vote choice monitoring. It also finds that the effects of reciprocity are greater under turnout monitoring than under vote choice monitoring only when a voter’s candidate preference on policy grounds is incongruent with the candidate providing a private transfer. The quality of monitoring, however, has little impact, as the effects of reciprocity do not vary according to monitoring probabilities. I conclude by discussing the implications of the findings.

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1. Introduction

A considerable body of research has explored the sustainability of clientelism – whereby candidates provide voters with private goods in exchange for electoral support – by focusing on voters’ instrumental incentives (e.g., Keefer & Vlaicu, 2008; Lindbeck & Weibull, 1993; Nichter, 2008; Stokes, 2005). Given that voters are likely to make their electoral choice according to their original preferences when anonymity at the ballot box is guaranteed, candidates must be able to identify defectors and impose external costs on them in order to induce recipients to vote for the candidates. This inference leads scholars to examine how candidates’ monitoring capabilities determine recip-

ient groups. For example, Stokes (2005) predicts that if a candidate is able to monitor voters’ choices at the ballot box – referred to as vote choice monitoring – the candidate provides private goods to her opponents on policy grounds because her supporters will always turnout to vote for her even when she does not offer private goods to the supporters. Meanwhile, Nichter (2008) predicts that if a candidate is able to monitor only turnout – referred to as turnout monitoring – the politician targets her weak supporters who are inclined to abstain due to the cost of voting. This is because her strong supporters will always turnout to vote for her, whereas her opponents will vote for the other candidate once they decide to turnout.

An alternative view suggests that social norms of reciprocity lead individuals to return votes in exchange for candidates’ provision of private goods (e.g., Auyero, 2001; Boissevain, 1966; Chubb, 1982; Lemarchand & Legg, 1972; Scott, 1972). Reciprocity can regulate the daily exchange of non-comparable goods, so voters who have internalized the reciprocity norm would feel obliged to return kindness to a candidate who provides private goods. This sense of obligation further leads voters to vote for the clientelistic

E-mail address: hc665@nyu.edu

¹ I am grateful to Eric Dickson, Rebecca Morton, and Leonard Wantchekon for their support and advice. I also thank Benjamin Pasquale and Shana Warren for their help in conducting the experiment. The experiment was programmed and conducted with the software z-Tree (Fischbacher, 2007). The Center for Experimental Social Science (CESS), New York University, provided its lab as well as funds for the experiment.

candidate at the ballot box, even when the anonymity of vote choices is guaranteed.

To this point, however, the literature in political science on the role of reciprocity in clientelism remains empirically weak, owing to the fact that analyses have typically been descriptive or historical.² While recent studies address this limitation by relying on statistical analyses of survey and experimental data, internal validity issues continue to plague those studies to some degrees. For example, [Finan and Schechter \(2012\)](#) conducted a survey in Paraguay on middlemen who broker clientelistic exchanges between candidates and voters,³ complementing the survey results with experiments that measure villagers' reciprocity. They find that candidates are more likely to provide private goods to reciprocal villagers, but they do not control for the possibility that "candidates actually know which party voters prefer and are simply paying them to turn out to vote" ([Finan & Schechter, 2012, p. 877](#)), which corresponds to the central claim in [Nichter \(2008\)](#). As a result, the empirical results in [Finan and Schechter \(2012\)](#) may have resulted from the operation of turnout buying rather than reciprocal motivation, as they admit.

Another gap in existing studies on clientelism is that they leave unanswered the question of how normative motives for reciprocity interact with instrumental motives associated with monitoring. This may result from the scholarly division between instrumental and normative approaches to clientelism, but an examination of interactions between the two motives can nevertheless improve our understanding of when candidates develop monitoring technology and how candidates exercise monitoring technology.

Based on studies in psychology and economics, I expect that if voters are opponents of a candidate providing private transfers on policy grounds, the effect of reciprocity will be greater under turnout monitoring than under vote choice monitoring, because the superiority of vote choice monitoring in inducing the opponents to vote for the candidate will violate their autonomy (or their perception of a clientelistic candidate's trust), which is crucial for the operation of normative motives for reciprocity ([Deci & Ryan, 1985](#); [Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999](#); [Gagné & Deci, 2005](#)). Compared to the case of opponents, the effect of reciprocity will not vary between the two monitoring technologies if voters are supporters of a clientelistic candidate on policy grounds. This is because the two technologies are equally effective in inducing the supporters to vote for the candidate; as a consequence, the autonomy of the supporters will be equally crowded out between the two technologies. In a similar vein, I also expect that the better the quality of monitoring (i.e., successfully implemented monitoring),

the more likely that it crowds out the normative motives for reciprocity.

Using observational data to test the effects of reciprocity and its interaction with monitoring poses several challenges. First, monitoring electoral behavior is illegal in most countries; there is no objective or reliable measure of monitoring technology to my best knowledge. One may rely on a subjective measure of monitoring by surveying a feeling of being monitored, but it is vulnerable to biased estimation because the feeling is likely to be mediated or moderated by diverse factors. Thus, it is unclear to what extent a subjective measure of monitoring is reliable. Second, participation in a clientelistic exchange is likely to be underreported in the field, given the fact that it is regarded as inappropriate or illegal behavior in most countries. Researchers may rely on secondary questions by evaluating (1) respondents' approval of a situation in which a hypothetical voter engages in clientelistic exchange ([Gonzalez Ocantos, Jonge, & Nickerson, 2014](#)) or (2) respondents' imagined feelings of obligation to vote for a candidate providing private goods ([Lawson & Greene, 2014](#)). Yet, it remains unclear whether or not respondents' reciprocal motivations would prevail behaviorally even when these motivations are in conflict with materialistic interests, a tension at the heart of internal validity concerns regarding reciprocity studies. Third, sensitivity to reciprocity norms is typically unobservable. To circumvent this problem, researchers may measure voters' sensitivity to reciprocity by surveying them or their acquaintances (e.g., middlemen), but this approach is vulnerable to omitted factors that may affect social desirability bias.

In order to overcome those challenges in testing the effects of reciprocity and its interaction with monitoring, I rely on an experiment in which undergraduate students are invited to a laboratory at a private university in the USA.⁴ Anonymous and indirect interactions between subjects via computers are expected to reduce social desirability problems in the lab. In addition, an incentivized experimental set-up exposes subjects to internal conflict between reciprocity motives and materialistic interests, and the ability to control manipulations in the lab reduces concerns about measurement issues and helps verify the causal impact of reciprocity.

Of course, lab evidence does not directly verify the effect of reciprocity on electoral choices in the field, but it may complement existing observational studies (e.g., [Finan & Schechter, 2012](#)) by providing empirical grounds on which to attribute a correlation between reciprocity and vote choices observed in the field to reciprocity rather than to unobservable or omitted factors. Furthermore, the lab experiment arguably constitutes a lower bound for the effects of reciprocity in the field. That is, if psychological motivations for reciprocal votes are behaviorally manifest even among undergraduate students who have been educated not to exchange votes for money, one may expect that

² Needless to say, descriptive and historical approaches have made important contributions to the literature on clientelism by documenting the operation of reciprocity in clientelism and providing sophisticated insight on it.

³ Middlemen mediate between a politician and voters typically by offering the politician information about the voters' preferences, delivering private transfers to the voters, and monitoring their electoral behavior and punishing any negligence in returning electoral support on the politician's behalf.

⁴ Lab experimental studies including this one come at a cost of the merits that one could expect from field studies. Due to a lack of space, I do not address such costs here.

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