

PLUGGED IN BROKERS: A MODEL OF VOTE-BUYING AND ACCESS TO RESOURCES

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Available formal models portray brokers as exploitative agents who buy their clients at the minimum possible price; that is, at voters' reservation values. If this were the case then we should expect that poor voters be indifferent as to which broker they deal with, since they could expect the same minimum price from any broker. On the contrary, evidence of long-term broker-client relationships suggests that clients do care about who their broker is. The formal model in this paper, in correspondence with evidence drawn from 120 interviews with brokers, illuminates the reason why clients care about who their brokers are. Brokers are uncertain about voters' reservation values. Due to this uncertainty, the more resources brokers obtain, the more they transfer to clients to assure their votes. Given this uncertainty over reservation values, voters benefit from brokers' abilities to access more resources. These dynamics account for party machines' frequent electoral hegemony.

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I. Introduction

“He does not give me everything that I want, but he supplied me with school uniforms for my children and he always helps me out with food. If I go to somebody else I might well end with less than that. He has my loyalty.”

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This statement by a poor woman from a slum in the outskirts of Buenos Aires illustrates two important facts about vote-buying. First, clients care about who their brokers are. Second, and relatedly, brokers and clients develop enduring relationships that can even last decades. The formal model in this paper shows the logic that sustains these facts that are often neglected by existing formal models. The model highlights a frequently and surprisingly ignored feature of clientelism: brokers and clients can benefit together from brokers' skills to access increasing resources. These findings allow us not only to better understand stable broker-client relationships, but also to account for party machines' consistent electoral hegemony. Incumbent party machines can supply their brokers with ample resources who in turn assure with these resources the voters' support for the party. Voters support brokers with access to ample resources because they benefit from them. Furthermore, by introducing brokers' uncertainty about reservation values, this model provides a theoretical basis for analyzing the determinants that shape the level of clientelistic transfers from brokers to voters.

Brokers (called *punteros* in Argentina) are neighborhood party agents deeply immersed in poor areas that mediate between their bosses—politicians seeking voters' support—and poor people. They receive goods from their party bosses that they discretionally distribute to voters in order to garner their electoral support. Existing formal models on vote-buying (Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008; Cox and McCubbins 1986; Zarazaga 2015) usually assume complete information; that is, brokers know the exact price at which voters will sell their votes and, accordingly, brokers buy each voter at her reservation value (the lowest level of benefits for which a voter will sell her vote).¹ These models present brokers as having all or most of the bargaining power when buying clients' vote.² In Stokes' seminal work (2005), for example, any broker that decides to buy a voter will offer her exactly the same reward. If this were indeed the case, each poor voter should be indifferent as to which broker they deal with because all brokers would equally hold them down to the same minimum price. However, the evidence show that voters care

¹ From now on, I use masculine for brokers and feminine for voters.

² An exception to this is the interesting work by Nichter and Peress (2013) in which voters can initiate demands on their brokers threatening them to vote for the opposition.

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