

Vote Buying and Impression Management: Performing Largesse in Northeast Brazil

Mariana Borges

Northwestern University

MarianaBorges2011@u.northwestern.edu

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Abstract: Scholars have traditionally analyzed vote-buying exchanges through their economic value for both voters and politicians. Politicians are expected to buy votes efficiently, that is, to get the most votes from the resources expended either by targeting voters that are most likely to reciprocate or by ensuring through monitoring mechanisms that voters indeed deliver their vote. In contrast, this article proposes a theory of vote buying as an impression management tool to explain why in some contexts politicians distribute electoral goods indiscriminately. I conducted ethnographic research in Sertão of Bahia and worked as a broker for two different candidates, ultimately finding that these candidates tried to distribute goods to whoever asked, rather than operating on an efficiency model. I argue that, because politicians use vote buying to create impressions on voters, they follow a logic of distribution that complies with how voters expect them to handle vote buying's demands. Given the performative dimension of vote buying, to give voters the right impression, politicians need not only to have resources but also to master the etiquette around how goods should be given. I compare the vote-buying performance of one programmatic politician and one clientelistic politician to illustrate how their different abilities to perform according to voters' expectations impacted the impression that they gave to voters.

Introduction

“If someone comes to you and asks for something, you have to give it.” Ramiro¹ explained to me this rationale for dealing with voters (and their constant demands) while commenting on the unpopularity of the left-leaning mayor of a nearby city. “He doesn’t give even a little assistance to folks; he does not even give two hundred *reais* when folks ask him.” At the time of the comment, Ramiro was still a new politician, having (successfully) run his first campaign for vice-mayor of the city of Pedrinhas just two years earlier. He was already, however, skillful in the way of doing politics in Sertão of Bahia.² Ramiro’s comment pointed to an unwritten rule of politics in the region, one that I learned while working as a broker for him: never deny a request from a voter.

Most of the literature on clientelism expects that politicians will allocate vote-buying resources in an economically efficient way, that is, by targeting specific voters that are more likely to bring votes, whether those are swing or loyal voters³ or reciprocal voters.⁴ The unwritten rule of distributing resources indiscriminately in Sertão of Bahia, however, points to a different, if not opposing, logic of resource allocation. Candidates tried to spread money to whoever asked instead of trying to allocate resources only to those voters who were most likely to deliver the vote (or whose vote could be monitored). The indiscriminate distribution of goods during the election does not seem to be unique to Sertão of Bahia. Recent studies in India and Peru based on field immersion research have pointed to a similar dynamic: candidates pour money into voters during the election.⁵ Why do politicians in these different places purposefully forego a logic of economic efficiency when engaging in vote buying?

This article argues that politicians distributed goods indiscriminately to comply with the expectations of how viable candidates are supposed to behave. This perspective fundamentally changes the underlying mechanism of vote buying: rather than attempting to effectively buy

votes, politicians use vote buying to manage the impressions they make on voters. Other recent studies have argued that vote buying serves to signal a candidate's power or reputation,⁶ but most of these studies do not theorize two crucial aspects of vote buying as an impression management tool: the performative dimension of these exchanges, and the role of voters' expectations in shaping politicians' performances.

This article builds on the studies that have emphasized the signaling effects of vote buying to propose a theory of vote buying as an impression management tool. Given the performative dimension of vote buying, politicians engage in these practices to manage how they are perceived. For vote buying to be effective, politicians need not only to hold material resources to engage in it but also to master the etiquette of how goods should be distributed. To master this etiquette, politicians must understand how voters expect politicians to handle vote-buying demands and also have the cultural competence to act accordingly with such expectations with ease. From this perspective, understanding voters' expectations of how politicians should deal with vote-buying demands becomes more important than knowing voters' partisan tendencies.

This article draws from six months of ethnographic immersion in Sertão of Bahia in 2014, during which time I worked as a broker for two different candidates running for the state legislature and lived in a public housing project among poor voters. My research is the first study on clientelism to be based on evidence gathered by the researcher through work as political broker. Working for candidates gave me not only access to behind-the-scenes moments but also the opportunity to learn the various implicit rules that candidates followed while campaigning. Despite being from the same party and similarly engaging in vote buying, the candidates whom I followed had opposing profiles: one was a typical programmatic politician and the other had a

more clientelistic profile. I compare their public performances of vote buying to illustrate how both attempted to comply with voters' expectations when dealing with voters' demands but ultimately differed in their ability to embody the desired traits associated with vote buying.

This article lays out a theory of vote buying as an impression management tool and illustrates with the case of Sertão of Bahia how the theory can be applied to uncover the logic underpinning politicians' distribution of vote-buying resources. Theorizing about the performative aspects of vote buying matters because if vote buying works as an impression management tool, the logic guiding how politicians distribute resources must depend on voters' expectations. This theorization also sheds new light on vote buying's efficacy for politicians. When vote buying is perceived as an economic exchange, politicians are expected to follow a logic of economic efficiency, in which they aim to allocate resources efficiently to convert them into votes. When vote buying is analyzed as a tool to manage impressions, however, we can see how politicians are likely to allocate vote-buying resources in ways that comply with the impressions that they aim to make on voters. Beyond explaining the case of Sertão of Bahia, the article provides a framework that can be used to understand the rationale behind the allocation of vote-buying resources in places where parties are weak and where levels of political competition are higher.

Revisiting the Cash-for-Votes Model

Vote-buying uses and allocation have traditionally been analyzed through the material components of economic exchanges: transactions in which one vote has a certain monetary value and can be obtained for money or valuable services or goods. Scholarly approaches to vote buying diverge in how they conceptualize voters' preferences, but most rely on the assumption that it is through the economic value of the goods and favors distributed by politicians that

voters' preferences are best met. Following the assumption of voters' economic use of vote buying, the different approaches to vote buying also assume that the allocation of vote buying by politicians will follow the logic of economic efficiency, that is, that politicians will target their limited resources at the voters that are most likely to deliver their votes.

The current prevailing understanding of clientelism draws from the rational choice model delineated by Stokes.⁷ According to this understanding, poor voters are most frequently targeted in vote-buying exchanges: poor voters leave their programmatic preferences aside because the value of a cheap gift is likely to have a much bigger impact in their income than it has for wealthier voters.⁸ The goods are valuable enough to (temporarily) buy the support of clients but not enough to align the preferences of clients and patrons. Because it is possible that voters could accept the goods but vote according to their conscience, this clientelism model posits that, to be effective, mechanisms of monitoring and punishing voters' behavior should be in place. Most literature that draws from this rational choice model has focused on showing, then, that brokers are most likely to target either loyal or swing voters⁹ or that clientelism happens in constituencies where it is easier to track and manage voters' behavior.¹⁰

Another strand of the literature has contested the need to monitor votes by drawing on voters' feelings of reciprocity. Reciprocity authors argue that, contrary to the assumption of economic scholars, the gifts distributed by politicians serve to align the preferences of patrons and clients: monitoring voters' behavior is unnecessary because voters prefer to reciprocate.¹¹

Despite their differences, these two fields of thought share an assumption that politicians and brokers will target specific voters to make the allocation of vote-buying resources efficient. Either by targeting specific voters or by excluding oppositional voters, these two approaches to clientelism presume that politicians are trying to convert money into votes when engaging in

vote buying. The dynamics of vote buying in Sertão of Bahia, however, cannot be captured by these theories. Not only did politicians distribute resources indiscriminately, but they also did not expect to convert every penny into votes. An alderman of Pedrinhas summarized the logic of the distribution of vote-buying resources in Sertão of Bahia:

You should not expect that the people you helped will vote for you, because they vote for the one who gave money last. But, if you don't give money, even if it is just fifty cents, you are the worst person in the world. The difference between being the best and the worst person in the world is only fifty cents.

The alderman's statement shows that politicians did not expect to win the gratitude—much less the vote—of voters when distributing resources during the campaign. At the same time, politicians believed that they could not deny a request from a voter without hurting their reputation among voters. The rationale given by the alderman for vote buying in Sertão of Bahia indicates that politicians were keenly aware that vote buying was not useful to directly gather votes but that they were simultaneously aware that they could not forego the practice if they wanted to manage how they were perceived by voters. Because even a small sum of money—one that obviously could not be enough to buy a vote—could make all the difference, the worth of the exchange must be a matter of its effect on how voters perceived the candidate.

Some scholars have already called attention to the symbolic aspects of vote-buying exchanges.¹² Similarly to what these studies have shown in a diverse set of cases,¹³ vote buying in Sertão of Bahia was one of the tools that politicians used to signal electoral viability. We still lack, however, a coherent theory of how vote buying works as a tool to create an impression on voters and thus changes the way vote buying is expected to happen. Specifically, apart from Auyero and Björkman,¹⁴ most of the signaling literature does not theorize about the performative

dimension of vote buying. Yet, in contexts of stiff competition in which vote buying is a dominant strategy, simply engaging in vote buying is not enough to differentiate one candidate from another. In addition, the question of how voters' ideas about politics and vote buying and their broader cultural views shape voters' expectations of vote buying and, ultimately, politicians' behavior, is yet unanswered.

In the next section, I propose a theory of vote buying as an impression management tool. I focus on the performative aspect of vote buying and the ways in which voters' expectations shape politicians' practices of vote buying.

Managing Impressions through Vote Buying

Instead of an economic exchange, vote buying can be understood as a tool that politicians use to create an impression on voters. If politicians use vote buying thus, voters' expectations will guide how politicians should distribute vote-buying resources. Understanding voters' expectations about how a candidate is expected to handle vote-buying demands is, therefore, of central importance to politicians who are concerned about what impressions they will make on voters. Voters' expectations around how candidates should handle vote-buying demands depend on the local meanings that voters attribute to vote buying, which are themselves related to how voters experience and understand politics in their everyday lives. Politicians that are aware of which behaviors voters expect from them during vote-buying exchanges are thus also keenly perceptive of how voters understand and experience politics.

Having in mind the meanings that voters attribute to vote-buying exchanges, office-seeking politicians have the opportunity, therefore, to use vote buying as a stage to foster a desired impression. Simply engaging in vote buying, however, is not enough to convince voters that a candidate embodies the desired traits. To win over an audience or perform effectively,

performers must use their appearance, manner, body language, and speech.¹⁵ Through the use of signs, performers have some room to maneuver as they influence the audience. For instance, an actor playing the role of an aristocrat will use certain clothes associated with the idealized image of aristocrats to signal to the audience his class and social status. In the real world, a competent doctor might fail to convey his competence if he fails to perform the signs that confirm for his patients his status, like wearing a white coat or utilizing appropriate bedside manners.

The performative dimension of vote buying means that candidates promote certain impressions not only through the action of giving out resources but also through the narratives, appearance, and manners that accompany this action. An awareness of and capability of performing these symbolic aspects of vote buying is, therefore, essential to creating the right impression on voters. Candidates necessarily differ in their ability to perform the symbolic aspects of vote buying. For individuals socialized in a world saturated in vote buying, handling vote-buying demands in ways that comply with the idealized traits of politicians might come naturally. For others, however—those of other backgrounds or who have a stronger programmatic profile—performing these signs demands more effort and coaching as such behaviors are not part of their general repertoire of political practices.

Analyzing vote buying through the lens of performance fundamentally shifts, therefore, the focus of investigation. Instead of paying attention to resources and how they are allocated, the focus is turned to how candidates attempt to perform the signs associated with these resources and how they differ in their capacity to enact this performance. Efficiency from the candidates' point of view is not a matter of best targeting resources to voters most likely to reciprocate but rather creating a desired impression and convincing voters that one embodies the desired image.

Understanding the impressions that politicians are attempting to foster through vote buying demands first uncovering what it is that voters (the audience) expect from candidates. What are the signs that voters are looking for, and how do they associate a candidate's vote-buying practice with these signs? Backstage moments, that is, those moments in which voters are not present, reveal that candidates that are seeking office put careful effort in planning their public appearance when handling vote-buying demands. This is true even for those candidates for whom vote buying is second nature. Candidates have different skills in performing the idealized traits of politicians while handling vote-buying demands, as becomes apparent through the comparison of their public performances. Such different capacities might be the result of different vote-buying fluency levels: while vote buying comes naturally to some politicians, for others it is a more cynical performance undertaken only to manage perceptions.

In the next section, I discuss the suitability of ethnographic methods to the study of vote buying through a performance lens. Ethnography opens up the possibility for the researcher to access not only public performances but also backstage preparations and audience response. I discuss my access to these areas as well as the advantages of incorporating evidence from nonpublic interactions in understanding vote buying.

Ethnography: Analyzing Public Performances of Illegal Practices

My long-term commitment to living in Sertão of Bahia allowed me to build trust with my informants, both with voters and with politicians, and to observe voters and politicians in the course of their lives. The ethnography was conducted from August through December of 2014 and in the summer of 2015. My entrance to the field was mediated by interlocutors from the Workers' Party (PT) of Bahia. I introduced myself to political elites as a researcher studying the

impact of PT's redistributive social policies on voters' relationships with politicians.¹⁶ As a result, members of the PT regarded me as sympathetic to the party. This gave me extensive access to the political life of the local PT. The PT was the governing party of Pedrinhas and the state of Bahia when I conducted my fieldwork. In some party meetings, I was asked to give my input on the topics being discussed. After party meetings, I was invited to join in happy hours, lunches, and other social gatherings with party members. I also had access to private data as I helped party members analyze the efficiency of their brokers. After one month in the field, I was allowed to shadow two candidates running for state legislature during the last three weeks of the campaign. While shadowing these candidates, I traveled with them to their campaign activities throughout the state and worked for them during the campaign, helping them while canvassing or holding community meetings by distributing flyers and stickers, talking to voters about the candidates, and taking note of the demands that voters made to them.

Without my commitment to living in the region for an extended period and the trust that I gained among the members of the PT, I could hardly have had the open access that I was granted to the party. My degree of involvement with the party allowed me not only to have open and frank conversations with party members about the party's vote-buying practices¹⁷ but also to witness first-hand these illegal exchanges. While this level of involvement came at the cost of foreclosing on relationships with politicians from other parties, it allowed me not only to observe these public but secretive exchanges but also to gain access to backstage areas, that is, to those moments in which voters were not present and in which members of the team could stand back from their performance.¹⁸

Some of these backstage activities make it clear that individuals are playing a role: privately, they engage in talk that is incompatible with the impression that they are attempting to

foster in front of the audience.¹⁹ Observation of these backstage situations allows ethnographers not only to understand that their informants are trying to manage the impressions they make on others but also to understand which image they are trying to foster and how they attempt to enact it. When voters were not around, the candidates I followed, for example, discussed with their team the things that they needed to have in hand when dealing with voters. They also disagreed about how they should treat voters making demands. All those backstage discussions made it clear to me that candidates and their teams were worried about the impressions they were making when handling voters' demands. Candidates and their staff also explicitly reflected on voters' demands and commented on how they and other candidates dealt with (and should deal with) these demands. I use evidence from these sessions to interpret how they used vote buying as a performance.

I also draw from evidence from voters to interpret politicians' performance in vote-buying exchanges. Given the focus of my research on the lived experiences of disadvantaged individuals with politics, during my stay in 2014, I lived in a public housing project of the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (My House My Life) program (MCMV) in the city of Pedrinhas. At the housing project, I lived with Marleide—a black woman in her late twenties who worked as a kindergarten teacher—and her six-year-old daughter. By living in the public housing project, I observed voters in their private lives, witnessing, therefore, more than their public interactions with politicians. I followed Marleide in many of her daily activities, such as grocery shopping, visiting her family members, going to local festivities, and surfing on the internet at night, a time in which she constantly looked at the web pages of local politicians and their family members. I helped her with house chores and taking care of her daughter. I also served as her assistant at times for her weekend job of filling air balloons to decorate children's parties. Through

Marleide, I gained entrance to a broader community. I was invited several times to social gatherings in other poor neighborhoods of the city and the rural areas of Pedrinhas. After having learned the regional vocabulary that my interlocutors used to talk about politics and mapping the main politicians of the region, I also conducted fifteen ordinary-language interviews with local citizens.²⁰

In my interviews and informal conversations with voters, I was able, when politicians were not around, to gather voters' impressions about those politicians. Sometimes rumors about a candidate's vote-buying capacity and comparisons of candidates' vote-buying practices emerged spontaneously in conversations, without the need of any question from my part. My access to voters' private conversations about politicians allowed me to note where voters were directing their attention during elections and to compare voters' expectations with what politicians told me that they thought voters wanted from them. Living alongside voters also allowed me to observe habits and ideas that are taken for granted and often unarticulated, such as implicit notions about the role of politics.

Finally, by working for two candidates, I observed directly how candidates dealt with vote-buying demands from voters and compared their ability to perform the meanings associated with vote buying. The candidates whom I shadowed were both from the PT but had opposing profiles. Amélia was a typical *petista* (member of the PT) with a strong programmatic profile: she despised vote buying. Ramiro had just entered the ranks of the PT and had a more clientelistic style, that is, for him, vote buying was just how campaigns are organized. The fact that candidates with such opposing views about vote buying both engaged in this practice was one indication among others that vote buying was a dominant strategy. By observing candidates with distinct profiles, I was also able to observe whether their views about vote buying reflected

in their ability to enact the impressions that they aimed to foster through the practice. Amélia's ideological opposition to the practice was reflected in her uneasiness in dealing with voters' demands. Ramiro, while also being aware that he had to perform a certain way in front of voters, engaged in the practice with much more familiarity than Amélia. For him, helping voters solve their problems was just the way that politics is done.

Understanding Voters' Expectations: Electoral Viability, Ideas about Politics, and the Politics of Strength

In the interior of Brazil, the electoral period is known to divide the population of a city into two fiercely competing factions.²¹ Often the name of a political faction in a city is so old that it can be traced to the years before the military dictatorship of the 1960s. In the cities of Sertão that I visited and in which the PT has become a local political force, the old faction labels are now less common. Considered a true outsider even when it allied with traditional forces, the PT is not perceived as being one of the traditional factions. The labels might have waned with the appearance of an outsider force, but the fierce rivalry and competition of the election period in Sertão has not. One of the first things I was often warned about by political activists is how things can get violent during elections. People told me stories about childhood friends that had pointed guns at one another to prevent rival political groups' distribution of money the night before the polls open (the so-called *noite da vigília*). Cars turned upside down, cars on fire, car chases with shots fired or flat tires are still common in the last days of the campaign as competing groups try to ruin one another's capacity to move around the city and buy votes.

The violence surrounding elections speaks to the significance that people attached to asserting who would win them. Discussions about the elections could be heard in every corner of the city, and among the most heated debates were those over who were the strongest candidates

(“*os fortes*”). Everyday discussions during the elections, among candidates and voters, were permeated by comments and disputes about who had “*força na política,*” a chance of winning the election. The heated discussions about who would win were not restricted to those working for a candidate, who had an obvious economic interest in seeing their candidate win (as they expected to get jobs in the administration). In every election, people who did not necessarily work for a campaign but who proclaimed themselves to be passionate about politics (“*apaixonados por política*”) would make their bids in the betting market about who would win the election or how many votes a candidate would be able to gather. It was also not uncommon that the bidding market around the election would turn violent. In the 2016 election for mayor of the city of Imaculada, a businessman in the city was shot dead in front of his house four days after the election. The local police linked the crime with the election betting market. According to the police, the businessman, who supported the winning reelection bid of the incumbent, must have been killed by debtors in the bet since, as they explained, the businessman was not “involved with anything wrong.”

Why was establishing who were the strong candidates so important even for ordinary voters in Sertão of Bahia? I argue that a local understanding of politics explains the significance that individuals attributed to showing electoral viability. In Sertão of Bahia, the ability to perform appropriately in politics was associated with holding public office. One of the ways that politics was experienced by individuals in Sertão of Bahia was as a space to solve everyday problems through the mediation of politicians. To act as a politician meant two things in Sertão of Bahia: (i) that one assisted others in solving their everyday problems, and (ii) that one occupied a position in the government or local administration or that one had ties with government officials. The ability to participate in politics, that is, the ability to help others solve

their problems was, therefore, attributed to those who had access to the government machine or those who had ties with government officials. This association of politics with holding public office explains why the performance of electoral viability becomes an essential part of what both voters and politicians were paying attention to during the campaign in Sertão of Bahia.

This association of being able to participate in politics and the holding of public office became evident when individuals in Sertão of Bahia came to be known as political personas. There were two main ways in which individuals could begin to be perceived as “politicians”: when they started to solve personal problems of other individuals or when they had public ties with elected officials.

Marleide, for example, saw herself as a political actor in the city. Despite the fact that local politicians did not recognize her as a community leader or broker, she had a familial reputation as a politician in the making: for her, her family, and her friends, she “did” politics. What made Marleide be regarded as a political actor in Sertão of Bahia was her access to politicians. Marleide developed close ties with the alderwoman Geresa when she worked in Geresa’s first campaign in 2012. Through this relationship, Marleide gained access to other politicians and city bureaucrats. It was through these ties that Marleide tried to solve her problems, like obtaining her job as a kindergarten teacher, as well as the everyday problems of her friends and relatives. Marleide was proud that her friends and relatives saw in her a potential politician. She would often tell me that she was passionate about politics because she loved to help others and that she had plans to run as a candidate to the city council. Because Marleide helped her friends and relatives, her social circle expected that she would soon be running for office.

Lene, as Marleide, also had obtained a job because of her connection with local politicians, more specifically with those of the PT. Being close to politicians and activists from the PT, Lene had a different perception than Marleide of the meaning of politics. She once told me that she tried to fight against the “culture that one always needed a politician to access public services.” Lene reproduced the narrative of social movements of the region that emphasized that access to state services and resources constituted a right and did not depend on the mediation of any politician. Despite holding an alternative understanding of politics, Lene could not avoid the public expectations of her social circle to act as a broker for state services. She was a concierge in the headquarters of the regional administration, and given her job’s close contact with local politicians, her friends and relatives kept asking her to help them to get access to state services.

The public expectations surrounding Marleide and Lene illustrate the intertwined associations between participating in politics, helping others, and holding public office (or being close to those in government). Since holding public office was closely associated with the ability to do politics, claiming and disputing who were the strongest candidates in the election was a central part of everyday discussions among voters during the elections in Sertão of Bahia.

Establishing the strong candidates was something highly contested among rival groups. In September 2015, as I waited in the bus station of Boi Bravo, I overheard cab drivers discussing the chances of the incumbent mayor to win reelection the following year. The group was divided in their support for the mayor as well as their opinion about the chances of the mayor’s reelection bid. One driver felt that the mayor of Boi Bravo was not faring well, as “he does not give anything to anyone.” Another driver, who seemed to support the mayor, tried to appear unconcerned in the face of the other drivers’ opinions about the unpopularity of the mayor, because, for him, “when the elections come, we (*he puts his hands on his pocket*), we

solve the problem!” The discussion of the cab drivers about whether the mayor of Boi Bravo was stingy shows that people were constantly disputing the meaning of who was indeed *forte*. It also shows, however, that disputes over who was strong in politics necessarily encompassed commenting on a candidate’s display of money through vote buying. The word *fraco* (weak) and a candidate’s lack of capacity to spend money in the election came up in private conversations with voters about local politicians who, in their eyes, had no chances of winning.

When I interviewed Dona Cleuza, a retired small farmer from Umbuzeiro, a rural district of the city of Juriti, the conversation about politics soon turned into a heated discussion with her neighbors, present at the time, about the vote-buying practices of local politicians. Dona Cleuza’s niece, Léia, was criticizing her neighbor because, according to her, he had sold his vote for the then-mayor of Juriti, who, in her eyes, was not a good mayor as he did not assist voters with their needs.²² The neighbor then started to defend himself: “You can only vote for those who have money; if you have money, you win politics. It is not possible anymore to win just with willpower.” Léia immediately contested the neighbor by giving the example of an alderwoman who won without money: “This alderwoman was *fraca* (weak), she had no money, but she won. With her, it was not about *peixada* (popular name given to the hundred-*reais* bill); she looked to the side of assistance, not to the side of giving (referring to vote buying).”

The association between being weak in politics and having no money was taken for granted by both Léia and her neighbor. They disagreed on whether money was necessary for winning, but both implicitly agreed, as it appears from Léia’s comment, that a candidate who had no money was perceived as *fraco* (weak). It was very common, though, that an understanding of weakness in politics encompassed both lack of money and lack of chances in an election. Cida,

who was an unemployed MCMV resident, thought that it was evident that a poor candidate had no chance of winning an election:

Author: Would you vote for a politician that was poor?

Cida: I would if he was honest. But what happens is that those that are honest, people do not want to vote for because they will not win. Do you see my point? They don't want to waste their vote. For example, you have money, and I do not. If people see that you are giving money, that you are helping, that you are buying votes, who has a chance of winning? You or me? Who has a chance of winning in politics?

Author: I don't know, who?

Cida: You!

Author: Because I am buying votes?

Cida: Because you are buying votes!

Author: Do you think that those that buy votes are honest?

Cida: No, they are not, but they are those who win politics.

Author: So, would you vote for a candidate that is poor and does not buy votes?

Cida: I would vote for him, but he will not win.

A poor candidate for Cida was a candidate who was not buying votes and because of that had no chances of winning. Cida also associated a candidate's apparent poverty and inability to buy votes with a sense of honesty.²³ Honesty, in this sense of not buying votes, seems to be appreciated by Cida, but at the same time, to be worthless in her eyes as honest candidates had no chance of winning an election. Graciane, a self-employed MCMV resident, also thought that a candidate who cannot buy votes, cannot win: "The person who is buying votes is not being honest, so why will the other candidate lose? Because the other candidate who does not have the same money to buy votes will never have the capacity to be elected, because he does not have money."

These comments from voters show that, whether a candidate was strong was open for dispute, but the inability of a candidate to widely buy votes would inevitably lead to that candidate being labeled as *fraco* (weak), and, most likely, to being seen as a candidate with no serious chances to win. Given this unescapable association, candidates who wanted to be perceived as having any chance in the election could not forego engaging in vote buying.

Comparing Performances and the Logic of Largesse

Having the resources to engage in vote buying was, therefore, necessary to avoid being labeled a weak candidate in Sertão of Bahia. However, to be perceived as one of the *strong* candidates, resources were not sufficient. One reason for this is that the performance of *força na política* was not done only through the display of money associated with vote buying. Candidates had many ways to show their strength as potential winners: the number of people they could gather in a meeting, the number of people working and following them, the number of walls painted with their logo,²⁴ the fanciness of their cars, the number of powerful supporters they had. The endorsement of other, traditional politicians was especially important.

Nono, for example, was said to be the wealthiest person in the city of Pedrinhas; some said that he was even richer than the businessman Cachoeirinha, whose financial backing was considered essential for a politician to have any chance to run for mayor. Nono ran for mayor of Pedrinhas twice, once in 2008 and another time in 2012. Despite his fortune, Nono was not able to gather more than 4 percent of the votes. In a radio interview, Nono declared that what he lacked was the endorsement of the “*fortes*” (strong ones) of Pedrinhas—according to him, the former mayors of the city. He had the money to spend in the election, but this alone did not pave his way to being taken as a serious contender in the election.

In addition to performing these other aspects of what is expected from a strong politician, the manner in which politicians engaged in vote buying mattered to the impression they conveyed to voters. To comply with the social meaning of electoral strength associated with vote buying, the logic of how they allocated vote-buying resources should be very different from a logic of economic efficiency. In order to appear strong and avoid being viewed as *fraco*, candidates allocated resources indiscriminately, or, at least, handled vote-buying demands as if they could distribute resources generously. Given the social meaning of strength in politics

associated with vote buying, the logic guiding how politicians responded to the flow of demands of voters was a logic of largesse. This means that politicians tried to respond to voters' demands as if the resources they had were plentiful, their willingness to solve problems infinite and their power to solve requests unlimited.

Candidates, however, differed in their capacity to handle vote-buying demands according to this logic of largesse. The ease with which Ramiro dealt with the constant requests from voters contrasted with the visible discomfort of Amélia when voters approached her asking for favors or money. This contrast mirrored what vote buying represented to each of them. Amélia engaged in vote buying, but she did so grudgingly. She despised the practice and, not surprisingly, had a hard time convincing voters that she was a viable candidate. Despite being a novice in politics, Ramiro looked like a well-seasoned politician while dealing with voters. For him, vote buying was just how campaigns are supposed to happen, a foundational assumption that reflected in his ease of dealing with voters' constant demands during the campaign.

Even though Ramiro complained to me quite often about how much money he was spending on voters during the election, he had no ideological opposition to vote buying, unlike Amélia. On the contrary, for him it was evident that to be popular among voters, he needed to "help his people." However, even Ramiro could not say yes to all voters' demands. Not only were resources, of course, limited (even though candidates varied greatly in how much each had to spend in the campaign), but vote buying is also illegal in Brazil; therefore, candidates could not simply say yes to the demands of voters in the public light. Candidates feared being filmed by cell phone cameras when responding to voters' requests in public spaces. In those situations, they had no choice but to say no to voters. However, given that denying favors during the election was associated with weakness, candidates had to find a way to say yes even when they

were, in fact, saying no. Ramiro was very skillful in the tactics of saying no but appearing to acquiesce to voters' demands.

In one of Ramiro's canvassing activities, while he was greeting voters in a crowded square, a young black woman, who was carrying a baby and appeared to be drunk, was chasing him and asking for money. It was a difficult situation because if he denied her the money she could start to cause trouble by offending him in the middle of the crowd. He could also not give her money right away because someone could register the moment on camera. Ramiro's reaction demonstrated that he knew how to signal largesse even when he had to publicly deny a request. He did not shoo the woman away, nor did he engage enthusiastically with her. Instead, he rapidly gave one of his assistants a ten-*reais* bill and subtly pointed toward her. Holding the money behind herself, the woman left Ramiro in peace, and he was able to continue to greet voters.

During one day of canvassing in the main (and only) commercial center of Pedrinhas, two young girls in school uniforms from a private school approached Ramiro while filming with their cell phones and asking him questions for a school project. They asked his opinion about the political situation in the country, what could be done to improve public safety, and even whether vote buying still existed in the rural areas. While the girls were still around, holding their cell phones, other voters approached Ramiro asking for favors. At that moment, I got nervous because, as I was taking notes of voters' demands for Ramiro, I feared that the girls could film Ramiro and me in a situation that could be legally characterized as vote buying and, therefore, as an electoral crime. Ramiro, however, handled the situation in the same way that he always did with demands made in the public light. He explained to voters that at that moment he could not solve their demands because it could be characterized as vote buying, and if he attended to their requests he could risk losing his seat if elected. Right after saying that, however, he gave the

name of people from his staff that could help the voters with their specific demands and even told me to distribute his phone number. In this way, Ramiro performed both the legally required rejection of voters' demands and, at the same time, the socially expected acceptance of the same voters' demand. By giving voters his phone number and telling them whom to look for to solve their problems, Ramiro found a way to comply with a logic of largesse of resources (and thus avoid appearing weak) even in the moments in which it was too risky to give a literal and resounding yes.

Ramiro knew how to appear to attend to voters' demands even when he could not openly do so. What was complicated for him was to participate in the programmatic party politics of the PT, with long meetings where rhetorical skills and a leftist vocabulary of politics were valued. "I do not know how to speak well, but I like to be among the people" (*Não sei falar bonito, mas gosto de estar entre o povo*), he told me in one of our first conversations. He had little patience for the long party meetings. His public speaking skills were often a topic of scorn among party activists, and he would often use politically incorrect terms when meeting with representatives of social movements.

In contrast with Ramiro, Amélia was praised by party activists for her ability to deliver programmatic public speeches. She did not dread, as Ramiro did, the moments during rallies in which the microphone would be handed to her. Quite the opposite: she would deliver long speeches with reference to class divisions in Brazilian society, her history of siding with the poorest in Bahia, the role of the PT in improving the life of the poor, and her programmatic commitments, and she denounced the candidates that used money to buy voters. Amélia was admired by local activists because of her long-term involvement with the landless social

movements of the region. She was one of the founders of the PT in the region during the 1980s, while Ramiro was only recently affiliated with it.

Amélia's public speaking skills contrasted with her difficulty in dealing with the constant requests from voters during the campaign. Despite her sincere objection to the practice, Amélia did engage in what was typified by Brazilian law as vote buying. I witnessed as she grudgingly promised to deliver smaller sums of money to voters or brokers that were helping her. She agreed to cover smaller expenses, such as travel costs for voters to go to their electoral districts on election day, or a little cash to pay for health exams or to partially pay for construction material for home improvements. She did not, however, have Ramiro's ability of dealing with voters' requests as if she was always willing to help them.

While canvassing in a rural district of Capela,²⁵ Amélia encountered a voter who, like the women with a baby, was not discreet about the vote-buying dealings being done during the campaign. When Amélia passed by the butcher shop to talk about her candidacy, the butcher started to speak loudly and with a cynical tone of negotiating his vote: "I am not selling my vote, but one can give me a little help, right? To vote for the whole ticket... Tell me who are the ones who have money in their pockets, so that I will look for them." Amélia angrily replied to the voter's provocation: "Haven't you seen on TV that it is not right to sell a vote? This way won't work."²⁶

Not all voters were so open about their willingness to negotiate their vote. Some voters were more tactful in disdaining the goods distributed during elections in the public light but demanding them in a more secretive space. It was not uncommon that when first approached by either Ramiro or Amélia, some voters would say that they were not interested in receiving goods or money so long as they could count on the politicians' assistance in future matters more urgent

and important, such as health issues, lack of water, or sudden unemployment. Later, when speaking more privately with the candidates or brokers, voters often negotiated a certain “assistance” from the candidates to the family. One voter told Amélia that he only asked for a politician’s help in times of need (*hora da precisão*). Amélia was straightforward in her answer: “Right now it is not worthwhile to ask for my assistance, I am only a professor, I can help only with ten or twenty *reais*, but if I become a deputy, I will have a car and resources to help.”²⁷ Confronted by similar requests, Ramiro reacted very differently. He would hand his phone number to the voter and would start talking about families he had recently helped in securing hospitalization due to motorcycle accidents, which were very common in the area. In one of these conversations, he said to the voter that if he was not able to solve a problem, he would seek the help of the twelve federal deputies who supported him. By the end of the conversation, he added: “I chat with Rui (the governor of Bahia) in the same way that I am chatting with you.”²⁸

By handing his phone number to the voter, Ramiro signaled his willingness to assist the voter. By talking about the hospitalizations he obtained and his connections with higher ranking politicians, Ramiro also showed that he had the power to provide this assistance. Amélia signaled her willingness to help but failed to show that she had connections in public administration that could be mobilized to help voters navigate the overcrowded public health system. At the time of the election, Ramiro was not yet a state deputy, and he had been the vice mayor of the city of Pedrinhas for only two years. Amélia, on the other hand, was at the time an important figure in the PT of Bahia. She had been mayor of the city of Capela for two consecutive terms (totaling eight years) and, for the campaign of 2014, she had the support of some federal deputies. Amélia could potentially, like Ramiro, use her connections to secure access to the public health system

for her voters. However, being more concerned with her programmatic commitments, Amélia did not know how to do politics in this way.

Another way open to the candidates to perform their willingness to help voters during the election was by spending time with voters. This was yet another area in which Ramiro and Amélia differed. Ramiro had a much busier agenda than Amélia. His candidature was sponsored by the mayor of Pedrinhas, Diadorim, who was a powerful politician of the PT with strong links to the governor. The support of Diadorim meant that Ramiro was endorsed by several mayors and aldermen across the state, many of whom Ramiro did not know personally. While I traveled across the state with Ramiro, my activity with Amélia was much more restricted to the cities around Capela. In a single day, Ramiro had activities in different cities, and he tried to be on time for these commitments, except when he was canvassing with voters.

On one Saturday, Ramiro followed the advice of the alderman that was supporting him in the city Vila de Cosme to visit a house that could give him more than fifty votes. The conversation was led by the matriarch of the house. The house was indeed full; the conversation took place in the presence of the sons, daughters, and a grandson of the woman. Ramiro sat down with his wife on his side in the reception room, facing the woman and her family who were all crowded onto a couch. The conversation went on for a long time. The woman told her personal story of raising seven children and helping support other kids. She also talked about her disappointment with the politician whom she had previously supported: he had not given her any attention when she was trying to obtain treatment for a grandson who had cancer. At some point, the alderman of Vila de Cosme told me on the phone that Ramiro was late for his next activity in the city. Ramiro, however, looked upset when I said in front of the voters that he was late. After noticing that, I asked one of Ramiro's assistants whether it would not be better if someone from

Ramiro's staff intervened to end the conversation with voters so that Ramiro could continue with his agenda. The assistant replied: "Ramiro does not like that. When Ramiro visits voters, it does take a while because our people like to chat, and if we do not do like that, they might be upset. Ramiro himself does not approve of setting up an agenda that makes him run from one place to another."²⁹

Amélia had a different approach when she was knocking on voters' doors. She was in a rush and seemed to aim to visit as many houses as she could. She even had a phrase ready to tell voters for why she could not sit down with them when invited: "I have a lot of votes to go after, if you had forty thousand clothes to iron, would you be seated?" (Amélia's goal was to have forty thousand votes).³⁰ In one of her speeches in a community meeting, she apologized for not being able "to spend time listening, understanding, and systematizing the demands" and hoped that the audience would understand as "it was the last days of the campaign and she needed to go after votes."³¹ If the alderman of Vila de Cosme worried that Ramiro spent too much time chatting with voters, Amélia's staff worried that she spent too much time in her public speeches. During Amélia's visit to a rural district of the city of Boi Bravo, one of the young women who supported Amélia in the city asked me to go tell her to finish her speech because they still needed to visit other neighborhoods.³²

By giving his time, by knowing how to give something to voters even when it was risky to do so, and by talking about his connections with higher ranking politicians, Ramiro implicitly followed a logic of largesse while dealing with voters. He did not need to be coached on how to deal with voters' requests in ways that subtly signaled that he had the resources, willingness, and power to help voters. Amélia, despite engaging in vote buying, could not signal largesse in the same way as Ramiro.

The Backstage: Straightening Out Performances and the Logic of *Largesse*

In this section, I will discuss my observations of candidates when voters were not present. In those situations, just like the backstage of a performance, a candidate's behavior is freed from voters' expectations about it. Given this freedom, candidates and their staff have a space to discuss among themselves the appropriateness of their public appearances. As I will illustrate, backstage evidence from Ramiro's and Amélia's campaigns made it clear that both campaigns were invested in managing impressions when handling vote-buying demands. It also further evidences that for Amélia, engagement in vote buying was much more strategic than for Ramiro. Because Amélia was not familiar with the etiquette of vote buying, her staff needed to coach her about how she should deal with voters' demands. Ramiro, on the contrary, had a natural ability to deal with voters' demands. He was the one who instructed his staff about how he wanted to appear in front of voters.

Ramiro's concern about appearing to be open to listening to voters' demands became evident to me on the first day that I accompanied him. When we entered a village, Ramiro reminded his driver to open the windows of the car and to honk the horn when we passed someone.³³ In addition to honking, Ramiro would wave, smile, and warmly call out to the passerby: "Ohhh *Fazendeiro(a)* (farmer)," he would shout. Ramiro repeated the order to open the car windows every time we were driving through a city. By opening the windows of his car, Ramiro signaled that he was approachable, that he was not hiding from voters and their requests inside a car.

Amélia liked to use her time in the car to go through her agenda, talk on the phone, or even read a magazine. She would not open the windows of her car even when she was in her hometown, Capela, where many voters recognized her car and waved but were unnoticed by her.

In a visit to the rural community of Lagoinha, Amélia's political consultant was accompanying her and, seeing the windows of the car closed when we entered the community, he advised her to open them. Amélia opened her window but continued to concentrate on her phone conversation, ignoring the voters who were waving at the car.³⁴

The campaign of 2014 marked the first time that Amelia had a political consultant. The consultant was hired at the suggestion, if not outright pressure, of the most important political figures in the regional PT. One of the political consultant's main concerns, which often led to a heated discussion with Amélia, was how Amélia would handle voters' demands. On one occasion, the consultant advised her: "put your heart in your mouth because sometimes you look like the *cuca* (a villain from a Brazilian children's book series)," as he thought that Amélia looked angry when attending to demands from voters.³⁵ By looking angry when a voter approached her with a demand or by simply driving with her car windows closed, Amélia failed to signal her willingness to help voters with their demands.

The political consultant was not the only one from Amélia's staff that was concerned about how Amélia was handling voters' demands. On another occasion, when we were leaving a rural community, some children surrounded Amélia's car asking for pennies, and a woman asked for money to pay for a bus ticket to go to her hometown to vote. Amélia, clearly uncomfortable with the situation, gave some pennies to the kids and hesitantly told the woman that her driver would cover the cost of the bus ticket. As soon as we left, the driver, who was her close ally and a consultant, harshly reprimanded Amélia for her behavior in front of the voter: "You cannot hesitate (to attend to a request) in front of the voter," he screamed. By not confidently and immediately agreeing to the voter's request, Amélia signaled that she had a problem in solving

the demand, which could be perceived as a sign that Amélia lacked the resources to attend to voters.

In the previous section, I discussed how Ramiro's performance excelled in signaling that his campaign had the resources and willingness to help voters with their demands. His performance followed the implicit rule of "never say no to a voter," and even the rule of "when one actually says no it has to look like yes," as one of his political allies told me explicitly. Ramiro was so concerned that his appearance in front of voters would not signal a lack of resources that he made sure that he would not be empty handed when children approached him asking for things. Although illegal, it is common practice that candidates distribute candy to children. After leaving a community meeting in a rural district and being surrounded by kids, Ramiro entered the car and berated us for not having brought the bag of candy that he had asked us to buy and keep in the car.

Amélia's campaign had fewer resources than Ramiro's. Her hesitation to comply with all voters' requests probably reflected the more constrained budget that she had to manage. But it was also a product of Amélia's own ideological opposition to the practice of vote buying and, consequently, her discomfort with complying with the logic of largesse that accompanied the exchange. The political consultant once complained to me privately about Amélia's behavior in front of voters, saying that Amélia was "very arrogant with some things, and a candidate cannot afford to say no (to a voter)." Amélia's driver and her political consultant did not share her disapproval of vote buying. They were mainly concerned with Amélia's electoral performance, and for that reason, they cared about the impression that Amélia was making on voters. For them, it was not enough that Amélia say yes to voters' demands: they attempted to coach Amélia to also show openness to voters' demands and to say yes generously and without hesitation, thus

complying with the logic of largesse. Ramiro, on the other side, seemed to know intuitively what was needed to comply with this logic when handling voters' demands, to the point that he was the one that reminded his staff what was needed to give voters the right impression.

Conclusion

In this article, I propose a theory of vote buying as an impression management tool to explain why in some contexts politicians distribute electoral goods indiscriminately. Because politicians use vote buying to create impressions on voters, they distribute electoral goods broadly to best comply with the expectations of voters. More than trying to convert every cent spent into votes, politicians aim to manage the perceptions that they convey while engaging in vote buying. The performative dimension of vote buying means that for the practice to be efficient, resources themselves are not sufficient. Politicians also need to master the etiquette that guides how goods should be given.

In addition to explaining politicians' behavior in Sertão of Bahia, this approach aims to inform studies of clientelism in other places, especially in those in which politicians follow a logic of largesse rather than one of economic efficiency in the distribution of vote-buying resources. This study has broader consequences for the literature on clientelism as it calls scholars to pay less attention to the presumed mechanisms that are necessary to make vote buying an economically efficient transaction and more to the ways that these exchanges are interpreted and performed. In practice, this means focusing less on variables such as the existence of monitoring mechanisms, the size of constituencies, the partisanship of voters, and even the socioeconomic status of presumed recipients of cash-for-vote exchanges. Instead, this paper calls for a research agenda that is more attuned to both the socioeconomic and the semiotic contexts in which vote buying is prevalent and the ways in which these contexts shape how

individuals interpret their political reality. The current literature has mostly focused on the view of brokers and politicians; this paper highlights the importance of incorporating voters' perspectives to understand the strategies of politicians during elections.

Finally, a word about the normative consequences of this study. Vote buying is normally understood as a harmful practice to democracy because it presumably prevents voters from voting according to their conscience. This study presents a very different picture as voters and politicians are both active participants in perpetuating a semiotic environment that puts the display of wealth at the heart of politics and vote buying as just one element in a larger context. As such, the question about the consequences of vote buying for democracy becomes one about the central role that the display of wealth plays in an election and the consequences of this for representation and policy making.

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Appendix: Background Information about Sertão of Bahia

The backland areas of Brazil that are exposed to a semiarid climate are known as Sertão.

The semiarid climate encompasses most of the area of the states of the Northeast Region of Brazil and 70 percent of the territory of Bahia.³⁶ My research was conducted in a part of the northeast area of the Sertão of the state of Bahia, which includes cities from two mesoregions of Bahia, the *Centro Norte* and the *Nordeste Baiano*. The cities of the region I lived in had between 5,000 and 80,000 inhabitants.³⁷ Pedrinhas, the city in which I was based, was one of the biggest cities of the region with 40 percent of its population living in rural areas. Rainfall in the Sertão is not only low but also irregular, leading to long periods of drought. Traditionally, the drought is associated with the famines and the high levels of poverty that have plagued the Sertão. Most of Sertão of Bahia is occupied by small subsistence farmers, who are severely affected by the drought.³⁸

By the time that I arrived in Sertão of Bahia in August 2014, the region had transformed profoundly. Civil society organizations flourished in Sertão of Bahia during the 1970s and 1980s. Pushed by Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (CEB), an organization of base ecclesial communities, and under the leadership of priests associated with liberation theology, small farmers of the region started to organize. They took control of rural unions out of the hands of local elites and formed associations. During the recessive years of the 1990s, these community associations received foreign money from the World Bank, European Christian NGOs, and American NGOs to invest in community-development projects that aimed to improve small farmers' living conditions. However, the huge mobilization capacity of small farmers during the 1990s did not mean more representation in the political sphere. Candidates of the PT, who mainly came from these civil associations, performed poorly in local elections. The situation changed after the PT won the presidential office in 2002 and the gubernatorial office in 2006.

The PT is currently the governing party of the state of Bahia for its third consecutive term. With the rise to power of the PT, the *carlista* machine was significantly dismantled.

As a result of the implementation of universal and targeted social policies, which started in the late 1990s, the population's living standards in Sertão of Bahia have improved significantly. Even before the implementation of the conditional cash transfer program *Bolsa Família* (BF) in 2003, other universal social policies, such as the *Benefício de Prestação Continuada* and rural pensions had already reached the very poor in Bahia.³⁹ The results of these redistributing social policies were reflected in numbers.⁴⁰ In Pedrinhas, for example, the percentage of people living under extreme poverty⁴¹ dropped from around 40 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 2010, whereas the number of people living in poverty⁴² went from around 71 percent of the total population to 30 percent over the same period. Probably the most telling statistic is the drop in the infant mortality rate from around 70 to 20 in Pedrinhas between 1991 and 2010.⁴³ Water access, which in the past was one of the main currencies used in clientelistic exchanges, also significantly improved after the implementation of the federal water supply program, *Água para Todos*. In 1991, only around 40 percent of individuals in Pedrinhas lived in a house with running water; in 2010 that number was almost at 90 percent.

¹ To protect the identity of my informants, I use pseudonyms to name the cities, villages, and individuals portrayed in this article.

² I conducted the ethnographic research on which this article is based in a part of the northeast area of the Sertão of the state of Bahia, which includes cities from two mesoregions of Bahia, the *Centro Norte*, and the *Nordeste Baiano*. The cities of the region in which I lived had between 5,000 and 80,000 inhabitants. Pedrinhas, the town in which I lived, was one of the biggest cities of the region with 40 percent of its population living in rural areas. I give further historical and sociodemographic details of my field site in the appendix.

³ Stokes et al. 2013; Stokes 2005; Nichter 2008; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012; Chandra 2007; Scheiner 2007; Weitz-Shapiro 2012; Nichter and Peress 2017.

⁴ Finan and Schechter 2012; Lawson and Greene 2014.

⁵ Muñoz 2014; Chauchard 2018; Björkman 2014.

⁶ Kramon 2016; Muñoz 2014; Björkman 2014; Zarazaga 2014; Auyero 1999.

⁷ Stokes 2005.

⁸ Stokes et al. 2013, 161.

⁹ Stokes 2005; Stokes et al. 2013; Nichter 2008; Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012.

¹⁰ Chandra 2007; Lyne 2008; Weitz-Shapiro 2012; Szwarcberg 2014; Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros, and Estevez 2007; Scheiner 2007; Stokes 2005; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007.

¹¹ Lawson and Greene 2014, 877; Finan and Schechter 2012.

¹² Auyero 1999; Kramon 2016; Muñoz 2014; Szwarcberg 2014; Björkman 2014; Gadjanova 2017; Zarazaga 2014.

¹³ Kramon 2016; Muñoz 2014.

¹⁴ Auyero 1999; Björkman 2014.

¹⁵ Goffman 1959, 24.

¹⁶ The growth of the Workers' Party (PT)—a leftist-leaning party with a strong programmatic profile—in Brazilian states like Bahia that have been historically ruled by clientelistic machines offered a great opportunity to observe firsthand the process behind poor voters' changing political behavior. As frequently occurs with interpretative research, my research questions changed after my immersion as I observed the continuation of clientelistic practices rather than dramatic change.

¹⁷ I also conducted thirty-five semistructured interviews with party and social movement activists from seven different cities to gather party members' views of whether the party had changed patron-client relationships in the region.

¹⁸ Goffman 1959, 113.

¹⁹ Goffman 1959, 171.

²⁰ In the fifteen semistructured interviews that I conducted, I used the ordinary-language interview method (Schaffer 2006), which aims to observe how individuals use certain words—such as *politics* and *politicians*—in practice, instead of asking direct questions about an individual's behavior or beliefs. In these interviews, the goal is to use the common vocabulary of locals instead of academic terms to prompt conversations. I focused on asking questions about the main political actors of the region because those were the politicians known by ordinary voters. The interviews allowed me to explore narratives around politics of rural voters as most of my participatory observations were based on the urban context of the public housing project. Of the fifteen interviewees, six were from rural areas. I was given consent to record nine of these interviews. With low levels of education, many rural dwellers felt embarrassed to have their way of speaking recorded.

²¹ Palmeira 1996.

²² In another work, I explore in further detail how voters in Sertão of Bahia distinguished between politicians who only bought votes during the election and those who were always available to voters to assist them with their needs. Voters reproached vote-buying candidates as they feared that candidates who bought votes during the election would not be responsive to voters' needs after the election.

²³ Despite being widespread and mostly initiated by voters, vote buying was perceived by voters in Sertão of Bahia as a corrupt practice. They classified vote-buying politicians as dishonest (see my other work).

²⁴ See Zarazaga 2014 for a similar finding.

²⁵ Capela is a municipality of the interior of Bahia in the semi-arid region with a population of approximately 35,000 inhabitants.

²⁶ Field notes, October 3, 2014.

²⁷ Field notes, September 30, 2014.

²⁸ Field notes, September 20, 2014.

²⁹ Field notes, September 20, 2014.

³⁰ Field notes, September 30, 2014.

³¹ Field notes, September 29, 2014.

³² Field notes, September 29, 2014.

³³ Field notes, September 17, 2014.

³⁴ Field notes, September 29, 2014.

³⁵ Field notes, October 3, 2014.

³⁶ Lima, Oliveira, and Spinola 2008.

³⁷ Ninety percent of the 417 cities of Bahia have fewer than 50,000 inhabitants.

³⁸ Sampaio 2008; Nascimento 2010.

³⁹ The *Benefício de Prestação Continuada* (BPC) is a monthly allowance of one minimum wage paid to the elderly and disabled who have an income below a quarter of the minimum wage. The BPC started in 1996 and, according to Souza (2015), Bahia has the highest percentage of beneficiaries in Brazil, around two million people. Rural pensions, despite their creation in 1971, experienced a rise in the number of beneficiaries from 1988 to 2007. With Bahia's large rural population, rural pensions play an important role in the economy of its backland areas.

⁴⁰ To avoid revealing the real name of the municipality, I use only approximate numbers here.

The demographic data from the city of Pedrinhas was collected from the *Atlas do Desenvolvimento Humano no Brasil* (PNUD, IPEA, and FJP 2013).

⁴¹ "Extreme poverty" applies to individuals living with a monthly income below 70 *reais*.

⁴² "Poverty" applies to individuals living with a monthly income below 140 *reais*.

⁴³ Infant mortality is the number of deaths of children under one year of age per 1000 live births.