

What is Vote Buying?

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It is tempting to view vote buying as a purely economic exchange. A vote is literally “bought” or “sold” depending on whether one adopts the perspective of the candidate or the voter. The act of vote buying by this view is a contract, or perhaps an auction in which the voter sells his or her vote to the highest bidder. This market model finds expression not only in our everyday language (we English speakers do say “vote *buying*” after all) but in more scholarly treatments as well. Perhaps not surprisingly, academics who favor rational choice or other formal approaches derived from microeconomics are particularly inclined to adopt this view.

Nevertheless, more historically textured or ethnographic accounts reveal that what scholars, journalists, reformers, and sometimes participants habitually call “vote buying” carries different meanings in different historical and cultural contexts. English voters in the 1830s, for instance, spoke of selling their votes as a “birthright” (Hoppen 1996, 564). Research on electoral politics in San Isidro, a village in the Bataan province of the Philippines, found that:

Vote buying and the vote selling can be understood no longer as an economic transaction between those who sell their freedom and those who buy them in the hope of regaining their investments when they get into power...From the standpoint of ordinary people... elections are the times when equality and justice are temporarily achieved as their patrons fulfill their financial obligations to support them in times of need (Ibana 1996, 130-31).

A student of Taiwanese politics argues that:

A more helpful characterization of vote buying holds that it is more than a mere economic transaction; instead it is a combination of economic exchange and social ritual. Taiwanese custom requires a guest to greet his or her host with a small gift. A tiau-a-ka [vote broker] usually makes the pitch for a candidate during a visit to the voter's home; candidates also visit potential tiau-a-ka. In both situations, it is easy to see how political hopefuls might have found themselves caught between the demands of ‘clean’ elections and good manners. In most parts of Taiwan, local convention proved more powerful, and the presentation of gifts as part of the campaign visit became the norm. Gift-giving also demonstrates respect for the recipient; to give someone a gift is to give that person face (Rigger 1994, 219).

Such observations raise a number of questions, among them the following which we will try to address in this paper: What does “vote buying” mean, or more precisely what different forms does it take, in different locales around the world?¹ What gets obscured by seeing as tokens in an economic transaction all particularistic material offers made in hopes of influencing the electoral choices of voters?² Do the consequences for democratic accountability differ if the meanings attached to such offers differ? How do local forms and meanings impact the success of efforts to curtail “vote-buying” through various types of reform?

We begin this inquiry by looking first at the meaning of particularistic material offers from the perspective of candidates and their agents. What, specifically, are the different strategies by which gives hope to influence the electoral behavior of recipients? (By recipient, we mean someone who receives an offer. It does not imply that the recipient actually accepts the offer). We will then turn to the meaning of such offers to voters themselves. What, we will ask, are the range of ways in

¹ This paper is not, to put it differently, an attempt to legislate the meaning of vote-buying, to deductively explicate its properties, or to locate its meaning in a larger field of concepts such as clientelism or patronage - all valuable undertakings, and all reasonable ways to proceed when asking the question “what is vote buying?” Rather, the goal here is to inductively identify similarities and differences in things people - be they scholars, journalists, reformers or participants - variously, though not uniformly, call vote buying. It is finally important to note that while this approach draws inspiration from ordinary language analysis, it does not pay close attention to language usage in the way that ordinary language analysis demands.

² We say that offers are “particularistic” to emphasize that they are channeled to selected individuals or groups. Offers of public goods such as clean air, in contrast, can be enjoyed by all. There is a consensus among scholars that the delivery of public goods does not constitute an attempt to “buy” votes in most usual senses of the term. There is, however, disagreement about how excludable the benefit must be, or how exclusive the group must be, for the offering to count as an attempt at “vote buying.” In keeping with our goal of examining a wide range of ways in which “vote buying” is conceptualized, we adopt here the more inclusive understanding of “particularistic,” since it allows us to incorporate the views of scholars who see offers made to whole neighborhoods or villages, or offers of quasi-public goods like wells and sewers, as instances of “vote buying.”

which recipients perceive offers? In the final sections of the paper we turn to some causes and consequences of particular offer strategies and voter meanings.

From the perspective of candidates and their agents

In offering money, goods, or services selectively there are, broadly speaking, three ways in which givers might hope to get recipients to vote, or not vote, for a particular candidate. First, givers might hope to produce *instrumental* compliance. If successful, recipients change, or do not change, their electoral behavior in exchange for tangible rewards. (We include “do not change” to acknowledge that sometimes offers are made to forestall voters from changing their minds). Second, givers may hope to generate *normative* compliance. If successful, recipients change, or do not change, their electoral behavior because the offer convinces them of the goodness or worthiness of the candidate, or because they somehow feel normatively obligated. Third, givers may hope to generate *coercive* compliance by bullying recipients into changing, or not changing, their electoral behavior. If successful, recipients fear retribution if they decline the offer, and if they do not vote as directed after offer has been accepted.

To generate or reinforce these forms of compliance (alone or in combination), there are a number of strategies available to givers. For one, givers might *monitor how individuals vote* as either a condition for post-voting payment, or as a prelude to post-voting retribution if the recipient does not do as instructed. Sometimes election officials can be counted on to observe how voters fill out their ballots, as they commonly did in early 20th century Adams County, Ohio (Gish 1961, 63). Even when direct observation is not possible, there are a number of ways to monitor how individual ballots are cast. Where voters write in names on the ballot, they might be given carbon paper to record how

they voted, as in the Philippines. Or they might be instructed to fold the ballot in a distinctive way, or to put a pinhole in one corner of the ballot, as happens in Corsica.³ Another way is to give a voter a fake or stolen filled-in ballot before entering the polling station. The voter casts the filled-in ballot, and gives the blank official ballot he or she received in the polling station to another voter waiting outside. This voter then fills out the official ballot to the buyer's satisfaction, goes into the polling place, and repeats the process. The practice, called “telegraphing” in Cambodia, and “*lanzadera*” (Spanish for “shuttle”) in the Philippines, was also common in 19th century Australia and United States where it was known as the “Tasmanian dodge” (Schaffer 2002b). In locales where there are dense social networks, as in some urban areas of Argentina, it is also often possible for givers to pick up “clues” about those who accepted their offers (Brusco, Nazareno, and Stokes 2002, 8).

To produce instrumental or coercive compliance, givers can also *monitor the aggregate turnout* of villages or neighborhoods. This strategy is especially relevant in places where givers offer material incentives to entire villages or neighborhoods, as happened in parts of England after the introduction of the secret ballot in 1872, and which takes place today in Taiwan, Thailand and Senegal, among other places (Seymour 1915, 438; Rigger 1994, 13; Callahan and McCargo 1996, 383, Salem 1992). This collective monitoring strategy is especially effective when votes are counted at the precinct level, as in India, Senegal, and Thailand prior to the 1997 reforms (Schaffer 2002b, 78-79; Schaffer 1998, 136; Callahan 2002, 7).

Another strategy to generate instrumental compliance is to pay voters to abstain from voting altogether, thereby *preventing* them from casting ballots for one’s opponent, a strategy often called “negative vote buying.” This strategy proliferated in late 19th century Maryland and rural New York

³ Author’s interview with the President of the *Tribunal Administratif de Bastia*, January 1999.

(Argersinger 1987, 234; Cox and Kousser 1981). It has also been used in Guyana, where agents campaigning for the ruling party in the 1997 election bought voter identification cards of the opposition's supporters. In the Philippines, party workers hire buses to take voters on out-of-town excursions on election day, or pay registered voters to disqualify themselves from voting by dipping their index fingers in indelible ink, as voters are required to do after casting their ballots (Schaffer 2002b). Similar practices have been reported in Mexico (Cornelius 2002, 7) and Venezuela (Kornblith 2002).

Still another strategy to promote instrumental compliance is to provide rewards that are *dispensed conditionally* upon the right candidate winning. In early 20th century France, givers sometimes distributed half a banknote prior to the election, and provided the other half only if their candidate won (Knaub 1970, 33). The same strategy has been carried out in other places with pairs of shoes. In a more sophisticated variant, KMT officials in the 2000 Taiwan election used a gambling scheme to provide monetary incentives for voters to turn out in favor of the party's presidential candidate. As one journalist explained:

Organizers for the ruling National Party and local gangsters are offering heavily loaded odds to lure votes to Lien Chan, the party's candidate. Although opinion polls indicate that support is evenly divided in the three-way race, they are promising to pay the equivalent of Pounds 10 for every Pounds 1 bet on a win for Mr. Lien. The odds being offered for the other two candidates are just 80p for every Pounds 1 bet.⁴

A similar tactic is used in Thailand, where operatives sell election lottery tickets (Callahan and McCargo 1996, 387).

To generate normative compliance, givers may try to instill in recipients a belief that the candidate is *good* or *worthy*. This is often accomplished through giving gifts or dispensing favors

⁴ "Betting Alters the Odds in Close Taiwan Election," Times of London March 15, 2000.

which demonstrate the benevolence, kindness, responsiveness, or respect of the candidate. Locales where election-related gift giving or favor rendering is common include Benin, Taiwan, Japan, northern Portugal, and the slums of both Buenos Aires and Metro Manila.⁵ A belief in the goodness or worthiness of the candidate might also be created by paying the recipient wages for rendering some nominal service for the candidate (pollwatching, distributing ballots, hanging posters, delivering messages, playing music), the goal of which is to generate gratitude towards the candidate or cognitive dissonance were the recipient to vote for another candidate. As one Filipino observer noted:

Once a candidate has sworn in a registered voter as a partisan poll watcher, he or she can expect that the latter will vote for him or her. Our Filipino trait of *utang na loob* [debt of gratitude] is evident on this case. Once a person has granted us something, a favor, we would do everything to pay that favor back to him or her, sometimes even at the expense of ourselves. We tend to view persons who did us some good things as benefactors, and we view ourselves as beneficiaries who can please them by doing the same for them (Bava 1998).

This practice, sometimes called “indirect vote buying” in the Philippines, was also known in 19th century England and early 20th century France, and is common today in the squatter settlements of Quito, Ecuador (Seymour 1915, 181; Knaub 1970, 33; Burgwal 1995, 116).

Another strategy, one which may produce or reinforce any of the three modes of compliance, is to instill in the recipient a sense of *personal obligation* to vote for the candidate. One way a candidate can produce such feelings is to recruit givers who are respected members of their communities, or other intermediaries to whom recipients feel bonds of personal accountability. This tactic is commonly employed in Thailand. In the 1992 election, for instance, campaign workers for

⁵ See Banégas 1998; Bosco 1994, 39-41; Rigger 1994, 219; Cox and Thies 2000, 39; Silva 1994, 39; Auyero 2000, and Schaffer 2002a.

one candidate sought in each village “to recruit the person best placed to deliver support, generally someone with significant social status in the village. Other qualifications include being respectable, well-known, a local leader (either official or unofficial), the candidate’s relative or close friend, or some other characteristics that would make people honour their vote promises” (Callahan 2000, 25). Vote brokers in Taiwan operate in similar fashion (Wang 2001, 24-27).

There are a few points to note regarding these various strategies. To begin, other strategies, and variants of strategies, exist as well. This list is representative, not exhaustive. It is also important to reiterate that different strategies, if successful, are likely to generate different modes of compliance. Monitoring may help bring about instrumental or coercive compliance. Fostering a belief in the goodness of the candidate may produce normative compliance; conditionality and prevention may promote instrumental compliance; while making recipients feel bonds of obligation may occasion or reinforce any of the three modes of compliance.

Also important to note is that monitoring individual votes is but one strategy available to candidates and their operatives to increase the likelihood that voters will cast their ballots in the desired way. Some scholars argue that the effective use of particularistic material offers requires an ability to observe how individual recipients vote (Rusk 1974, 1041-1042; Gerber 1994, 136; Heckelman 1995; Lehoucq 2002, 13). This assessment is in need of serious qualification. Even where an individual is able to vote secretly, givers may still have a smorgasbord of options available to them, depending on the cultural, social, and institutional circumstances they find themselves in (more on this below). Only under certain circumstances will the disruption of individual vote monitoring lead to the abandonment of particularistic offering strategies.

A final point to mention is that such strategies - whatever mix is chosen - may or may not, in the final analysis, be effective. Sometimes an offer will have no impact at all on the voting behavior of the recipient. Sometimes the offer may dissuade the voter from casting a ballot for the candidate on whose behalf the offer was made. The offer (which may or may not have been accepted) may send a signal to voter that the candidate is morally wrong, politically dumb, or the like. Or perhaps the offer - through successful strategies of instrumental, normative, or coercive compliance - might persuade the recipient (who presumably accepted the offer) to vote for the candidate. Little quantitative research has been done on the amount of "leakage" or "slippage" that actually occurs, in part because of the difficulty in assessing the quality of any data collected. Still, one survey of Mexican voters found that only 37% of voters who "received a gift" from the PRI, and only the PRI, voted for the PRI's presidential candidate in the 2000 elections (Cornelius 2002, table 4). Survey data from the Philippines similarly show that among the poor, accepting material offers influenced decisively the vote of only about 30% of the people who accepted them in the 2001 elections (Schaffer 2002a). Using a finer-tuned method, though one that is difficult to replicate, Wang (2002, 37,54) compared the number of votes garnered by KMT candidates in one Taiwanese town to the number of voters who received money from KMT vote brokers (which he was able to determine by gaining access to the actual lists of names used by the vote brokers themselves). He found that at least 45% of the people who received money did not vote for KMT candidates in the 1993 elections.

From the perspective of voters

An offer may or may not carry the same meaning for giver and recipient. Money intended by an operative as binding payment may be understood by the voter as non-binding gift. This potential disjuncture makes it important to explore the range of meanings an offer may hold, not only to givers, but to recipients as well.

A catalogue of such meanings would have to include the following, which we have already discussed:

* *Payment*. A quid pro quo, or exchange of goods for votes, or business transaction; but one which the recipient may or may not choose to honor.

* *Gift or Favor*. Something that comes without strings, that does not generate an explicit obligation to reciprocate at the ballot box. It may or may not produce feelings of gratitude or obligation.

* *Wage*. Something earned for services rendered. It may or may not produce feelings of gratitude or obligation to the candidate.

Whether in the form of payment, gift, or wage, material offers can also carry a range of more symbolic or implicit meanings to the recipient, including the following:

* *Threat*. “An offer that can’t be refused.” Declining the offer generates fear of retaliation from candidate or operatives. In Metro Manila, for instance, money offered as a gesture of goodwill comes with implicit pressure to accept it, lest the recipient be branded as someone defiant (Schaffer 2002a).

* *Reparation*. Something given as amends for wrongs done in the past. In Benin, for instance, offers are seen by many voters as opportunities to get back money that politicians

have stolen (Banégas 1998, 78-79). Villagers in the Philippines see offers as “practically their only opportunity to get anything from people in government” (Kerkvliet 1991, 231). Accepting an offer is, in other words, a way to stake a rightful claim to the resources of those higher up. It is a momentary opportunity for the ordinary citizen to transform unequal, sometimes coercive, relationships into something more equal and just. It is an arrangement that allows the voter not only to gain materially, but also achieve a measure of dignity (Ibana 1996, 130-31).

* *Evidence of winnability*: A signal that the candidate is confident that he or she will win. In Nigeria “citizens who wish to support a winner will view the payment as evidence that the candidate is very powerful or has the support of powerful forces” (van de Walle 2002, 16). Such information is of great value to voters insofar as backing a loser might result in a loss of access to state resources.

* *Affront*: Something that causes offense, because to accept the offer would damage one’s self-respect. Thus many rural poor voters in Mexico “perceive the sale of political rights as an attack on personal dignity” (Schedler 2002, 26). Some poor urban Filipinos similarly see accepting payment as “surrendering one’s right to vote” or “selling one’s principles” (Schaffer 2002a).

To recipients, then, the act of accepting an offer may hold a variety of meanings. It might constitute making a contract, securing amends, receiving a gift, accepting an auction bid, recognizing power, compromising one’s principles, acknowledging goodwill, or more. In accepting or rejecting offers, or in changing or not changing their electoral behavior, recipients may be acting, among other things, out of fear, duty, indignity, gratitude, righteousness, or calculated self-interest.

There are two additional points worth making. First, the meaning(s) recipients attach to an offer most probably have an impact on the how successfully a giver can influence their electoral behavior. All other things being equal, we might conjecture, a voter who views an offer as an expression of caring or benevolence will be more likely to vote for the designated candidate than a voter who views the same offer as amends for previous wrongs, or a voter who sees the offer as an attack on her dignity.

Second, there can be significant diversity in how members who live or work in a community view the same actions of a giver. Auyero shows just how differently two people in a Buenos Aires slum interpret the very same deed of a councilwoman named Matilde:

“On our block,” Susy told me, “Matilde donated the pipes to construct the sewer. Yet she never told us ‘I give you this, but you should do this, go there, or vote for me.’ The only thing she told us was that she would like to come and see when we have finished constructing the sewage system.” Susy lives across the street from the local school. Esther, the school’s director, has another interpretation of the same sewage installation. She agrees that the pipes were supplied by councilwoman Matilde, but she stresses the exchange aspect of the operation by reproducing a phrase that - Esther believes - Matilde presumably told the beneficiaries of “her pipelines”: “Whenever I send the bus to the corner of your house in order to be loaded (for a rally) you know what to do.” For the school director, *Matilde exchanges pipelines for attendance at rallies*. For Susy, the direct beneficiary of the sewage installation, *the pipelines are one demonstration - among many others - of how helpful Matilde is* (1999, 305-306).

Thus we see significant variation, not only across different locales as we might expect, but also within a single community. This conclusion finds support in research done in the Philippines (Schaffer 2002a).

Institutional, socioeconomic, and organizational contexts

Though diverse, the choice of offer strategies chosen by candidates and their agents, and the meanings attached to offers by voters are surely not totally random. Both are shaped by institutional, socioeconomic, and organizational contexts, though in unequal degrees. While socioeconomic factors influence both candidate strategies and voter meanings, institutional and organizational factors seem more determinant of strategies than meanings. Here we offer only a few illustrative examples.⁶

Socioeconomic factors

Whether voters view material offers warmly or with approbation may, in certain locales, vary somewhat by class. Members of new middle classes around the world have often been the most vigorous attackers of particularistic material benefits flowing to the lower classes (Kitschelt 2000, 857). “Anti vote buying” campaigns in both Thailand and the Philippines, for example, have been carried out largely by middle class reformers who seek to “educate” the poor (Schaffer 2002a). Or return for a moment to the two views of Matilde and her sewer pipes. It may not be coincidental that the school director resides outside the slum, and belongs to higher class than Susy, who lives in the slum, across the street from the school (Auyero 1999, 306).

Socioeconomic factors may also influence the offer strategies chosen by candidates. Where strong traditions of gifting or affective clientelism exist outside the electoral arena, candidates may find giving gifts to be a more appropriate and effective strategy than outright payment. In Taiwan,

⁶ We leave aside the topic of how socioeconomic, institutional, and organizational factors combine to shape a party’s, candidate’s or agent’s decision to make material offers in the first place. There are, after all, other strategies available to influence a voter’s electoral choices. For various perspectives on this issue see Scott 1972, Shefter 1977, Rochon 1981, Gay 1994, Rigger 1994, Kitschelt 2000, Hicken 2002, and Lehoucq 2002.

for instance, gift giving is generally expected of house guests. Candidates or brokers going door-to-door feel pressured to meet this expectation. Gift giving for them is thus a matter of showing “good manners” (Rigger 1994, 219).

Institutional factors

The degree to which vote secrecy is respected, among others things, will limit a candidate’s ability to use an individual monitoring strategy. Thus when the secret ballot was introduced in New York, canvassers in rural parts of the state were forced to switch from a strategy of individual monitoring to one of prevention (Cox and Kousser 1981). This switch was facilitated by the fact that canvassers in rural areas were community residents themselves and thus knew pretty well how individual voters intended to vote. Canvassers could thus identify those voters they needed to keep away from the polls (Baker, 1984: 179, 190 n. 55). When vote secrecy was established in Senegal for the 1993 elections, candidates had to switch to monitoring aggregate turnout, a tactic made more effective by the social pressure for conformity generated by tight-knit social networks. Aggregate monitoring was also facilitated by the fact that votes are counted in each polling station, and for that election the number of polling stations in the county was increased from 3,537 to 8,220 (Schaffer 1998, 135-136).

In these two cases, the choice of alternative strategies depended on a number of sociological (stability of community, density of social networks), organizational (ability to recruit local canvassers) and institutional (where ballot counting takes place, number of polling stations) factors. Or, to put it another way, a change in institutions will not singularly determine what new strategies candidates and their operatives will adopt. The advent of the secret ballot in New York led canvassers to adopt a strategy of prevention. The advent of the secret ballot in England led agents

in certain boroughs to distribute money more widely (while also reducing dramatically the amount of money they were willing to give to each recipient) in hopes that some percentage of voters would feel obligated to vote for the candidate on whose behalf the money was given (Seymour 1915, 434-435). Agents in England were unable to adopt a strategy of prevention because, with the quadrupling of the size of the electorate just a few years earlier, they did not know enough about the electoral preferences of the newly enfranchised voters to identify which of them needed to be kept at home (O’Leary 1962, 2; Helmore 1967, 7).

Organizational Factors

Factors relating to the organization of a party or a candidate’s campaign also matter, as the example of rural New York suggests. That political parties were able to find and recruit canvassers in rural communities helped make a strategy of prevention feasible. Similarly, the ability of the KMT in Taiwan to recruit large numbers of local vote brokers in the early 1990s made a strategy of personal obligation possible. In the town under study by Wang (2002, 26), each broker was assigned to an average of only seven households.

These examples, as we said, are only illustrative. Much work needs to be done to link systematically specific strategy mixes and clusters of voter meaning to particular sets of socioeconomic, institutional, and organizational arrangements.

Accountability

It is sometimes argued that voters who change their electoral behavior as a result of accepting material offers are “exchanging” their political rights for material gains (Fox 1994, 153). That is, they relinquish any claim or power to hold accountable those they elect to office. This argument is

no doubt wrong to the extent that, as Kitschelt argues, “politicians who refuse to be responsive to their constituents’ demands for selective incentives will be held accountable by them and no longer receive votes and material contributions” (2000, 852). The prospect of receiving material offers, in other words, generates expectations among potential recipients, expectations which impose a form of accountability on politicians.

Nevertheless, it is also true that the types of offer strategies adopted by candidates and the types of meanings attached by recipients to these offers will have differential implications for democratic accountability. There is surely a difference between a candidate who literally buys votes and a candidate who offers favors as a demonstration of benevolence, or between offers that are seen as reparations and offers that are seen as evidence of winnability. In the former cases, accountability may extend no further than the demand for the intermittent electoral payoff. In the latter cases, the politician may be subject to ongoing demands for help. In the slums of Buenos Aires, where material offers often take the form of favor doing, politicians come to be seen by residents as an essential part of their everyday “problem-solving network.” Local politicians thus face a daily stream of requests for food, medicine, clothing, emergency home repairs, and more (Auyero 1999).

Still, it may be true that even this more durable form of accountability does not extend to policy formation. “Once constituencies have been bought off with selective incentives,” in the words of Kitschelt, “politicians are free to pursue policy programs as they see fit” (2000, 852). Yet even this point may draw a too rigid and overgeneralized distinction between public “policy programs” and private “selective incentives.” There is, after all, a large fuzzy area of what Desposato (2002, 11) calls “local public goods” - goods that are “nonexclusive, but still have a decidedly local impact.” Such local public goods include “block parties, concerts, preferential snow plowing, road

construction, new schools, a free circus,” and “other public works projects.” When the residents of one urban neighborhood in Senegal banded together to request a new well (Salem 1992), were they making a private demand or a public one? It’s hard to say. In this case, public demands overlap with private ones. Thus forms of accountability that grow out of ongoing demands for “private” benefits may have a “public” dimension. The larger point is that different offer practices have different implications for accountability.

Reform

Election officials, legislators, and civil society activists in a number of countries have tried to curtail or eliminate the practice of “vote buying.” The effectiveness of such efforts has depended, in part, on how well they have anticipated the menu of offer strategies available to candidates, and whether they have taken into account particular meanings attached to offers by recipients. Here we give only a few cautionary examples of reforms that have met with only patchy success, if that.

Reforms intended to change the behavior of candidates and agents

There are a number of ways lawmakers and election officials have tried to reform the behavior of givers. Among the more common are strengthened vote secrecy, centralized vote counting, tightened campaign finance rules, reducing the number of allowed campaign workers, and switching from multi-member to single member districts. But those who put their hopes in such reforms have not always anticipated that givers can, to a certain extent, adjust their strategies as the rules of the game change. As we have seen, the advent of the secret ballot in Senegal, rural New York, and parts of England led to such adjustments. Indeed it led to different kinds of adjustments in different local institutional, socioeconomic, and organizational environments.

The 1997 constitution of Thailand provides an example of a more comprehensive set of reforms designed to stem the practice of “vote buying.” Among its provisions are strict controls on campaign finances, the centralization of vote counting at the district level, the introduction of a party list system to encourage voters to choose their members of parliament based on party platforms rather than personalistic ties, barring constituency members of parliament from becoming ministers (thus denying them access to ministerial funds), a switch from multi-member to single member constituencies that was intended to dry up the pool of second and third “surplus votes” available for “purchase,” the introduction of compulsory voting to expand the electorate and thus make vote buying prohibitively expensive, and the creation of a new independent body to administer elections and disqualify candidates who break the law (Callahan 2002, Hicken 2002, Surin 2002).

Yet this panoply of reforms met with only limited success. In the judgment of one observer, “vote buying by no means disappeared and candidates and parties exhibited impressive flexibility by adapting their vote buying to the new electoral environment” (Hicken 2002, 19). To escape scrutiny and punishment, some agents were careful to approach only relatives and close friends. They also began using more intensively a strategy already present in the early 1990s, that of “indirect vote buying”- hiring lots of people to work as canvassers in hopes of winning their allegiance. Also with a goal of winning allegiance, agents began to give “salaries” to voters who joined their political parties (Callahan 2002, 11-12; Croissant and Dosch nd, 21). Reflecting on the overall sense of these post-reform adjustments, two scholars conclude that “vote buying was still rampant even though the new laws forced it to become more discreet” (Croissant and Dosch nd, 20).

Reforms intended to change the behavior of voters

The reform of voters has often taken the form of voter education. These efforts have failed when they have not taken into account how recipients understand offers and the people who make them. Reformers in Taiwan produced a sticker prior to the 1989 election that carried the message “My family doesn’t sell votes,” and asked voters to display it on their houses. But the sticker provoked unanticipated reactions. As Rigger tells it:

Not everyone responded to the sticker the way the activists intended. In 1991 I interviewed an opposition party activist in a southern Taiwanese village who said she wouldn’t dream of using the sticker, which she found embarrassingly self-righteous. She gave me the sticker as an example of how out of touch activists in Taipei were with conditions in the countryside (2002, 5).

Similarly, voter education campaigns in Thailand have produced a host of unintended consequences. During the 1995 election public service ads were run on television inspired the very behaviors it was trying to discourage - in schoolchildren no less. Callahan, commenting on an item in the local press, explains:

To promote the elections, mock polls were organized in many schools. But in one primary school there were unexpected results: “one team bribed the others with candy, while another straightforwardly stuffed papers with their candidate numbers into the hands of younger pupils.” This was not seen as a natural thing for Thais to do. Rather, as the assistant principal told the press, it was the product of modern media culture: “They did not know they were doing anything wrong. They saw anti-vote-buying advertisements on TV but did not get the whole message. They thought bribery might help them win, so here we got plenty of candy today” (2000, 133).

Children were not the only ones to draw the “wrong” lessons from voter education campaigns. A network of Thai election monitoring organizations hosted a series of educational forums in Chiang Mai province in 1999, with funding provided by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. A primary goal of the forums was to teach voters not to sell their votes. After interviewing

some 1700 attendees, evaluators found that, perversely, “there was a slight increase after the forum in the number of participants who believed that it was wrong to sell their votes and not vote for the buyer” (Thornton 2000, 29). In other words, the forums (like the anti vote buying ads to which the school children were exposed) reinforced or produced the very beliefs they were designed to dispel. A similar story of unintended consequences can be told about the Philippines (Schaffer 2002a).

In the Philippines, as in Taiwan and Thailand, voter education is largely an undertaking of middle class activists, and as we have already discussed, there is often a divide in how people of different classes regard various offer practices. When such differential understandings get enacted in voter education campaigns, unintended results may ensue.

Conclusion

Political scientists often treat vote-buying as a single type of political behavior. But there are, as we have seen, a variety of ways in which particularistic material offers designed to influence vote choices are made, received, and responded to. Exploring some real world variations has given us a somewhat better fix on the range of phenomena conventionally - though we would argue inaccurately - covered by the category of “vote buying.” We put the stress on “inaccurately” because the further away we move from a market transaction, a “normal” act of buying, the less plausible (or the less exact) is it to use the commercial analogy, and to speak of the “purchase” of votes, vote “trading,” a “market” for votes, and the like. Yet we see, as an empirical matter, that there is significant diversity both across and within locales in the meanings attached to material offers. The market transaction may provide an “idealized” model to the casual observer of what transpires between giver and recipient, but in the real world it may not be the modal practice at all. It is thus important to

acknowledge and investigate the underlying diversity since different practices of offering can have very different consequences on, among other things, voting behavior, the operation of democratic accountability, and the effectiveness of reform efforts.

There are, finally, questions of terminology to which we must turn. If the use of “vote buying” to describe a range of different practices is obscuring, what linguistic options would generate more light? Should we scholars use “vote buying” to refer only to situations in which candidates and agents literally make payments for votes? Or should calling something a case of “vote buying” require (instead? in addition?) that voters themselves see offers as payments? What do we call other offer practices? Is there a general class to which all of these practices belong? If so, what do we call it? (“Ways of making and responding to particularistic material offers” is certainly a mouthful!) Here we only pose the questions, and leave possible answers for another day.

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