

SHORT REPORT

Citizen Approval of Monetary- vs Goods-For-Votes Exchanges

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Abstract

Does citizen approval of vote buying depend on the type of benefit being offered? I answer this question using data from a survey experiment conducted on a nationally representative sample of Nicaraguans in 2017. Nicaraguans report significantly lower approval of money-for-votes exchanges compared to goods-for-votes exchanges. Furthermore, reported rates of vote buying are lower in the money condition (4.8%) than in the goods-for-votes condition (7.8%), even though the posttreatment question assessing vote buying experience was identical across conditions. This study echoes other work suggesting the need for care in designing questions about vote buying, as slight changes in question wording that prime participants to think about goods versus monetary exchanges can affect both citizen approval of the behavior and the reported prevalence of vote buying.

Keywords: Vote buying; Clientelism; Latin America; Nicaragua

Public support for the exchange of excludable benefits for votes (vote buying) varies across countries and individuals (Gonzalez Ocantos et al. 2014; Weitz-Shapiro 2014). Parties offering goods-for-votes attract electoral support with a variety of benefits, ranging from monetary compensation¹ to goods, services, and employment.² While some view monetary handouts as a strong signal of politicians' competence (Kramon 2016), others view the exchange of goods for votes as integral to political representation (Auerbach and Thachil 2018; Oliveros 2016). Does citizen approval of vote buying depend on the type of benefit being offered? This short

I thank Liz Zechmeister, Geoff Sheagley, and Ryan Powers for feedback on earlier versions of this manuscript and Mariana Rodriguez and the team at LAPOP for fieldwork support. The data, code, and additional materials required to replicate all analyses in this article are available in the *Journal of Experimental Political Science Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network*, at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/XZOZGK>. This study was funded by the Latin American Public Opinion Project and its major supporters (the United States Agency for International Development and Vanderbilt University). The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

¹Across contexts, votes may be cheap (e.g., US\$0.60 in Manila in 2002) or expensive (e.g., US\$10,000 in Kuwait in 1996, Schaffer 2007).

²The value of goods exchanged in goods-for-votes varies from relatively cheap (e.g., soap, shoes, boxes of food) to relatively expensive (e.g., vasectomies, cocaine; Schaffer 2007; Szwarcberg 2015).

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report presents an answer to this question, based on a survey experiment conducted on a nationally representative sample of Nicaraguans in 2017.^{3,4}

Survey-based measures of vote buying often ask about the exchange of goods, favors, and money for votes. This can affect study results: findings about how vote buying offers are targeted vary according to how vote buying is defined (Nichter 2014). The type of good exchanged may also affect public approval of vote buying. If differences in citizen approval of goods-for-votes exchanges are affected by the type of good, this may help explain variation in vote buying tactics and frequency, as well as individual reporting of vote buying on surveys. Understanding how the type of good being exchanged affects citizen approval of vote buying thus matters for scholarly understanding of the real-world phenomenon.

For the survey experiment analyzed here, respondents to a nationally representative survey of Nicaraguans were randomly assigned to either a “goods and favors”⁵ ($N = 795$) or “money” condition ($N = 797$).⁶ Respondents in both groups received two questions asking them about their approval of (1) parties engaging in vote buying practices and (2) individuals who accept votes-for-benefits offers. The English question wording follows; only the type of good being offered (in brackets below) varied across conditions.

Approval of vote buying offers: “Sometimes in Nicaragua, candidates or other people from political parties offer [favors, gifts, or other benefits] [money] to individuals so that they support or vote for them. To what extent do you approve of this type of activity?”

Approval of accepting vote buying offers: “And when this happens, sometimes people accept the [favors, gifts, or other benefits] [money]. To what extent do you approve of this type of activity?”

Response options for both questions were (1) strongly approve, (2) approve, (3) does not approve but understands, (4) disapprove, (5) strongly disapprove.⁷ I recode both variables so that higher values indicate stronger approval of vote buying practices and of accepting the proffered benefit and maintain the five-point scale. Figure 1 presents average approval of vote buying by question and across conditions.

³Vote buying is a common electoral tactic used by both major parties in Nicaragua (Close 2016).

⁴The survey ($N = 1,592$) was fielded from August 16 to September 16, using a nationally representative area probability sample design. The study was conducted by LAPOP, which employed face-to-face interviews using computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) by a project-trained enumeration team. For more details, see www.lapopsurveys.com.

⁵“Favors, gifts, or other benefits” are less specific than “money”; however, this language directly mirrors LAPOP’s standard question measuring vote buying incidence. Due to space constraints, respondents were not asked to list the offered favors, gifts, or other benefits; it is possible respondents in both groups thought of monetary exchanges, making observed differences across conditions conservative estimates of true population differences.

⁶Randomization was conducted automatically by the CAPI software, and treatment groups were balanced across standard demographic covariates (see Appendix for balance checks).

⁷Non-response was 6.2% (goods and favors) and 6.8% (money) for approval of vote buying and 5.5% (goods and favors) and 6.6% (money) for approval of accepting vote buying offers; differences are not significant across conditions.

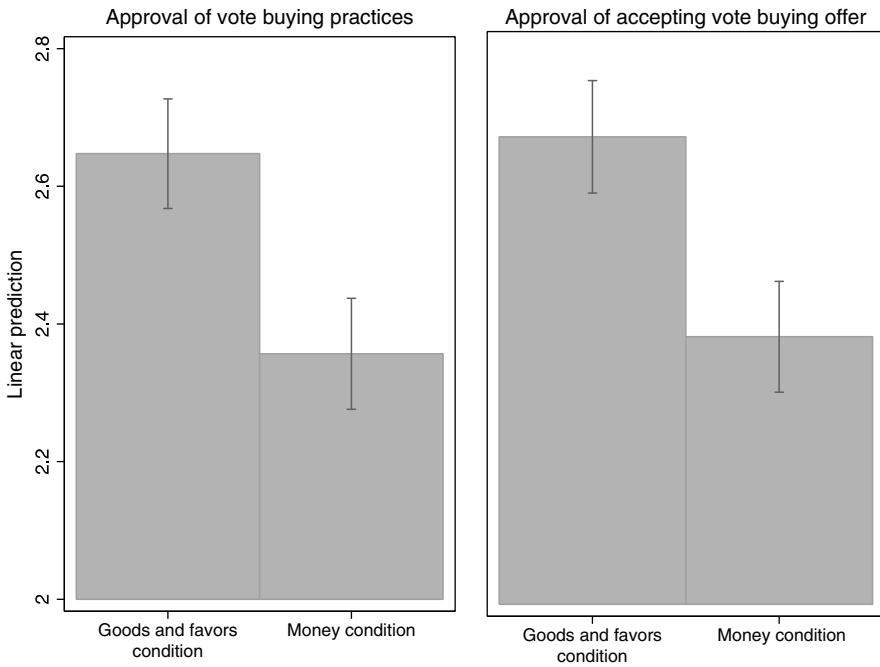


Figure 1
Approval of Vote Buying in Nicaragua.

NOTES: Figure presents approval of vote buying (estimated using OLS with survey-adjusted standard errors) with 95% confidence intervals around estimates in each condition. Models estimated without covariates.

Nicaraguans report significantly lower approval of vote buying practices and of those who accept vote buying offers in the money condition on average. While statistically significant, these effects are substantively moderate: individuals asked about their approval of parties offering goods and favors in exchange for votes give an average response of 2.65 on a five-point scale; approval decreases to 2.36 (0.27 standard deviations) in the money condition. Results are similar for approval of accepting vote buying offers: those in the goods and favors condition give an average response of 2.67, and approval decreases to 2.38 (0.26 standard deviations) in the money condition.⁸

Because questions about vote buying can be prone to social desirability bias, scholars regularly employ sensitive survey techniques like list experiments to elicit more honest responses about citizen engagement in vote-buying exchanges (e.g., Corstange 2012; Gonzalez Ocantos et al. 2014; Kiewiet De Jonge 2015). If citizens view one type of exchange as more or less acceptable, asking about goods- versus money-for-votes exchanges may shape survey participants' willingness to answer survey questions honestly. Indeed, Figure 2 shows that reported rates of vote buying are significantly lower in the money condition (4.8%) than in the goods and favors

⁸An independent samples t-test shows no statistical difference in approval of parties buying votes (2.50 on a five-point scale) versus voters accepting the offer (2.53).

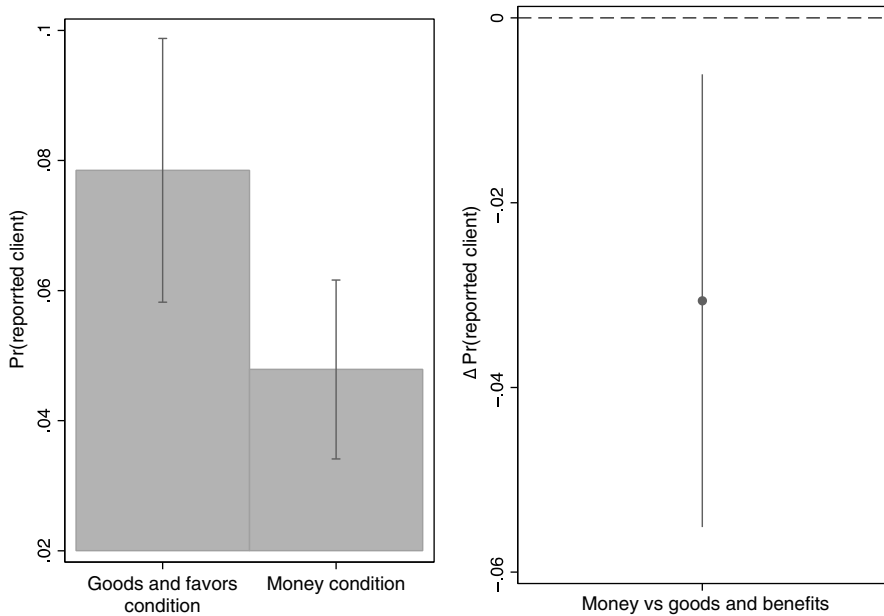


Figure 2

Predicted Probability of Reporting Receiving a Vote Buying Offer by Condition.

NOTES: Panel 1 of the Figure presents predicted incidence of vote buying in recent general election (predicted probabilities estimated using values from a logistic regression with survey-adjusted standard errors) with 95% confidence intervals around estimates in each condition. Panel 2 presents the estimated change in the likelihood of reporting receiving a vote buying offer in the money condition (compared to goods and benefits). Values are estimated without covariates.

condition (7.8%) – even though the posttreatment question assessing vote buying experience was identical across conditions.^{9,10}

This study shows that approval of vote buying varies significantly depending on the type of good referenced in one context where the practice is prevalent, Nicaragua. Future research should assess whether this difference in approval varies consistently across contexts. More concretely, this study echoes other work (e.g., Nichter 2014) suggesting the need for care in designing questions about vote buying. Slight changes in question wording that prime participants to think about goods versus monetary exchanges have the potential to affect the reported prevalence of this behavior.

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/XPS.2020.4>

⁹“And thinking about the last general elections of 2016, did someone offer you something, like a favor, gift, or any other benefit in return for your vote or support?” Difference is significant at $p = 0.01$.

¹⁰This study did not establish a “true” rate of vote buying in the population, so it is not possible to establish whether respondents over- or under-report frequency across conditions. Priming respondents to think of monetary exchanges may depress reported rates due to social desirability or because these exchanges occur less frequently than goods-for-votes exchanges.

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