When Voters Help Politicians: Understanding Elections, Vote Buying, and Voting Behavior through the Voters' Point of View

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Abstract

Current studies explain voters' compliance in vote buying by suggesting either that voters are forced to deliver their vote or that they freely support vote-buying candidates because they prefer them. In Sertão of Bahia, Brazil, however, voters freely support vote-buying candidates despite perceiving them as unreliable patrons. Based on original ethnographic research, this article explains voters' behavior by arguing that voters use their vote as a bargaining chip rather than as an expression of their preferences. The article sheds light on the voters' strategy of siding with likely winners to leverage their support for these candidates in post-election dealings with them. The paper further contextualizes the voters' strategy as a response to the threat that the use of vote buying represents to voters' interest in securing long-term assistance from politicians. The study illustrates how ethnography better elucidates sensitive behavior by giving researchers access to social action and to the perspectives of people being studied.

Keywords: vote buying, elections, electoral behavior, ethnography

Introduction

"If a politician says no to us, then when the electoral period arrives, we will also say no to him," said a small farmer from Umbuzeiro,[1] Bahia, Brazil. Like him, voters in Sertão of Bahia, Brazil, publicly threatened to punish candidates that denied their requests during and after the electoral period. And yet, despite their defiant talk, voters overwhelmingly supported vote-buying[2] candidates that were deemed to be not only corrupt but also largely unresponsive to voters' requests.

Most studies assume that, in the absence of political machines that control voters' behavior (Stokes 2005; Gonzalez Ocantos, Kiewiet de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014; Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros, and Estevez 2007; Nichter 2008; Weitz-Shapiro 2014), voters support candidates that engage in vote buying because they perceive these candidates positively (Finan and Schechter 2012; Kramon 2016; Lawson and Greene 2014; Muñoz 2014; Nichter 2018; Zarazaga 2014). Recent studies into vote buying in places where party machines are absent illuminate the mechanism through which voters support their preferred candidates, but these studies cannot explain why voters voluntarily side with candidates that they personally dislike but perceive as likely winners. My paper contributes to this growing literature by laying out the mechanisms through which voters support candidates that they dislike in the absence of coercive mechanisms to hold them accountable.

Based on ethnographic research that focuses on voters, this article argues that to fully account for voters' electoral behavior, we need to take into account the ways in which voters themselves frame their electoral choices and the conditions that lead to this framing. Recent studies have rightly claimed that in contexts where voters depend on

politicians to access essential resources, they express a preference for supporting reliable patrons (Kramon 2016, 464; Nichter 2008, 170; Zarazaga 2014). However, by observing not only voters' spoken opinions but also their actual relationships with local politicians over time, my participant observation revealed that voters' electoral choices did not reflect their stated preferences for reliable patrons.

I argue that the explanation for this paradoxical behavior lies in the fact that voters perceived and used their vote as a bargaining chip rather than as an expression of political preference. Voters' actions and words reflected the notion that their vote was an act of assistance given to politicians running for office. Voters sided with likely winners even when they perceived these candidates as untrustworthy patrons in order to leverage their support (i.e., their vote) in post-election dealings with these politicians. I argue that this behavior was informed by a perception among voters that their right to seek politicians' assistance *after* the election was threatened by the widespread distribution of money and favors *during* the election.

The article illustrates the contribution that ethnographic methods can bring to the study of electoral behavior, in which a range of moral valuations shapes what individuals consider appropriate to express to a researcher. By observing not only what individuals say but also what they do (Hagene 2015, 3; Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Wedeen 2009, 85), ethnography can produce a more complete understanding of social action in contexts of sensitive behavior—like vote buying—and disentangle stated preferences from actual behavior. The study shows that participant observation offers crucial access to voters' perspectives and their lived experiences, an access that is essential to uncovering how real voters negotiate their electoral choices.

The Case of Sertão 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 where I lived have between 5,000 and 80,000 inhabitants, many of whom live in rural areas. Pedrinhas, the city where I was based, was one of the biggest cities of the region and yet had a population that was 40 percent rural. For comparison, of Brazil's total population, only 14 percent is rural.

Rainfall in the Sertão is not only low but also irregular, leading to long periods of drought. Most of Sertão of Bahia is occupied by small subsistence farmers, who are severely affected by the drought. Harsh climate conditions and the poverty of small farmers are—according to scholarship on Brazil's Northeast—the two biggest factors behind Sertão voters' susceptibility to coercion and material dependency on strong local bosses (Graham 1990; Leal 1997; Vilaça and Albuquerque 1978). For almost two decades after Brazil's democratization in 1985, conservative parties dominated the politics of the Northeast (Power 2000). Scholars attribute this dominance to their clientelist practices and their tight control of federal resources (Alves 2018; Alves and Hunter 2017; Montero 2010, 2012; Van Dyck and Montero 2015).

Bahia, the largest, most populated, and richest state of the Northeast, was controlled for decades by a conservative party linked with Bahia's former governor, Antônio Carlos Magalhães (ACM). Despite the active civil society organizations that flourished in Sertão of Bahia during the 1970s and 1980s, the left and programmatic parties linked with these grassroots associations never made significant inroads in electoral races (Ansell 2010; Palmeira and Heredia 2010).

The situation changed in 2006 when the left-leaning Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) defeated the right-wing incumbent and eroded the hegemony of the ACM group in the state. The PT has been historically a unique party in Brazil. In a country where most parties lack roots in society and clear ideological content, the PT has cultivated a distinct party brand through tight internal discipline, a left programmatic ideology, opposition to clientelism, and strong links to grassroots movements (Amaral 2011; Hunter 2010; Keck 1992; Samuels 2006). When I arrived in the field in 2014, the PT had 91 mayors in Bahia, 20 percent more than in 2002. In the 2018 elections, the PT won a fourth gubernatorial term and defeated once again the ACM group.

The dismantling of conservative control of politics in Bahia by a leftist programmatic party was not the region's only transformation. Due to the implementation of universal and targeted social policies, the population's living standards in Brazil's Northeast have improved significantly in the past few decades. In Pedrinhas, for example, the percentage of the total population living in poverty[3] went from around 71 percent in 1991 to 30 percent in 2010, with the percentage living under extreme poverty[4] dropping from 40 to 15 percent over the same period. Water access, which in the past was one of the main currencies used in clientelist exchanges, also significantly improved after the implementation of the federal water supply program, *Água para Todos* (Water for All), which built water cisterns in rural households that lacked access to running water.

To my surprise, despite these changes, clientelist and vote-buying practices persisted. Much to the discomfort of its grassroots members, the PT in Bahia not only forged pragmatic alliances with traditional clientelist parties (Alves 2018; Alves and Hunter 2017) but its candidates also distributed favors and money to voters during the

2014 election.[5] And despite the rise in living standards, low-income voters still face significant insecurities related to unemployment, illness (Nichter 2018, 98–100), and drought. To deal with these risks, commoners in Sertão of Bahia continue to rely on politicians' assistance as a safety net.

The case of Sertão of Bahia can provide significant insight into the resilience of vote buying in a modernizing society, while also serving as a window into clientelist politics in not only rural but also urban areas of Brazil. In 2017 almost 60 percent of Brazilian legislators reported that voters pressured them to behave in clientelist ways.[6] Other ethnographic studies have also documented the existence of similar practices in larger metropolitan areas (Arias 2006; Gay 1994; Kuschnir 2000b, 2008).

Vote Buying and Voters' Behavior Revisited

Traditional approaches have characterized vote buying as a coercive electoral strategy in which voters are forced to give up their preferences to gain access to material goods distributed by candidates during campaigns. According to scholars, in order to prevent voters from receiving handouts from one candidate and then voting for another, organized political machines generally monitor voters' behavior and punish defectors (Gonzalez Ocantos, de Jonge, and Nickerson 2014; Magaloni, Diaz-Cayeros, and Estevez 2007; Nichter 2008; Stokes 2005; Stokes et al. 2013; Szwarcberg 2012; Weitz-Shapiro 2014). From this perspective, voters deliver their support for clientelist politicians because they fear retribution.

Observing the widespread distribution of material goods during elections in places where organized political machines are absent, recent studies have questioned the importance of monitoring and coercion. Field observations in African countries

(Guardado and Wantchékon 2017; Kramon 2016; Vicente and Wantchekon 2009), India (Björkman 2014; Chauchard 2018) and Peru (Muñoz 2014) have revealed that the distribution of material goods during elections is not followed by a systematic attempt to control the behavior of voters. Likewise, in Sertão of Bahia, candidates distribute electoral payouts widely, without discriminating against supporters of the opposition.

In order to explain the existence of vote buying in places that lack organized political machines, new studies have proposed different mechanisms to explain politicians' continued use of this strategy. Some scholars argue that vote buying *directly* affects voters' choice because the material inducements distributed by politicians produces a feeling of indebtedness in voters (Finan and Schechter 2012; Lawson and Greene 2014). As such, brokers would not need to monitor voters' behavior (although they need to identify voters that are more likely to reciprocate): voters will naturally choose to support the candidates to whom they feel grateful.

Other scholars argue that vote buying *indirectly* affects voters' choice. For Zarazaga (2014), neither monitoring nor reciprocity is necessary because voters support candidates with a reputation for having access to resources and fulfilling their promises. Similarly, Nichter (2018, 169–70) argues that voters use politicians' responses to past requests to ascertain whether a candidate will follow through on long-term promises of assistance.

Still other scholars argue that vote buying provides voters with crucial *information* that voters use to determine their support. For Kramon (2016), voters seek candidates whose promises of future distribution of resources are more credible. He argues that a candidate's distribution of electoral handouts signal to voters electoral

viability, competence, and trustworthiness. For Muñoz (2014), the distribution of electoral handouts helps candidates establish viability by buying voter turnout but does not directly influence voters' choice. However, voters who participate in campaign events are exposed to candidates' electoral platforms, which then help them decide their vote.

Existing approaches cannot explain the puzzling behavior of voters in places like Sertão of Bahia, where party machines are not institutionalized and where clientelism is competitive, preventing politicians and brokers from monitoring voters' behavior. Voters in Sertão did not vote under coercion, but they also—given their negative views toward vote-buying candidates—did not vote as an expression of preference or of gratitude.

Current studies cannot account for voters' voluntary support for candidates whom they dislike. First, most studies center their attention on the candidates or brokers and only secondarily theorize about the reasons behind clients' support for vote-buying candidates. Second, most base their analysis of voters' behavior on voters' stated attitudes rather than on actual, observed behavior. Finally, most studies rely on individualistic assumptions of rational choice models, which produce accounts of voters' preferences and behavior that are disconnected from voters' actual social context and practical relations (Wedeen 2002, 717). To explain the seemingly paradoxical behavior among voters of freely supporting unreliable patrons, we must take a deeper look at voters' perspectives and at the ways that voters make sense of their electoral choices.

Uncovering Voters' Constrained Agency in Vote-Buying Settings

This study adopts an ethnographic approach that focuses on voters as socially embedded actors and on the ways in which they understand their political choices (Schatz 2009, 9). Departing from the premise that individuals' behavior and attitudes are shaped

by the way that they interpret their political reality (Cramer 2012; Kubik 2009; Pearlman 2016; E. S. Simmons 2016; Wedeen 2002), this article argues that voters' behavior in clientelist contexts can only be fully understood by accounting for the ways in which voters themselves frame their electoral choices and the conditions that underpin this framing.

Current studies assume that when voters' behavior is not controlled by political machines, they exercise their vote as an expression of political preference. However, voters' voluntary support for candidates whom they dislike reveals that voters frame their vote differently. In Pedrinhas, voters talked about their vote as aid given to politicians to gain office, and they leveraged this support to legitimize their right to seek a politician's help after the electoral season. I argue that the strategy of siding with winners and talking about the vote as assistance reveals that voters understood and used their vote as a bargaining chip rather than an expression of political preference.

Voters' framing of their vote as a bargaining chip was a response to a social context that they perceived as threatening to their interest in securing long-term and reciprocal ties to politicians. Voters perceived electoral results as largely determined by a candidates' capacity to distribute electoral handouts and yet felt that heavily vote-buying candidates would be unresponsive to their demands after the election. To voters, the ubiquity of vote-buying practices meant not only that they had little leverage to influence the elections but also that the winning candidates were those least likely to help them beyond the electoral period. Given this context, voters' concern was on affirming their right to seek a politician's help beyond the electoral period. Voters thus sided with likely winners in order to leverage this support in their post-electoral requests to politicians.

The strategy of siding with likely winners lays out a mechanism of voter compliance that is distinct from what coercive and informational approaches to vote buying have theorized. This strategy elucidates not only why voters and politicians paid a great deal of attention to displays of electoral strength,[7] as noted by Kramon (2016) and Muñoz (2014), but also why voters cared more about a candidate's electoral viability than his quality as a politician. For informational scholars, electoral viability is not a determining factor because voters are assumed to understand their vote as an expression of preference. Voters are neither blackmailed nor monitored but their concern on affirming their right to seek a politician's help beyond the electoral period hindered their ability to use their vote as an expression of political preference.

Relying on an interpretivist sensibility, I mobilize voters' testimonies to uncover their interpretation of their reality (Schatz 2009, 13), particularly their views of the electoral process and their judgments about the quality of politicians that elections produced. I discuss how conversations about elections were centered on candidates' electoral strength and how politicians and voters often referred to the capacity of a candidate to distribute electoral handouts to justify their perceptions of this strength. I argue that these comments reveal a shared understanding that elections' results are highly dependent on the capacity of a candidate to dispense money in the campaign. I also draw from voters' narratives about good and bad politicians to show that voters perceived heavily vote-buying candidates as unreliable patrons. Based on long-existing moral distinctions between vote buying and reciprocal ties (political clientelism) (Ansell 2014, 80; Palmeira 1996, 49; Villela 2005, 273; Villela and Marques 2002, 91), which revoked vote-buying recipients' ability to seek a politician's assistance after the election, voters

believed that politicians that relied on vote buying would be unresponsive to their demands after the electoral period. The ubiquity of vote-buying exchanges alongside with these shared ideas about elections and vote-buying candidates meant for voters that the candidates getting elected were the ones that they judged to be least reliable.

Perceiving their right to seek a politician's assistance after the electoral period as threatened by the widespread use of vote buying during the campaign period, voters responded by emphasizing their role of helping politicians. Voters engaged in performative talk that inverted the roles of who helps whom in vote-buying exchanges. Voters overvalued the importance of their vote, talked about their vote as assistance that they lent to politicians to gain office, and constantly gossiped about the money that politicians made once in office. I argue that this performative talk reveals not only that voters were concerned about their bargaining positions vis-à-vis politicians but also that they used their vote to legitimize their right to seek a politician's aid after the election.

Although such claims did not change the asymmetric relationship of voters and politicians, these practices affected how voters approached their electoral choices. Individuals form their identity through public speech and actions (Wedeen 2009: 89). Voters—by aggrandizing their own position—thus felt entitled to approach elected politicians as if they had provided the latter with tangible assistance. As I will discuss with concrete examples, voters that sided with likely winners justified the legitimacy of post-electoral requests by framing their vote as aid given to politicians. Not all voters followed the logic of siding with winners, but those who did so left aside their personal preferences and leveraged their vote post-election to claim support from politicians.

Research Design

Observations of voters over time and their practical relations with local politicians were essential for revealing that voters' actual behavior did not follow their verbal account of past or future behavior. Research has shown that individuals not only act in ways inconsistent with their expressed beliefs but also provide inaccurate accounts of their actions (Fujii 2010; Jerolmack and Khan 2014). This problem is acute for socially sensitive phenomena like vote buying, in which a range of moral valuations shapes what individuals consider appropriate to express in conversations or to a researcher. Ethnography elicits a better understanding of social action in sensitive contexts because it entails direct observation of behavior (Jerolmack and Khan 2014, 181). Ethnographers observe people moving through their lives—noting not only what individuals say but also what they do (Hagene 2015, 3; Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Wedeen 2009, 85). Indeed, during interviews, voters consistently criticized candidates that heavily relied on vote buying and threatened to punish politicians that denied their requests. However, in observing voters' actual relationships with local politicians, I noted that voters sided with heavily vote-buying candidates despite expressing disappointment with them.

The access that participant observation grants to voters' perspectives is also essential in uncovering the motivation behind voters' actual electoral strategies. Understanding voters' choices entails accessing often unarticulated strategies that can only be uncovered by tracing how voters define their vote and understanding the concerns that molded their thinking. By immersing themselves in the lives of those under study, ethnographers access the real-life constraints and collective understandings that individuals face on a daily basis and that influence how they define a situation and the

lines of action that they end up taking (Jerolmack and Khan 2014, 181–86; Cramer 2016, 21). By spending time with voters as they went through their lives, I could note the topics that they discussed (Cramer Walsh 2009, 171) and the objects of their attention during the elections. I could then use this evidence to uncover not only their interpretation of their political reality but also the taken-for-granted strategies that they utilized to negotiate their context and to affirm their interests.

My immersion in Sertão of Bahia can be divided into two broad categories of participant observation: I lived among low-income voters, and I interacted with brokers and local politicians. As the focus of this paper is to make sense of voters' electoral choices, most of the evidence mobilized in this paper is based on what I experienced by living among ordinary voters. During my first stay in Sertão of Bahia, from August through December 2014, I lived in a public housing project (hereafter named the *Cruzeiro* residential complex) in the city of Pedrinhas. I made a follow-up visit in summer 2015, and I am still in touch with my most important interlocutors. By living at *Cruzeiro*, I was able to gain access to ordinary citizens. This focus was intentional as I sought to investigate the experiences of individuals outside the realm of organized politics[8] and of individuals who are not themselves political elites. 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.[9]

In addition to my participant observation among voters, I also observed politicians and party activists mainly from the local PT. I also worked closely for two candidates for state legislature during the last three weeks of the 2014 campaign. My participant observation of the local PT was an opportunity that emerged in the field following my initial contact with Diadorim, then the mayor of Pedrinhas, who gave me access to the city as well as the political life of the local PT. My active participation in the PT, however, kept me from pursuing close relationships with other local politicians as I was perceived by locals to be a *petista* (member of the PT).

I chose to shadow the two candidates because both were competing for the votes of the region where I lived and because, despite being from the same party, they had opposing profiles. Amélia was a typical *petista* with a strong programmatic profile, while Ramiro had just entered the ranks of the PT and had a more clientelist style. As already discussed, the PT has historically opposed vote-buying practices and was, therefore, the party least expected to engage in vote buying. And yet, both Amélia and Ramiro's campaigns, despite their different profiles, engaged in the distribution of electoral gifts to voters—a finding that speaks to the ubiquity of this practice in Sertão of Bahia. Amélia and Ramiro's daily activities in their campaigns resembled the strategies implemented by conservative politicians: meet with voters through canvassing, community meetings, and rallies, and respond to voters' constant requests for electoral favors. I have no reason to believe that the electoral strategies that I observed from legislative candidates were any different from those used by candidates in other races, like municipal races. If anything, given that the municipality has historically been a major source of employment in the

small cities of the interior of Brazil, I would expect the use of vote-buying practices to be even more accentuated in municipal elections.

Voters' Perspectives and Electoral Choices

In the following empirical sections, I will draw from ethnographic evidence to uncover voters' interpretations of their political environment and their responses to this perceived context. In the first part, I mobilize voters' narratives, gossip, and conversation to uncover how voters perceived the electoral process and how they evaluated politicians that they perceived as successful—that is, the heavily vote-buying candidates. In the second part, I will draw from voters' talk of their vote as an aid and the accompanying sense of entitlement to approach politicians to uncover how voters framed their electoral choices as a bargaining chip and how they leveraged this framing to affirm the legitimacy of their post-electoral requests to politicians.

Vote Buying and Electoral Viability

Traditionally, vote-buying exchanges are characterized as undertaken by politicians and brokers who offer goods and services to voters in exchange for their votes. The distribution of electoral payouts in Sertão of Bahia, however, did not follow this dynamic. The exchanges were led not by the politicians but by voters, who constantly approached politicians asking for goods and services during the campaign. As I learned by working for Ramiro, candidates followed one unwritten rule to deal with voters' requests during the campaign: never deny a request from a voter. Thus candidates attempted to hand out money to whomever asked. In a country where levels of party affiliation are low (Samuels and Zucco 2014, 755) and where most parties lack a distinct programmatic identity (Samuels and Zucco 2014, 757), the distribution of electoral

handouts is a central factor in the mobilization of political support. Despite the traditional image of elections being controlled by local bosses through force and intimidation in the rural Northeast, elections in the backlands of Brazil have historically been a fierce competition among rival political groups (Palmeira 1996, 45). In this competitive environment, vote buying was of such central importance that even programmatic candidates engaged in the practice.

The importance of vote buying has roots in the common association between a candidate's vote-buying capacity and perceptions of electoral strength. Discussions during the election were permeated by comments and disputes about who had *força na política* (lit.: strength in politics), which, during the campaign period, meant in large part who had the chance of winning. A candidate's display of money through vote buying was often used as a marker of strength.[10] Voters and politicians alike shared the perception that money, often displayed through a candidate's capacity to buy votes, was the main factor that decided his chances of winning an election.

For Amélia's campaign manager, for example, Amélia's primary challenge in her campaign was her inability to match the expenditures of heavily vote-buying candidates: "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?'" he once told me.

However, the performance of *força na política* was not done only through the display of money through vote buying. Candidates had many ways to perform strength as potential winners: the number of people they could gather in meetings, rallies, and caravans; the number of people working for and following them; the number of walls painted with their logo;[11] the fanciness of their cars; the quality of their flyers and

campaign songs; the number of powerful supporters they had. Although candidates paid attention to all these elements, vote-buying exchanges were particularly important for voters because they offered a hands-on opportunity to gather impressions about candidates' strength. Politicians in Sertão of Bahia distributed electoral payouts not to convert every penny into votes nor to buy participation in campaign events (Muñoz 2014; Szwarcberg 2012) but rather to foster impressions of strength among voters. As Cramer and Toff (2017) note, individuals draw heavily from personal experiences with political actors or institutions to form their political opinions. By observing how candidates responded to their requests, voters gathered impressions about candidates' strength. Cida, a resident of *Cruzeiro*, for example, was sure that she could tell whether a candidate would win by comparing 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 does it again*]. They have dough.
>
> Author: Do you think the other parties do not have money?
>
> Cida: They do. But I say this because Dilma [Rousseff, 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? […]
>
> 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.
>
> […]
>
> Author: What about Diadorim [the then-mayor who supported Ramiro]?

Cida: Look, it is not about whether Diadorim is honest. 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 [local right-wing candidate] 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 Rousseff were worth far less than the millions of *reais* that

Cida claimed as their value,[12] they gave Cida the impression that Rousseff was 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 Rousseff: it cemented in

her the impression that the PT candidates were wealthy and therefore would get elected.

Voters' Attitudes and Vote Buying: Criticizing Bad Politicians

In addition to gathering impressions about a candidate's strength, voters used a

candidate's vote-buying practices to judge his quality as a politician. However, a

candidate's vote-buying practices did not induce in voters a sense that he would be a

reliable patron (cf. Kramon 2016). Rather, voters saw the distribution of electoral

handouts as a clear sign that the candidate would not be a good and reliable patron.

For Léia, a young, small farmer from Umbuzeiro, 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. For Léia only those who assist were deserving

of her vote. Likewise, Cleide, who worked as a cooker for a public school and lived in

Cruzeiro with her daughter, viewed politicians as good only if they remember voters after the election:

> The deceased Chico da Cova won more than five elections because he did not forget the people, he worked night and day. Whatever you needed, he was there for you if he could do it, it could be any time of the day, you only needed to ask. Whatever was needed: to make a doctor's appointment, to schedule a surgery, to transport a body… A politician cannot be a politician only during the election, like the aldermen in our city. Go ask something from them now [after the election], and see if they give it. During the elections, they all run after you…

The similar narratives of Cleide and Léia reflected a predominant understanding among voters that good politicians were the ones always ready to assist voters with their pressing needs regardless of the period, whereas bad politicians were the ones that would only help voters during elections. These narratives should not be interpreted as evidence that voters actually supported only those that they perceived as good patrons, but rather as an indication of what voters characterized as an ideal politician: one who always assists voters and who does not rely on vote buying.

This opposition in voters' minds between vote-buying politicians and reliable politicians has its roots in the long-existing differentiations among voters of moral and immoral exchanges between voters and politicians. Similarly to the findings of other anthropologists of Brazil's backland areas (Ansell 2014, 80; Palmeira 1996, 49; Villela 2005, 273; Villela and Marques 2002, 91), my researched revealed that individuals in Sertão of Bahia perceived vote-buying exchanges as immoral and corrupt because they did not grant voters access to a long-term personal relationship with politicians.

Marleide, a kindergarten teacher living in Cruzeiro, for example, believed that rural voters sell their votes because they do not need politicians: they can survive with what they produce on their lands. Implied in Marleide's comment is the idea that by selling their vote, rural voters consciously give up their right to seek a politician's help after the election. Showcasing this predominant understanding of vote-buying exchanges, a rural voter from Brasilândia said, "I do not sell my vote for a bag of cement or for fifty *reais*, because then the politician will not help you when you really need it. You need to know the right time to ask." I do not know whether this farmer refrained from receiving electoral handouts, but his narrative illustrates the perceived threat that engaging in vote-buying exchanges represented to a voter's right to seek a politician's help post-election.

This predominant understanding of vote buying as an exchange that happens during the election and that revokes voters' ability to establish ties of reciprocity with politicians beyond the election explains why voters perceived candidates that engaged in vote buying as potentially unreliable patrons. To voters in Sertão, a candidate's engagement in vote buying did not signal his promises of future support (Kramon 2016) but rather directly tarnished his reputation as a reliable patron.

This negative understanding of vote buying together with the perception that only heavily vote-buying candidates win elections has a direct consequence for how voters perceive electoral results. The prevalence of vote-buying exchanges in Sertão was perceived by votes to mean not only that the election was rigged in favor of heavily vote-buying candidates but also that their right to seek a politician's assistance beyond the electoral period was seriously challenged.

The Voter as a Helper

Contradicting the generalized perception among voters that elections were decided by a candidate's capacity to dispense money, voters engaged in seemingly paradoxical talk that boosted the importance of their vote. As I will show, this type of talk inverted traditional notions of who was helping whom in vote-buying exchanges, allowing voters to symbolically perform the role of helper. I argue that voters engaged in talk that emphasized the contribution of their vote to politicians because they were concerned with their post-election bargaining position. This performative talk also reveals an active attempt to challenge the notion that their ability to request politicians' aid beyond the electoral period was hindered by widespread vote buying.

One of the ways in which voters engaged in talk that emphasized their contribution to politicians was by telling stories about how one vote could be decisive in an election. As we have seen, Cida made it very clear that elections were decided by a candidate's capacity to buy votes. In the same conversation, though, she sent a different message by saying that a single vote could make all the difference for a candidate. Cida was known in *Cruzeiro* for the number of things that she received during the election. When talking about all that 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 that one vote has for politician. A single vote could win or lose an election:

> Author: But, part 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.

To make sense of Cida's seemingly contradictory narratives it is necessary to explore their context. When she said that an election was determined by a party's capacity to distribute electoral handouts, she was trying to show me that she understood how elections work. When she contradicted her previous statement by saying that her vote could make all the difference, she was attempting to refute the idea that she had sold her vote for electoral handouts. Cida's overvaluation of her vote in the election reveals her concern for countering prevalent notions of vote buying as a practice that could restrict her ability to seek later assistance. It is also a performative narrative that inverts the roles of helper/helped in vote-buying exchanges.

Another performative strategy that voters used to emphasize the contribution of their vote was to explicitly name their vote as "assistance." The verb *ajudar* (to help) was often used by voters to mean that they had 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 [with the vote]." The rationale that followed this framing of votes as "assistance" was that politicians had a duty to pay back voters' help in getting them into office, which, again, reveals an explicit attempt by voters to challenge notions that

threaten the legitimacy of their post-election requests. 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."[13]

This narrative of the vote as empowering, however, is only relevant if the politician supported does get elected—that is, if the vote indeed helps a politician win an election. As I will discuss in the next section, the ability to draw from this narrative of the voter as creditor is what makes siding with likely winners so attractive. When I asked a small farmer whether he would seek assistance from a politician for whom he voted but that was not elected, he replied, "if the politician does not win, I will not seek his help because he owes me nothing." Voters thus engage in performative talk in which they occupy the role of creditor but only if the vote helps grant office to the politician.

Another discursive strategy that voters used to bolster their own role as creditor 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 family were enriched after obtaining office was a constant topic of conversation among voters: the big house where the mayor lived, the new business his family opened, the expensive car that was purchased by a nephew, the school in Salvador that the once-poor public school professor owned after becoming secretary of education. Those were all rumors that I heard voters discussing when they chatted about local politicians. The accuracy of this gossip did not matter: voters themselves admitted that they did not whether the rumored wealth was true, only that they heard about it. These rumors cemented in voters the idea that a politician would always personally and financially profit from winning office. Talking about politicians'

profit from holding office helped voters highlight how much their vote contributed to politicians and, as such, fostered voters' narratives of their vote as aid.

Using the Vote as Assistance

The previous sections explored how voters interpreted the widespread distribution of electoral payouts as detrimental to their ability to seek a politician's assistance after the election and how as a response to this threat they talked about their vote as an act of aid to politicians. In this section, I will illustrate with concrete examples how voters used their support to likely winners to reclaim assistance from a politician beyond the electoral period. This ability to draw from the notion of the vote as an act of assistance to politicians that would later be repaid helps us understand why voters attached more importance to a candidate's chance of winning the election than to his qualities as a patron. As I will discuss, in siding with likely winners, these voters left aside not only their resentment toward politicians that had denied their requests in the past but also their preferences for other candidates. And voters, despite having varying degrees of proximity toward politicians, uniformly pulled from the same understanding of their vote as an act of assistance to legitimize post-election claims for aid from politicians.

When I meet Marleide in 2014, she had been close to the alderwomen Gerusa for over two years. Marleide was part of a big family in Pedrinhas, which granted her considerable political capital to build ties with local politicians. In 2012, Marleide worked for Gerusa's first campaign for city council, although Gerusa was not her favorite candidate. Marleide was a member of a local neopentecostal church, and she and her family had supported and worked for her pastor during his two unsuccessful attempts to get elected to the city council in 2004 and 2008. When the opportunity to work for

Gerusa appeared, Marleide did not hesitate to leave her pastor, who also ran for city council in 2012. Marleide told me that she felt no doubt about this decision because she was tired of being unemployed. She thought that the chances of the pastor winning were rather slim in comparison to Gerusa, who, according to Marleide, would surely win that election given the financial support of Cachoeirinha, one of the wealthiest businessmen in Pedrinhas. When Gerusa won her election, Marleide got a job at the daycare as part of the quota of jobs that Gerusa had obtained by supporting the mayor.

Marleide told me that she had not sold her vote for Gerusa, not only because she did not receive goods during the election, but also because she, differently from those who sell their vote, could continuously seek the assistance of Gerusa for any problem she might face. And so I observed her doing during my stay in Sertão of Bahia.

Despite having secured a job—one of the most desired requests among voters— Marleide was disappointed with Gerusa. At the time of my 2015 visit to Pedrinhas, Marleide had left the job at the daycare, moved to another city, and grown tired of the "dirtiness of politics." Marleide's frustration with politics had a lot to do with her discontent with Gerusa. She complained that Gerusa "gave the best jobs only to the white women with straight hair," even though she (Marleide), who was black, "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. Besides, she suspected that Gerusa had surreptitiously registered her as an employee of city hall and was keeping her salary. Despite Marleide's frustrations, when Gerusa ran for state legislature in 2018, she supported the candidate again, participating in rallies and other campaign events. While in 2012 Marleide abandoned her pastor's

campaign to support Gerusa, in 2018 she left her resentment toward Gerusa behind as Gerusa continued to be one of the strongest politicians in the city.

Cida lived in the same public housing project as Marleide and, like many other voters in Sertão of Bahia, she hoped that politicians could help her find a job. Cida, however, did not have close ties to a local politician. Despite eventually holding flags and distributing fliers for different campaigns associated with the political group of Diadorim, Cida was not part of the inner circle. Unlike Marleide, she did not have a job in the local administration. And yet, just like Marleide—and even as she admitted to having received goods during the election—Cida claimed that her support for Diadorim granted her the right to continuously seek his assistance. I asked her why she still voted for Diadorim's candidate, Ramiro, given her frustration with Diadorim and the fact that she said that she disliked Ramiro. She responded:

> 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. […] 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 justified her support by saying that she expected to receive a job from Diadorim, yet she knew from her previous experience of voting for Diadorim's group that she would likely not 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 Ramiro in 2014. Rather, Cida supported Ramiro because, despite her frustration with Diadorim, she still felt entitled to continue approaching Diadorim to make good on the act of assistance that she had given to him. Had she given her vote to Felipe, for example, a candidate that she viewed as more honest but unlikely to win, 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 leveraged her vote as an act of assistance to Diadorim and thus was able to persist in seeking his help to find a job.

If voters from the city, like Cida and Marleide, were mostly frustrated with local politicians for the lack of employment, rural voters were most bitter about the lack of assistance in accessing health care. Being far away from the urban medical facilities, rural dwellers often depended on rides provided by local politicians and brokers to get to a hospital in cases of emergency. Dona Cleuza and her grandniece Léia were small farmers from Umbuzeiro, a rural district of the city of Juriti. When I met them in 2015, they were outraged with the alderman José that served their community. In the past, Dona Cleuza said, José had been very helpful, taking her brother to the hospital when he was

sick, no matter what time it was. Now, the alderman would only take villagers to the hospital if they paid for gas, and he only visited the community while campaigning. A neighbor of Dona Cleuza's who was listening to our conversation also complained about José. He said that the alderman did not attend to his request for help in dealing with a health issue, even though he had delivered twelve votes from his household to the alderman.

Although Dona Cleuza, Léia, and the neighbor shared the same disappointment in the alderman, they seemed to disagree about whether they would continue voting for him. Having voted four times for José, Dona Cleuza said that she would not support him anymore and that José was not going to be reelected. The neighbor, however, was evasive. He said that he would shoo the alderman away if he appeared at his door during the election, but when Léia accused him of having sold his vote to José—even after being denied assistance—he defended himself by saying that one can only vote for the candidates that have money because only they will win. As Léia continued to confront the neighbor, he repeatedly affirmed that he was not José's nor anyone else's toady. He said that he was no fool: he knew how much a money a politician made once elected and, therefore, he does not hesitate to go after the politician he supported. "If I give you the vote, tomorrow I will ask you to pay me back," he said.

The confrontation between Léia and the neighbor shows the stigma associated with supporting candidates that heavily rely on vote-buying strategies. Different from my private conversations with Marleide and Cida, this confrontation was a group conversation. It is to be expected that the neighbor would avoid explicitly confessing his support for a politician that all agreed was unresponsive to their demands. His response to

Léia's accusation of having sold his vote to the unreliable politician indicates, however, that he followed a similar strategy to that of Cida and Marleide: siding with likely winners despite knowing first-hand that those candidates were unreliable. Cida, Marleide, and the neighbor also had in common a fierce defense of their sense of entitlement in seeking the assistance of the candidate they supported after the election, even though each of them had different levels of proximity to these candidates.

These cases contradict the expectations of certain scholars that voters support candidates that have a reputation of being reliable patrons (Zarazaga 2014) or refuse to vote for candidates that have denied their requests (Nichter 2018, 167–69). Scholars rightly point out that in clientelist contexts, voters prefer candidates that they believe will be responsive to their demands (Kramon 2016; Nichter 2018; Nichter and Peress 2017; Zarazaga 2014). However, what the literature misses is that voters are willing to overlook a candidate's past as unreliable patron in favor of focusing on their bargaining position vis-à-vis the politician after the election. Voters prioritize improving their bargain over rewarding good patrons as they perceive that ties of virtuous reciprocity between voters and politicians are being eroded by the prevalence of short-term electoral exchanges.

Siding with likely winners and leveraging this support to request a politician's assistance after the election was not, of course, a strategy that all voters followed. It might be that Dona Cleuza and her grandniece did indeed stop supporting José. Other voters told me that they waste their vote because they never receive anything from politicians (either because they never requested something or because their requests went unfulfilled). And still, for the voters involved in the social movements of the region for which politics was an arena for collective struggles, the logic of grudgingly siding with

likely winners made little sense. Voters' views on politics in Sertão of Bahia were diverse, as were their interpretation of their electoral choices. However, supporting likely winners was a common strategy as the candidates known for heavy vote buying also gathered the most votes, even as they were perceived as corrupt and unreliable.

Conclusion

This article contributes to political science by uncovering the mechanism through which vote-buying practices can generate compliance in the absence of party machines and amid profound dissatisfaction from voters toward local patrons. Based on voters' narratives of their vote as assistance, this paper argues that voters voluntarily support unreliable patrons because they perceive their vote as a bargaining chip rather than an expression of political preference. Voters side with likely winners and then use this support as leverage in their post-electoral requests to elected officials.

By showing how voters' interpretations of their political reality shape their behavior, this article contributes to a growing literature in political science that emphasizes the importance of accounting for the meanings that those under study attribute to their own political reality (Cramer 2012; Kubik 2009; Pearlman 2016; F.C. Schaffer 2007; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; E. Simmons 2016; Wedeen 2002). The approach developed in this article also adds to literature that emphasizes the cultural dimension of clientelism (Auyero 2000) by shedding light not only on the way that voters perceive vote buying but also on the meanings that voters attribute to their vote, a subject that has been largely ignored by scholars of vote buying.

This study illustrates the contribution of ethnography to the study of electoral behavior by showing the importance of directly observing behavior in its natural context.

As this study illustrates, accounts of behavior or stated preferences do not necessarily match voters' actual behavior. The access that ethnography gives to voters' perspectives and to the constraints that mold these perspectives is essential to make sense of this discrepancy and to uncover the motivation behind voters' actual electoral strategies.

This study also contributes to the literature that portrays clients with more agency (Ansell 2014; Auyero 1999; Gay 1994; Lazar 2004) than traditional studies of vote buying have done. Like Gay's (1994) study of voters in two favelas of Rio de Janeiro, this study reveals that voters in Sertão of Bahia attempted to use their vote in strategic ways to ensure their continuous access to goods and services. Keenly aware of their reality and its disadvantages, voters in Sertão of Bahia strove to leverage their position and, as Lazar (2004) points out in her study of Bolivia, to make politicians more responsive to their demands. Uncovering voters' agency does not mean, however, that vote-buying practices did not entail venal consequences for representative democracy. While voters were not coerced to deliver their vote, they were trapped in a venal logic in which they saw themselves compelled to support politicians whom they perceived not only as corrupt but as unreliable. Voters had agency in framing their electoral choices but this agency was constrained as they perceived their right to secure politicians' assistance beyond the electoral period threatened by the pervasiveness of money in elections.

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Notes

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

[2] Following the prevalent meaning among individuals in Sertão of Bahia, in this paper I understand vote buying as a one-time exchange of goods for electoral support that does not build long-term ties between voters and politicians (Ansell 2014, 80; Palmeira 1996, 49;

Villela 2005, 273; Villela and Marques 2002, 91). In contrast, and following Hagene (2015, 2,10) and Hilgers (2011), I understand political clientelism as a reciprocal and long-term relationship that involves the exchange of goods and services for political support.

[3] "Poverty" applies to individuals living with a monthly income below 140 *reais.*

[4] "Extreme poverty" applies to individuals living with a monthly income below 70 *reais.* 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).

[5] The reason why the party started to engage in the very practice it once criticized is out of the scope of this article, but some of the evidence discussed here sheds light on this question. As I discuss in another paper (Author 2019), to become a serious contender in the eyes of low-income voters, the PT had to adopt traditional clientelist electoral practices.

[6] Brazilian Legislative Survey (2017).

[7] In another piece (Author 2018), I explore at greater length the use of vote buying by candidates to foster impressions of strength and, therefore, electoral viability. Instead of theorizing vote buying as a signaling device (Kramon 2016), I argue that framing vote buying as an impression management tool is more appropriate as it emphasizes the performative aspect of this practice. In addition to having resources, politicians need to master the cultural skills that are necessary to perform the expectations of how strong candidates should deal with voters' requests.

[8] The drawback of this focus is that I do not discuss in depth how other groups of poor people, especially the members of the strong and well-established grassroots movements

of the region linked with the struggles for water, land, and peasants' rights, experienced the election.

[9] 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 conversation 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.

[10] Similarly Hagene (2015, 17) found that people in Mexico talked a lot about vote buying to explain why a competing candidate won.

[11] See Zarazaga 2014 for a similar finding.

[12] 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).

[13] A similar logic appeared in the ethnographic research in Brazil's backland areas 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.