

**When Voters Help Politicians: Understanding Vote-Buying Dynamics through the  
Voters' Point of View**

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**Abstract**

Current studies explain voters' compliance in vote-buying exchanges by suggesting either that voters are forced to deliver their vote or that they hold positive views of vote-buying candidates. In Sertão of Bahia, Brazil, however, voters freely support vote-buying candidates despite perceiving them as unreliable patrons. This article argues that vote-buying dynamics depend on voters' perceptions of their political reality. Based on original ethnographic research, this paper describes how voters perceived the widespread practice of vote buying as threatening to their interests and to the power of their vote. Voting for highly vote-buying candidates, who were perceived to be likely to win, was one of the strategies that voters implemented to challenge these public understandings. Voters framed their vote as material assistance lent to politicians to get elected to office, and they used this support to gain leverage to seek politicians' assistance beyond the electoral period.

## Introduction

Even before becoming a politician, Ramiro<sup>1</sup> was a well-known businessman from a low-income family in the city of Pedrinhas, Brazil.<sup>2</sup> With his fortune came the expectation to help those with less. As such, before becoming a politician, he sponsored *vaquejadas* (popular cowboy competitions) in the rural districts of the region, extended ample credit to long-term clients going through financial difficulties, and helped those in need of assistance. However, the expectation to help those with less because of his wealth when he was a private citizen was nothing compared to what was expected of him when he became a politician. As a politician in Sertão of Bahia,<sup>3</sup> Ramiro was inundated with *pedidos* (requests) as a part of his daily routine. He could not walk around without regularly being stopped by voters boldly asking for something. Everybody in Pedrinhas knew that, during Ramiro's campaign for the state legislature in 2014, he distributed goods and favors to anybody who asked for them, despite such practices being illegal. Although Ramiro's vote-buying efforts contributed to his winning the election, they did not lead to his building a reputation among voters as a reliable patron. Voters feared that heavily vote-buying<sup>4</sup> candidates like Ramiro would consider their "debts" with voters paid by vote-buying exchanges and then abandon them after the election was over.

The current literature on vote buying assumes that, in the absence of political machines (Stokes 2005; Gonzalez Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014; Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros, and Estevez 2007; Nichter 2008; Weitz-Shapiro 2014), voters support vote-buying candidates because they expect these candidates to become reliable patrons (Zarazaga 2014; Kramon 2016; Lawson and Greene 2014; Finan and Schechter 2012; Auyero 1999). In Sertão of Bahia, conversely, a candidate's vote-buying practice generated the opposite expectation in voters (the expectation that candidates would be

unreliable patrons), and yet, heavily vote-buying candidates won the most votes in the region. To put it differently, voters perceived vote-buying candidates as unreliable but voted for them anyway. The surprising dynamics of vote buying in Sertão of Bahia opens a broader question about how vote buying works: how is it that vote-buying candidates thrive without winning the hearts and minds of clients and in the absence of monitoring mechanisms?

My findings reveal that voters supported candidates that they perceived as viable in order to gain crucial agency. Voters in Sertão of Bahia viewed vote-buying practices as detrimental to their larger interest of having continuous access to politicians because they feared that heavily vote-buying candidates would disregard voters' requests after being elected. Voters also largely believed that a candidate's capacity to distribute money was decisive for his or her chances to win the election; this belief depreciated the perceived importance of individual votes. Voters challenged these common understandings by ascribing alternative meanings to vote-buying exchanges and their vote. They framed their vote as a form of material aid that they lend to politicians to help the latter get elected to office. By voting for a viable candidate, voters affirm their vote to be an aid and deny the idea that they "sold" their vote when engaging in vote-buying exchanges. Although symbolic, these speech and material practices affected how voters approached politicians. Those that framed their vote as aid or assistance felt entitled to seek a politician's assistance after the election.

With few exceptions (Gay 1994; Auyero 1999; Hilgers 2009; Lazar 2004; Nichter and Peress 2017; Scott 1972), current studies on vote buying have focused on brokers' perspectives. In line with burgeoning literature in political science (Walsh 2012;

Riofrancos 2017; Simmons 2016; Parkinson 2016; Chabal and Daloz 2006; Kubik 2009; Pearlman 2016; Schaffer 2007; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Wedeen 2002), this article incorporates voters' interpretations about their political reality to explain how they build agency in an unfavorable environment. This work is based on original ethnographic research, during which I lived among poor voters in a housing project of Sertão of Bahia and worked as a broker for two different candidates. My extended immersion among voters in their own context allowed me to observe a more nuanced picture than current studies that either give voters no agency or view voters as the driving force behind this process (Nichter and Peress 2017). The study shows how a range of bold narratives and attitudes of voters in the face of politicians was instead a symbolic attempt of voters to gain power in a context in which the use of money in elections depreciated the importance of voters' votes.

While this paper draws from the lived experiences of voters in one specific region, the Sertão of Bahia, the mechanisms here outlined can illuminate how vote buying works on the ground at a much broader level, especially in other places in which vote buying thrives in the absence of political machines, such as in Peru and India (Muñoz 2014; Chauchard 2018; Björkman 2014), and amid disapproval of the practice. Two broader and interconnected lessons from the case of Sertão of Bahia can inform other studies of vote buying. First, the way voters think about their political reality influences how they frame their political choices. Second, the cultural context in which voters are embedded shapes their thinking about politics. In a nutshell, this paper claims that to understand how vote buying works on the ground, scholars need to consider not

only the material effects of vote buying but also voters' understandings of these exchanges and their own political reality.

### **Current Views of Vote Buying: Coercion or Reliable Patrons?**

According to the current literature on vote buying, two broad mechanisms explain voters' compliance in vote-buying exchanges. Scholars posit either that voters need to be monitored to ensure they deliver their votes or that monitoring is not necessary as voters innately prefer to support vote-buying candidates, whether out of gratitude or out of a belief that these candidates will be reliable patrons. Neither of these mechanisms, however, fits the dynamics of vote buying in Sertão of Bahia.

Take the assumption of the need for monitoring. Those who consider that monitoring is required hypothesize that mechanisms for monitoring voters' behavior prevent voters from receiving handouts from one candidate but voting for another candidate of their preference (Gonzalez Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014; Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros, and Estevez 2007; Nichter 2008; Stokes 2005; Stokes, Dunning, Nazareno, and Brusco 2013; Weitz-Shapiro 2014). From this perspective, for vote buying to be efficient, politicians and brokers should exclude oppositional voters and target those voters—either loyal or swing—who will likely deliver their support in exchange for goods.

The dynamics of vote buying in Sertão of Bahia deviate in many ways from the monitoring mechanism described above. First, voters had a defiant attitude while approaching politicians, which calls into question the assumption that fear and coercion are the mechanisms underlying voters' compliance. Second, based on my observations as I shadowed Ramiro and Amélia, there is no strategy in place to track voters and their received payouts. On the contrary, both candidates tried to distribute payouts widely

without differentiating supporters from oppositional voters. Lacking control of voters' behavior, brokers and politicians frequently told me a joke in response to the question of how could they be sure that voters would deliver their votes: "voters deliver the vote because they are honest" (the punchline being that the voters are honest when they are participating in a practice regarded as corrupt).

Scholars that contest the viability of monitoring votes within contemporary democracies propose different mechanisms to explain vote buying, but they share the basic premise that voters prefer vote-buying candidates. Some scholars argue that material inducements distributed by politicians produce a feeling of indebtedness in voters (Finan and Schechter 2012; Lawson and Greene 2014). Zarazaga (2014) argues that in the slums of Buenos Aires, neither monitoring nor reciprocity is necessary as voters prefer to support candidates who have a reputation for having access to resources and for being reliable. Similarly, Auyero (1999: 318–21) finds that those who saw politics as an everyday way to solve problems perceived patrons as helpful and self-sacrificing. Other scholars view vote buying not as a strategy to gather votes directly but rather as one that works by conveying information to voters (Kramon 2016; Muñoz 2014; Szwarcberg 2014). According to Kramon (2016), the distribution of electoral handouts increased the expectations of Kenyan voters that a politician would provide benefits in the future.

These approaches, which find a positive match between voters' perceptions of the vote-buying practice and of those candidates who rely on this practice, also cannot account for the dynamics of vote buying in Sertão of Bahia. Voters who perceived politics to be an arena in which to solve personal problems resented vote-buying

candidates as they saw them as corrupt and as unreliable patrons. A candidate's vote-buying capacity in Sertão of Bahia, instead of increasing voters' expectation of future assistance, made voters fear that the candidate would abandon them later. Furthermore, instead of feeling indebted toward patrons, voters strongly refuted the idea that the goods distributed by patrons during the campaign were enough to pay for what they claimed as the value of their vote.

Based on fieldwork evidence that voters are the ones that initiate vote-buying exchanges, Nichter and Peress (2017) claim that voters may vote for competitors if requests are unfulfilled. While I found a similar dynamic of voters requesting goods from politicians in Sertão of Bahia, including threatening to vote for competitors, I have also found that voters ended up voting for candidates that they perceived as viable even when they felt that their requests went unfulfilled by those politicians. This contradiction illustrates the importance of implementing research designs that allow researchers to understand the contexts of those under study and to observe individuals' attitudes and behaviors.

### **Research Design**

The seemingly contradictory behavior of privately viewing vote-buying candidates as unreliable but voting for those very same candidates was not the only inconsistency that I came across in my interactions with voters. For example, voters would claim that money was what decided an election, but within the same conversation, they would say that their vote could make all the difference in an election's outcome. They denied that they had sold their vote despite admitting to engaging in—what is classified legally in Brazil as—vote buying.

Psychological studies have long demonstrated that self-reporting by individuals is inefficacious in explaining actual behavior (Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Wicker 1969; Schuman and Johnson 1976). A research design that relies on self-reporting of behavior, such as surveys or one-shot interviews, is more prone to miss this inconsistency and to draw misleading conclusions about the behavior of those under study by taking political actors' narratives at face value (Fujii 2010; Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Ethnographers, in contrast, observe people moving through their lives—noting not only what individuals say but also what they do. They are thus more likely to observe inconsistency of behavior among those under study. Instead of looking at such incongruence between words and acts as a lie, ethnographers see each action as context dependent and collectively negotiated.

To make sense of voters' inconsistency in Sertão of Bahia, therefore, I look at the different contexts in which these meaning-making practices were immersed.<sup>5</sup> To unpack the meanings embodied in voters' behavior, I draw from the data I gathered that focus on voters' and politicians' lived experiences in Sertão of Bahia. I conducted ethnography in Sertão of Bahia from August through December 2014 and in summer 2015.

My activities in the field can be divided into two broad categories of participant observation: I lived among poor voters in a public housing project, and I interacted with brokers and local politicians. The public housing project was part of the *Minha Casa Minha Vida* (My House My Life) program, (hereafter named the *Cruzeiro* residential complex) in the city of Pedrinhas. By living at *Cruzeiro*, I was able to gain access to ordinary citizens.<sup>6</sup> These citizens were diverse in age and gender, but they largely shared some correlates of poverty in Brazil: lower levels of education and revenue and low rates



of formal employment. After learning the regional vocabulary that my interlocutors used to talk about politics and mapping the main politicians of the region, I conducted fifteen ordinary-language interviews with local citizens.<sup>7</sup>

At *Cruzeiro*, I lived with Marleide—a black woman in her late twenties who worked as a kindergarten teacher—and her six-year-old daughter. I followed Marleide in many of her daily activities, such as doing the grocery shopping, visiting her family members, going to local festivities, and surfing on the internet at night. 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 to several social gatherings in other poor neighborhoods of the city and the rural areas of Pedrinhas.

In addition to my participant observation among voters, I also observed politicians and party activists from the local Workers’ Party (PT). I worked as a broker during the last three weeks of the campaign for two candidates running for state legislature, Ramiro and Amélia. They were both from the PT but had opposing profiles: Ramiro had just entered the ranks of the PT and had a more clientelistic style, while Amélia was a typical *petista* (member of the PT) with a strong programmatic profile. While shadowing these candidates, I traveled with them to campaign activities throughout the state and helped them canvas or hold community meetings by distributing flyers and stickers, talking to voters about the candidate, and taking note of the demands voters made to them. This opportunity enabled me not only to observe first-hand the interactions between politicians and voters during the campaign, but also to learn the implicit and explicit rules that underlay these interactions. In addition, I conducted thirty-five semistructured interviews

with party members of the PT throughout the region with the goal of gathering narratives about the current electoral practices of the party, including vote-buying practices.<sup>8</sup>

These different perspectives and, above all, my extended immersion in the field allowed me to observe the same actors in different circumstances (and to compare their narratives with their actions) and to compare various instances of similar situations, such as vote-buying exchanges. I use these data variations and my own immersion in my informants' worlds to understand the broader material and semiotic context in which voters are embedded, as well as the way in which voters' understanding of their political reality affects how they perceive their interests, their resources, and their attempts to negotiate this perceived reality.

### **The Battle over Meanings: How Voters Challenged Dominant Views of Vote Buying**

To understand how vote buying can thrive amid profound criticism by poor voters, scholars must take a deeper look into voters' perspectives: the way that voters interpret their political reality directly shapes how they frame their strategies and actions.

Voters in Sertão of Bahia were immersed in an atmosphere of widespread vote buying during the election. One of the shared ideas associated with vote buying was that voters who sold their vote would give up their right to seek a politician's assistance after the election. Another perception was that the result of the elections was determined by a candidate's capacity to distribute money through vote buying. For voters, that meant that their vote lost its power in deciding who was elected.

These perceptions—that voters' interests and power were in jeopardy—shaped the electoral strategies of voters as they sought to reclaim agency. Choosing to support viable candidates (those they perceived as most likely to be elected) was one prominent

strategy that voters used to contest prevalent understandings of vote buying. Schaffer (2014: 9) explains that individuals use concepts to pursue their goals and to affirm and to challenge power. As shared understandings of vote buying threaten voters' interests and power, voters challenge these interpretations by promoting and practicing alternative interpretations of vote buying and their vote.

In contrast to the view that their votes were insignificant, voters strove to affirm the meaning of their vote as a form of material assistance that they lent to politicians to get into office. Voting for a candidate who was likely to win, even for one that voters regarded as an unreliable patron, was one way that voters attempted to frame their vote as assistance. Part of voters' strategy was also to deny that their votes could be sold. By restricting what "counted" as vote buying, voters implicitly contested the idea that politicians were free to disregard their requests after the electoral period. Although such claims did not change the asymmetrical stand of voters in relation to politicians, these practices were consequential for the voters. Considering that it is through public speech and actions that individuals form their identity (Wedeen 2009: 89; Arendt 1998; Bourdieu 1996), voters—by aggrandizing their own position—felt entitled to approach elected politicians as if they had provided the latter with tangible assistance.

This article, therefore, elucidates what Schaffer (2014: 9) describes as the politics of concept use: voters in Sertão of Bahia deployed their own understanding of vote buying and of their vote to challenge prevalent understandings of vote buying, to promote their interests, and to affirm their power. Rather than resulting from positive perceptions of vote-buying candidates or from fear of coercion, voters' support for viable candidates was one strategy used to promote the idea of their vote as material assistance lent to

politicians and to foster their claim for a politician's assistance beyond the electoral period. Not all voters supported candidates that were perceived to be viable. However, those who claimed to have helped a candidate get elected, used to this support to justify their claim for seeking a politician's assistance beyond the electoral period. Voters' own framing of their vote as assistance, therefore, made vote buying an effective strategy to attract electoral support, even in the face of widespread distrust of those who offered goods and in the absence of monitoring mechanisms. As a candidate's vote-buying capacity was associated with his or her chance of winning the election, voting for candidates who heavily practiced vote buying made sense for voters who were eager to use this support to back up their claim for assistance from politicians beyond the electoral period.<sup>9</sup>

### **From the Voters' Point of View: The Threat of Vote Buying**

When politics is lived as an arena in which to solve everyday problems through politicians, voters' interest is to ensure that politicians will be available to help them.<sup>10</sup> In Sertão of Bahia, however, this interest was jeopardized by the prevalent perceptions of the widespread use of vote buying during the campaign period. Poor voters disdained vote-buying candidates because they feared that campaign payouts could replace the long-term assistance that they expected to gain from politicians once they were elected to office.<sup>11</sup> For Léia, a young, small farmer from Umbuzeiro, the threat that vote buying represented to her expectations of having continuous assistance from a politician was crystal clear. For her, there were two types of politicians: those who "give" and those who "assist." The first ones were politicians who would distribute money during the election but then disappear from the community. The politicians who "assist" were the ones who were always present in the community and available to assist voters with their

needs. Voters accused candidates who only “give” of getting what they wanted (the vote) without fulfilling what was expected from a good politician: being available to assist voters in their most pressing needs beyond the electoral period.

This tension between the short-term exchanges during the campaign period and voters’ interest in securing access to a politician’s help beyond the election also appeared when I was canvassing with Ramiro and Amélia. During canvassing, a typical first reaction of voters was to say that they were not interested in election payouts. A voter confronted Amélia: “I do not need anything now, but in times of sickness, I will need help.” Amélia usually replied with the following line: “Right now, I could not help you with your health problems because I am not an elected official, but if I win, you will have a deputy from your hometown whose door you can knock on to help you, isn’t that good?” Ramiro, conversely, would hand his phone number to the voter and would start talking about victims of motorcycle accidents (very common in the region) for whom he had recently helped secure hospitalization. Despite the initial, public display of a lack of interest in election payouts, voters would often, by the end of a home visit, direct Ramiro or Amélia to a more private room of the house, where a certain “assistance” from the candidate to the family would be negotiated.

By publicly belittling election payouts, voters indicated what they really wanted from politicians: assistance beyond the electoral period. Ramiro and Amélia, in their responses, tried to signal that they were attuned to what voters expected from them: that they would always be available to assist voters with their pressing needs. By publicly affirming that they were not interested in election payouts but later asking for them behind closed doors, voters signaled the perceived threat that vote-buying exchanges

posed to the long-term assistance that they expected to receive. They implicitly expressed the idea that politicians might give them something informally during the election but that—because they were not interested in these payouts—they could still seek a politician’s assistance later.

Beyond the potential threat that vote buying represented in the eyes of voters to the long-term assistance that they expected to have from politicians, voters also perceived vote buying as something corrupt. In Brazil, the distribution of handouts to voters of any sort during the campaign period is illegal. During the campaign period, the national electoral justice often releases national television advertisements campaigning for a “clean vote” and warning voters that vote buying is a crime.<sup>12</sup> It is hard to say whether voters stigmatized vote buying because they knew that it was illegal or because they increasingly saw these cash exchanges as replacing long-term ties with politicians. Both elements, though, certainly contributed to voters’ perception that heavily vote-buying candidates were not only potential unreliable brokers but also corrupt politicians. “If they offer [money] only when it is close to the election, then they are corrupt,” the farmer Leia explained to me. When I asked Cida, a resident of *Cruzeiro*, whether she thought of politics as something good, she gave me a surprised look, as if wondering whether my question could make any sense:

Cida: Politics? No, it is knavery. No, I don’t like it; if it was up to me, politics wouldn’t exist. It is too much wrong going on. Dirty business.

Author: Can you tell me more about what you think is wrong in politics?

Cida: This stuff of the vote, of buying votes. This stuff was not supposed to happen every two, four years. For me, it would be better if there was one

person that would stay there [in office], and that's it. Then, if someone needed assistance, this person would help. Then these constant changes wouldn't occur. It is a mafia, my dear. I say this because I worked in politics [in a campaign], and I saw a lot of wrong things happening [coisa da terra tremer].

Marleide, a kindergarten teacher in Pedrinhas, also equated the dirtiness of politics to vote buying:

I cannot stand this thing of politics anymore; it is too much dirtiness. A friend of mine told me that in the day of the waking [the night before election day], Gerusa and Diadorim [the mayor of Pedrinhas] distributed a lot of money.

For Marleide and Cida, politics was “dirty” not necessarily because politicians enriched themselves through public office but rather because they practiced vote buying.

### **From the Voters' Point of View: The Threat of Money**

The practice of vote buying in Sertão of Bahia influenced how voters perceived not only the candidates but also their own power to shape the result of elections. Voters and politicians alike shared a widespread perception that money, often displayed through a candidate's capacity to buy votes, was the main factor that decided a candidate's chances of winning an election. For Amélia's campaign manager, for example, the main problem that Amélia faced in her campaign for the state legislature was her inability to match the campaign expenses of heavily vote-buying candidates such as Ramiro:

When I did the campaign for another candidate in 2002, people used to say that you need half a million [*reais*] to make a state deputy, now [in 2014] it is at least two million, so where will it stop? Unfortunately, this is the only way to maintain some clout, but the question is whether this is worth it. I do not know whether it is worth

it anymore. People would come to me and say “Amélia is the best candidate, but her campaign does not pour money, how will she win if she does not have money?” Ramiro was elected because of that; the businessmen supporting him wanted him to win so they gave him a lot of money to spend during the campaign.

The belief that a candidate’s display of money in the campaign was associated with his or her chances to win the election was also shared by voters. A conversation about how much money a candidate had almost always followed the discussion of vote buying.

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 neighbor about the vote-buying practices of local politicians. Dona Cleuza’s niece Léia was criticizing her neighbor because, according to her, he sold his vote to the then-mayor of Juriti, who, in her eyes, was not a good mayor because he did not assist voters with their needs. 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.” Graciane, a self-employed resident of *Cruzeiro*, also thought that a candidate’s fate in an election depended on how much money he or she had to buy votes: “The person who is buying votes is being dishonest, so why does 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.”

Cida tried to make clear to me that she could tell who would win an election in the city by comparing the different wealth and vote-buying capacities of the local candidates and parties:



Cida: The PT is strong, because the PT has [*she rubs her index finger and thumb together*]. They have [*she rubs her fingers together again*]. They have dough.

Author: Do you think the other parties do not have money?

Cida: They do. But I say this because Dilma [then President of Brazil] is on the front, isn't she? They are loaded. Haven't you seen on TV her earrings, how many millions they are worth? [...] If I had just one little stone from her earrings, I could sell it and build the entrance to my house. And she is hanging all that money in her ears! [...]

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 them 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 spreading aid around, 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 would not win.

[...]

Author: What about Diadorim [the then-mayor who supported Ramiro]?

Cida: Look, it is not about whether Diadorim is honest or not. It is simply that the

PT is going to win anyway. They give to one person, then to another and

another. [...] This is why Ramiro won, my dear. [...] Do you think if

Felipe was from the PT he would not have won? He would have won, but

he did not attach his candidacy to the PT.

Although the earrings used by Rouseff were worth far less than the millions of *reais* that Cida claimed as their value,<sup>13</sup> they gave Cida the impression that Rouseff was very

wealthy. The massive vote buying that Cida observed being done by the candidates from the PT of Pedrinhas served the same function as the earrings of President Dilma

Rouseff: it gave the appearance that the candidates of the PT were wealthy and therefore would get elected.

The narratives above not only show that voters associated politicians who engaged in vote buying with corruption but also point to a widespread belief among voters and politicians that money (to buy votes) was what determined the result of an election.

Regardless of whether this perception was correct, its existence had a real consequence for voters: it led to the belief that the outcome of the election was out of their hands and that their vote carried no weight in the election.

### **The Vote as Assistance: Contesting the Threat of Vote Buying**

As we saw, Cida tried to make it very clear that she knew that elections were decided by a candidate's money and his or her capacity to buy votes. In the same conversation, though, she attempted to send a very different message by saying that a

single vote could make all the difference for a candidate. Cida was known in the *Cruzeiro* housing project for the number of things that she received during the election. When talking about the things she had received from candidates, she explained that these exchanges could not be classified as vote buying, since, she argued, they could not repay the value of one vote, as a single vote could make all the difference between winning and losing for a candidate:

Author: But, apart from a job, do you see anyone getting other things from politicians?

Cida: They do, they get a lot of things. They get bricks, cement, money. They have their water or electricity bill paid; one can get a lot of things.

Author: Have you ever received any of those things?

Cida: Yes, I have. To be honest with you, this is in a way vote buying, isn't it?

But, I am not crazy, just a bag of cement is not enough for a vote. A vote is a lot, because, you see, you can win or lose because of one vote. So, one vote is not worth just a little; one vote is worth a lot.

How can we make sense of Cida's seemingly contradictory narratives about the importance of the vote? The contexts in which each of these statements were made can elucidate this puzzle. In one moment, she was trying to show off to me that she understood how politics work, and in the second moment, she was embarrassed with her confession that she engaged in what is legally in Brazil classified as vote buying. As previously discussed, voters stigmatized vote buying not only because they saw it as a corrupt practice but also because they worried that politicians could disregard voters' needs after winning office if they had paid for the vote. Aware of this possible

interpretation, Cida did what many other voters did: she overvalued her vote in order to deny that she had sold it. By claiming that her vote could mean the difference between winning and losing, Cida also affirmed an alternative view to the idea that money is what decides an election.

In addition to professing the idea that one vote was decisive for an election, voters engaged in other strategies that aimed to frame their vote as material assistance lent to politicians. One of these strategies was to compare the value of a vote with what a politician could gain when elected. As a farmer said, “politicians want our vote because they make a lot of money when they are elected.” How much a politician and his or her family were enriched after obtaining office was a constant topic of conversation: the big house the mayor was living in, the new business his family opened, or the new expensive car that was purchased by a politician’s nephew. Whether the gossip surrounding the wealth of a politician was accurate did not matter: the expectation was that once in power, a politician would always personally and financially profit from his or her status. As Ramiro reflected half a year after being elected, “People think that I became a millionaire.”

Another strategy was to explicitly name their vote as “assistance.” The verb *ajudar* (to help) was often used by voters to mean that they voted for a specific politician: “We help them, and we don’t ask for a lot; we don’t ask for bag of cement, we just ask when we are sick, only in the times of need, so the mayor does not say no to us, he knows us,” a farmer from Brasilândia told me. Then he added, “Those who have helped us in times of need are the ones we help.” According to this rationale, the vote enables voters to act as if the politicians, not the voters, were the ones in debt. As a young domestic

servant from Brasilândia told me: “We vote, and when we go after the mayor asking for assistance, he has to help because it was us who put him there.”<sup>14</sup>

Voters also tried to increase the value of their vote by denying that they sold their vote despite admitting that they received goods from politicians. A farmer from Brasilândia argued that with the electronic ballot box, politicians could not control one’s vote anymore: “You give me a hundred reais, and when I get in the ballot box I vote for whomever I want, so vote buying does not exist anymore.” Another discursive strategy used by voters to restrict the range of what could be perceived as vote buying was to argue that they, the voters, were the ones who asked the politician for a handout. The idea shared by voters and brokers was that only if the politician was the one that made an offer that the distribution of electoral goods could be called vote buying.

By overvaluing the importance of their vote, by naming their vote assistance, and by restricting what counted as vote buying voters implicitly contested the idea that their votes were sold—even as they engaged in vote-buying exchanges. I argue that this denial was their counter response to the prevalent perception that voters that sold their votes lost their chance to demand a politician’s assistance after the election. By inverting the notion of who was the one helping whom in their deals with politicians, voters implied that despite receiving electoral handouts, they were still entitled to seek a politician’s assistance after the election. Voters’ overvaluation of the importance of their vote was, therefore, a form of resistance to the prevalent belief that they were powerless to shape election results when money played such a large role in the elections.

### **Practicing the Vote as Assistance: Voting for Viable Candidates**

By affirming that they have supported a candidate that was elected, voters not only framed their vote as assistance but also felt entitled to request a politician’s

assistance after the election. The cases of Cida and Marleide exemplify this sense of entitlement that accompanies the narrative of the vote as assistance.

As stated earlier, Cida received goods such as bricks, children's toys, and favors from Ramiro's campaign during the 2014 election. Following prevalent interpretations of vote buying, Marleide regarded Cida's exchanges with local politicians as a typical case of vote buying that, therefore, revoked Cida's right to seek a politician's help after the election. According to Marleide, "people from Pedrinhas spend the whole year in hardship [because they chose] to get something the day before the election. [...] Farmers sell their votes because they [...] can survive with what they produce." For Marleide, what set her (Marleide) apart from voters that sold their vote was that, because she did not receive goods during the election, she could continuously seek the assistance of politicians. When Marleide explained to me that she had not sold her vote, she said that she could, for example, asks for the alderwoman Gerusa's assistance for any problem she might face with her employer at the daycare.

Marleide's support for Gerusa consisted of more than just her vote. She worked for Gerusa's first campaign and could, therefore, be perceived as part of what Auyero (1999) called the inner circle of a broker. When Gerusa won the election for city council, Marleide got a job at the daycare as part of the quota of jobs that Gerusa had obtained by supporting the mayor in the city council. Marleide used her support for Gerusa to justify her right to demand assistance from Gerusa in solving her everyday problems. I witnessed Marleide use her connections with local politicians and bureaucrats to solve these everyday problems throughout my stay in Sertão of Bahia.

Despite eventually holding flags and distributing fliers for different campaigns associated with the political group of Mayor Diadorim, Cida was not part of the inner circle of Diadorim. Cida never got a job in the local administration as Marleide did. Cida, however, claimed—just like Marleide—that her support for Diadorim granted her the right to continuously seek his assistance, especially to keep demanding a job from him. Although she received a lot of goods in the election of 2014, what Cida wanted was a job. Yet, despite having supported Diadorim and the candidates endorsed by him in the previous elections, she was still unemployed. Making fun of her situation, she told me, “I should already have three jobs with the three votes I gave him.” Even though Cida was frustrated with Diadorim and seemed hopeless that he would someday fulfill his promise of getting her a job, she still supported Ramiro, Diadorim’s candidate. When I asked her why she voted for Ramiro even though she did not like him, this is what she told me:

I voted and what I thought, I don’t know if they will do it, was that they would open factories, jobs. Because there is a lot of unemployment. [...] I, during this time, worked twice in the last two campaigns for mayor. The mayor got elected, then reelected, and I still just have a promise of a job. If you come from a good family, if you are from high society, if you have something, you get all the jobs. Everything is easy! Now, for us who are humble [...] I told the mayor, and I say that anytime, I went there [to city hall] to look for a job, and someone said: “Oh no, but these jobs are only for those who took the public exam.” Then I told them: “Ok, but why haven’t you asked if my vote was a public exam?” Because my vote was already given, and now I need a job, and I don’t have the public exam. So one day I told this to the mayor by phone, and I went there personally to argue with

him. They told me to find them again after the electoral period is over. But to tell you the truth, I wait only for Jesus, because if I don't sell Natura and Avon [...] if I have to depend on someone, I will die of hunger, because those who are there, my dear, they are full of money. Do they care? No, they don't. [...] I will pester Diadorim 24 hours a day for my job. If not, I will tell him that I will go and live with him—me, my husband, and my kids and everything—because I want my job. I've voted so many times for him already, I am tired. Three votes!

Cida started to answer my question about her support for Ramiro by referring to her expectation of receiving a job from Diadorim. Yet she knew from her previous experience of voting for Diadorim's group that she would hardly get a job, as she does not come from a "good family." It was not, therefore, the hope of actually receiving assistance that led her to support a candidate she admitted disliking. The rest of her answer, however, sheds light on the underlying reason for her support for Ramiro. Cida was frustrated with Diadorim, but, given how she framed her vote as an act of assistance to politicians, she still felt entitled to continue approaching Diadorim to make good on his promise to her. Had she given her vote to Felipe, a candidate that, as we saw, in her view had no chance of winning the election, would she feel that she could "pester Diadorim 24 hours a day" for a job? By continuing to support Diadorim's group—according to her, the ones with the higher chance of winning the election—she could at least claim that her vote helped them and, as such, she felt that she could persist in seeking Diadorim's help to find a job.

Just as Ramiro was not Cida's favorite candidate, Gerusa was not Marleide's favorite candidate. Marleide was a member of a local neopentecostal church, and she and



her family supported and worked for a pastor of their church during his two unsuccessful attempts to get elected to the city council. In 2012, the pastor ran for the city council for a third time, but this time Marleide decided to work on Gerusa's campaign. Even though that election was Gerusa's first election, Marleide told me that she knew that Gerusa would win because her campaign had the financial support of Cachoeirinha, one of the wealthiest businessmen in Pedrinhas. When Marleide had the chance to build ties with Gerusa, a candidate that she believed would win the election, she did not hesitate to abandon her pastor. Marleide also had her frustrations with Gerusa, because the latter "gave the best jobs only to the white women with straight hair," even though she [Marleide] "was the one who worked the hardest on the campaign, going to the rural areas and paying for medications for voters from my own pocket." She also complained that Gerusa did not answer her requests for bricks.

Marleide and Cida supported candidates that they perceived as viable even though they both felt deeply frustrated with the assistance they received from these politicians. Both leveraged the support of their vote to continuously seek the assistance of these politicians in solving their everyday problems. Despite having different dealings with local politicians, the two women used the same logic of the vote as material assistance to claim a politician's assistance beyond the election. By voting for viable candidates, Marleide and Cida embodied the idea of their vote as assistance and used this support to seek what they considered to be fair payment for this aid: the assistance of politicians beyond the electoral period.

### **Conclusion**

Current theories of vote buying cannot explain the dynamics of the practice in Sertão of Bahia, a place in which voters voluntarily supported candidates they regarded

as unreliable patrons. I argue that current explanations overlook how voters interpret their political reality and how these perceptions influence their strategies. In the face of widespread vote buying in Sertão of Bahia, voters perceived their goal of receiving assistance from politicians beyond the electoral period to be in jeopardy. The perception that a candidate's vote-buying capacity was indicative of his or her chances of winning the election meant for voters that their power to shape elections through their vote was diminished. Voters attempted to challenge these shared understandings by framing their vote as assistance to get politicians elected and restricting what could count as vote buying. Voting for viable candidates was one of the ways in which voters promoted the idea of their vote as assistance. Beyond this symbolic framing, voting for viable candidates also emboldened voters to claim a politician's assistance beyond the electoral period. Voters' framing of their vote as material assistance made vote buying an effective electoral strategy even though it generated distrust among voters.

The approach developed in this article moves the literature on vote buying beyond narrow economic analysis to include the equally important cultural ideas about the meaning of vote buying and the vote. Beyond the case of Sertão of Bahia, incorporating voters' perceptions might help scholars explain how vote buying occurs elsewhere, especially in places where it thrives even in the absence of party machines, like in Peru (Muñoz 2014), and alongside high societal disapproval of vote buying (Gonzalez Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014).

This article also illustrates the benefit of spending long periods of time among interlocutors to the study of politics. By observing voters as they go through their lives, I was able to form a more nuanced picture of voters' preferences and attitudes. Instead of

revealing either appreciation or fear, a deeper look into voters' views revealed that poor voters were highly critical of vote-buying candidates. Attention to voters' own narratives also revealed that voters had agency in leveraging their dealings with politicians even within a context of objective disparity. Voters in Sertão of Bahia were neither trapped nor naively misguided by politicians. Keenly aware of their reality and its disadvantages, voters in Sertão of Bahia strove to leverage their position in a situation in which they felt disempowered. Spending time among those under study and paying close attention to the meanings that they ascribe to their social reality is therefore essential to uncovering how real actors negotiate their reality. This paper illustrates the potential of ethnography to uncover political categories that, despite being overlooked by researchers, are nonetheless meaningful for actors on the ground (Kubik 2009; Martin 1989; Jourde 2009). By shedding light on the meanings that voters attribute to their vote, a subject that has been largely ignored by scholars studying vote buying, I expand the focus of political science.

### **Appendix 1: Background Information about Sertão of Bahia**

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 (Sampaio 2008; Nascimento 2010).

By the time that I arrived in Sertão of Bahia in August 2014, the region had transformed profoundly from previous generations. 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 holding office in the state of Bahia for its third consecutive term.

Even though the state of Bahia was governed over decades by a strong political boss, Antonio Carlos Magalhães (ACM), the political structure controlled by ACM never resembled a typical political machine structure. His party, currently called Democratas (DEM), never exclusively monopolized the state legislature or local city governments, as would be expected in political machine-dominated places. The cities of the interior of Bahia have historically been divided among at least two fiercely competitive political forces that have alternated in power, though both parties were conservative and elite-based. At the local level, therefore, political competition was high even before the arrival of the center-left Workers' Party at the state government.

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.<sup>15</sup> The results of these redistributing social policies were reflected in numbers.<sup>16</sup> In Pedrinhas, for example, the percentage of people living under extreme poverty<sup>17</sup> dropped from around 40 percent in 1991 to 15 percent in 2010, whereas the number of people living in poverty<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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 appendix 1.

<sup>3</sup> 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. 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. 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.

<sup>4</sup> This article will elucidate the different ways that voters defined vote buying. When I use the term *vote buying*, however, I am referring to the distribution of goods, services, or

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favors to voters during the electoral period by politicians, who act on the expectation that this action will bring votes. This definition also matches the legal definition of vote buying in Brazil: any distribution of goods or promise of distribution that takes place from the time a candidate is qualified to run until the day of the election. Note that the time that this distribution takes place is what defines the provision of goods as vote buying, and as, therefore, illegal. Violation of this law in Brazil may entail imprisonment not only for those who offer goods (the vote buyers) but also for voters who receive or demand anything of value.

<sup>5</sup> I depart from the assumption that individuals' actions are context dependent to use an interpretive approach to make sense of voters' seemingly puzzling behavior. An interpretive approach means that (1) I assume that human action is embedded with meaning and that such meanings are what makes actions possible and that (2) to understand action, we must put the meanings embodied in such action in context with a broader set of meanings. As Bevir (2006: 284) puts it, "to explain action, we cannot just correlate it with a single isolated attitude, we must interpret it in relation to a whole set of beliefs and desires." Here, therefore, to understand voters' behavior in Sertão of Bahia, my analysis draw from the concept of hermeneutic circularity, in which an action is interpreted by taking into consideration the broader semiotic context in which the action is immersed (Yanow 2006: 16).

<sup>6</sup> The drawback of this focus is that I do not discuss in depth how other groups of poor people, especially the members of the social movements of the region, experienced and understood politics. Sertão of Bahia is a region with strong and well-established grassroots movements linked with the struggles for water, land, and peasants' rights.

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Each of these groups or movements promotes an alternative understanding and practice of politics from the one that is described in this article. See appendix 1 for a historical background of the social movements from Sertão of Bahia.

<sup>7</sup> The ordinary-language interview method (Schaffer 2006) aims to observe how individuals use certain words—such as *politics* and *politicians*—in practice, rather than generating narrow answers to direct questions about an individual’s behavior or beliefs. In these interviews, the goal is to prompt conversations by using the common vocabulary of locals instead of academic terminology. I focused on asking questions about the main political actors of the region because those were the politicians known by ordinary voters. Of the fifteen interviews that I conducted, six interviewees were from rural areas. Many rural dwellers felt embarrassed of having their way of speaking recorded. I was given consent to record nine interviews.

<sup>8</sup> As a center-left programmatic party, the PT has historically criticized the vote-buying practices that have plagued Brazilian politics. It was to my surprise, then, that when I arrived in the field, I soon observed candidates of the PT engaging in vote buying. The reason why the party started to engage in the very practice it once criticized is out of the scope of this article, although, as I discuss in another piece, Brazilian politicians can hardly forgo vote buying if they want to be taken seriously as contenders in elections. Given my extensive time in the field, PT politicians could not have hidden their electoral tactics from me. However, I believe that the open access I was given to their meetings and the permission I was given to shadow two of their candidates speak to a willingness on the part of the PT to reflect on the party’s current electoral strategies. During most of

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my interviews with party members, interviewees openly admitted the PT's engagement with vote-buying practices.

<sup>9</sup> I discuss in another piece the consequences of voters' logic in supporting "viable" candidates for political competition. The first effect was to make the practice of vote buying more widespread, even by candidates of more programmatic parties, such as Ramiro and Amélia from the PT. Being able to engage in vote buying, however, did not entail a clear advantage for a single candidate as almost every candidate who wanted to be taken as a serious contender distributed goods and favors during the election. Elections remained, therefore, competitive. The generalized practice of vote buying did entail, however, an advantage for incumbents, who could use the public machine to distribute more goods and resources than challengers. This advantage of incumbents in Brazilian politics in poorer areas was explored by Zucco (2008).

<sup>10</sup> This implicit view of politics as a source of assistance from politicians to deal with personal problems also appears in other political ethnographies (Auyero 1999; Kuschnir 2000). In her ethnography about Rio de Janeiro's council members, Kuschnir (2000: 35, 46) noted how some of Rio de Janeiro's aldermen were swamped by the demands of greedy voters, who asked politicians for the solution to all sorts of problems, from aid in constructing a wall to advice of where to look for a penis-enlargement procedure. Voters in the slums of Buenos Aires saw politics as helpful because, they claimed, it was through politics that not only their community but also their own home improved (Auyero 1999: 171).

<sup>11</sup> This fear was pervasive in everyday talk about politicians in Sertão of Bahia. Similarly, Ansell (2010: 286) noted in his ethnography in the Sertão of Piauí that the increasing

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monetization of patron-client relationships substituted for “virtuous reciprocities,” because—as a town councilman said—cash exchanges leave a “politician free” after the election.

<sup>12</sup> In one such advertisement, a white man in his forties is seated at a kitchen table counting a bunch of dirty 100-*reais* notes, while a narrator explains that during an election, many candidates attempt to break the law by making illegal advertising and, worst of all, by buying votes. The seated man stops counting the money, looks at the camera, and says, “Those who sell their vote, instead of making good money, will make dirty money. What is worst, they will lose the chance to vote for a brighter future” (“Campanha Voto Limpo do TSE” 2012).

<sup>13</sup> According to the newspaper *Estadão*, the earrings used by Dilma Rousseff set off a feverous trend among the popular sector, and replicas were widely sold by street vendors as the “earrings of Dilma.” The fake versions were sold for 5 *reais*, whereas the original *Dior* earrings cost 1,500 *reais* (Maciel 2014).

<sup>14</sup> A similar logic appeared in the ethnographic work of Rego and Pinzani (2013: 120, 132) in the answer that recipients of the conditional cash transfer program *Bolsa Família* (BF) gave to the question of whether they regarded the BF as a favor or as a right. Some recipients said that they considered the BF an obligation of the government because they (the recipients) helped the government with their vote.

<sup>15</sup> The *Benefício de Prestação Continuada* (BPC) is a monthly allowance equal to the minimum wage. It is 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.

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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.

<sup>16</sup> 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).

<sup>17</sup> "Extreme poverty" applies to individuals living with a monthly income below 70 *reais*.

<sup>18</sup> "Poverty" applies to individuals living with a monthly income below 140 *reais*.

<sup>19</sup> Infant mortality is the number of deaths of children under one year of age per 1000 live births.