

RESEARCH INSIGHTS



What explains vote buying in elections?



To understand why parties buy votes, a study analyzed electoral competition where parties can use both *vote buying* and policy promises. Parties can renege on the promises after the election.



Greater vote buying is associated with less fulfillment of campaign promises, greater rent-seeking by parties and stronger electoral competition. Parties that renege more often and are less competent also promise less.



The results account for stylized facts and apparent anomalies regarding vote buying, including the difficulty of transitioning from clientelist to policy-based electoral competition.

CONTEXT

In democratic countries, parties and candidates seeking public office face a tradeoff between two costly electoral strategies: engaging in vote buying just prior to the election, or making campaign promises to be fulfilled after the election. Although illegal in most countries, acts of vote buying are difficult to prosecute, so the practice remains widespread. In the latest (2010-2014) wave of the World Values Survey, 51.8 percent of respondents admitted that in their country voters are bribed often or fairly often. Why are some democratic elections more susceptible to vote buying and less driven by policy commitments?

THE PROJECT

This study highlights an often-overlooked feature of vote buying as an electoral strategy, namely that its benefits are delivered to voters before an election, circumventing the commitment problems associated with policy promises. This distinction allows for an assessment of the strategic incentives to rely on vote buying. The study highlights the following factors as critical in explaining reliance on this electoral strategy: the *credibility* of political candidates' policy promises, the availability of rents from public office, the intensity of electoral competition, the existence of an electoral advantage for some parties, and the degree to which voters reciprocate vote-buying favors.

Key concept



VOTE BUYING

Political candidates' provision of cash or other excludable benefits to a voter during an election campaign, linked to the expectation of obtaining the voter's support in that election.

RESULTS

Three factors make vote buying an attractive electoral strategy:

1. Parties tend to resort to vote buying when the credibility of their campaign promises is low. This can arise because democratic experience is limited and parties have not yet had time to develop clear identities that distinguish themselves from each other. Alternatively, low credibility may exist because society is clientelistic, with voter groups bound in trust relationships with local patrons, thus preventing parties from building a reputation directly with voters.
2. Vote buying thrives when elections are relatively competitive. In these settings, where every vote counts, parties seek out votes by any means in order to clinch the election. Often a gift or a payment is necessary to draw an undecided voter to their side.
3. Vote buying proliferates in countries where incumbent parties enjoy a disproportionate electoral advantage. Winning public office thus becomes especially valuable, pushing parties to compete fiercely for votes. We show that, when significant public resources are available for this purpose, total vote buying increases and the incumbent enjoys an electoral advantage. However, the incumbent does not exploit this advantage to reduce campaign promises.

In a dynamic setting, when two parties compete in an open election, they take into account the prospect of an incumbency advantage in future elections. Under these circumstances, parties spend more of their own resources to buy votes in the open election. In addition, when incumbency is associated with greater competence, the incumbent's campaign promises also increase.

Vote buying is particularly pernicious when it remains the only reliable government benefit for a large share of the electorate. These voters become invested in the system and unwilling to demand reform for fear of losing the economic power of their vote.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

1. The use of public funds to finance vote buying can constitute an important source of incumbent advantage, reducing the social benefits of electoral competition. Tighter constraints on tapping public resources for vote-buying purposes would allow elections to perform their welfare-enhancing function.
2. Higher party credibility reduces vote buying at both the extensive and the intensive margin. Developing institutions that encourage the formation of strong parties with clear policy programs would change the focus of electoral competition from short-term benefits to long-term policy goals. One example would be closed-list proportional representation that focuses elections on parties rather than individual candidates.
3. Politicians' preference for vote buying can emerge if they are particularly able to inspire reciprocal behavior by targeted voters. Public campaigns discouraging voters from becoming complicit in the practice would not only reduce politician reliance on this strategy, but also raise voter trust in elections and government institutions.

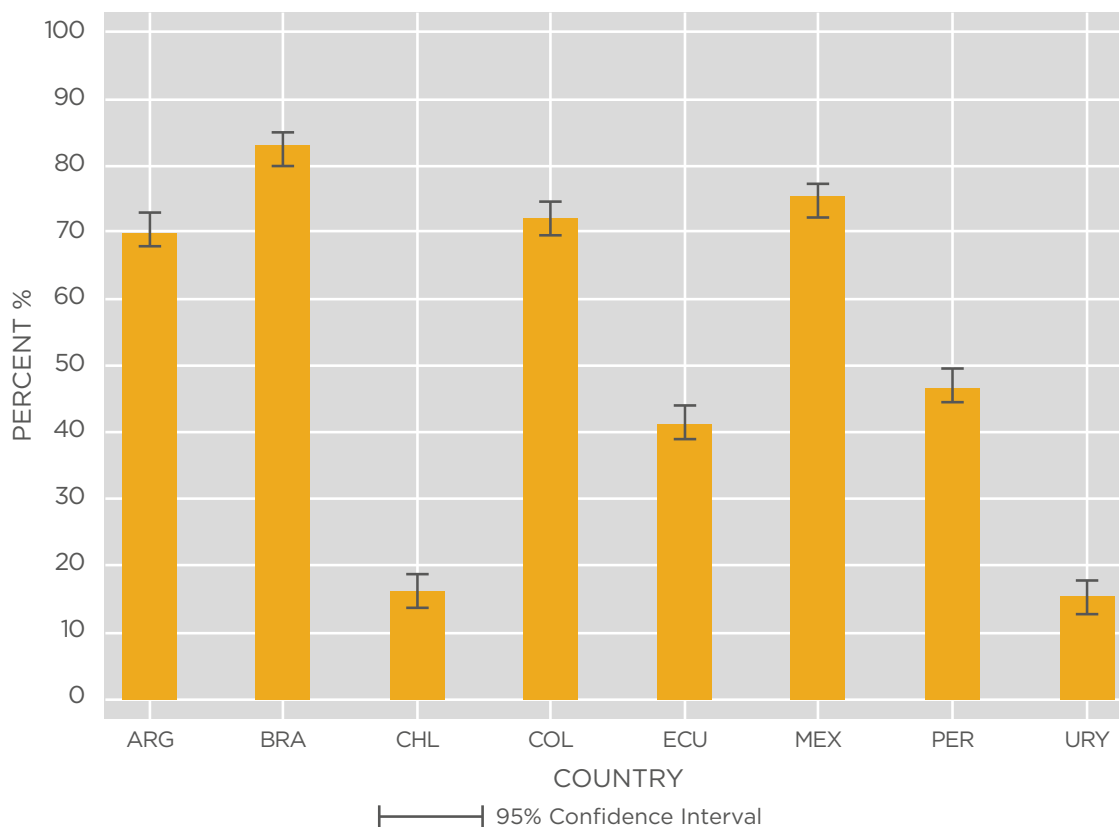
Key concept



PARTIAL CREDIBILITY

The likelihood that voters attach to a party's compliance with its campaign promises, which is viewed to be neither guaranteed nor unattainable.

Perceptions of Vote Buying



Note: Graph shows for each country the percentage of respondents to the World Values Survey 2016 question about whether in elections voters are bribed often or very often.

IDB RESEARCH ON POLITICAL ECONOMY

The IDB has a long-standing tradition of research on political economy. This study was a collaboration between the Research Department and the Institutions for Development Department at the IDB, and the Macroeconomics and Fiscal Management Group at the World Bank.



FULL STUDY

[Hanusch, M., P. Keefer, and R. Vlaicu \(2016\). Vote Buying or Campaign Promises? Electoral Strategies When Party Credibility is Limited.](#)

A follow-up study also appeared in the [*Journal of Comparative Economics*](#).

DEPARTMENT OF RESEARCH AND CHIEF ECONOMIST

The Department of Research and Chief Economist generates new ideas to enrich the knowledge base that supports the policy agenda of the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and its member countries for achieving sustainable and equitable development in the region. To maximize the impact of its research, the Research Department carries out activities that serve as inputs to other IDB departments, governments, the academic community and public opinion in the region.

Copyright © 2019 Inter-American Development Bank. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons IGO 3.0 Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives (CC-IGO BY-NC-ND 3.0 IGO) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/igo/legalcode>) and may be reproduced with attribution to the IDB and for any non-commercial purpose. No derivative work is allowed.

Any dispute related to the use of the works of the IDB that cannot be settled amicably shall be submitted to arbitration pursuant to the UNCITRAL rules. The use of the IDB's name for any purpose other than for attribution, and the use of IDB's logo shall be subject to a separate written license agreement between the IDB and the user and is not authorized as part of this CC-IGO license.

Note that link provided above includes additional terms and conditions of the license.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Inter-American Development Bank, its Board of Directors, or the countries they represent.

