

Clientelism and vote buying: lessons from field experiments in African elections

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Abstract Electoral clientelism and vote buying are widely perceived as major obstacles to economic development. This is because they may limit the provision of public goods. In this paper, we review the literature on clientelism and vote buying and propose the use of field experiments to evaluate empirically the consequences of these phenomena. We provide an overview, discuss implementation, and interpret the main results of recent field experiments conducted by the authors in West African countries. Clientelism and vote buying seem to be effective and to enjoy widespread electoral support. The results suggest that increased access to information and political participation by women may limit clientelism. In addition, voter education campaigns may undermine the effects of vote buying on voting behaviour. We argue that our findings may inform the design of development aid interventions, as a way effectively to increase public-good political accountability. We also discuss directions for fruitful future research.

Keywords: clientelism, vote buying, field experiment, West Africa

JEL classification: D72, O55, P16

I. Introduction

A major dilemma in democratic policy-making is that bad policies can be good politics and good policies can be bad politics (Bueno de Mesquita *et al.*, 2003). For instance, broad public policies, such as universal education or health care, may be good for growth but may be electorally ineffective. On the other hand, clientelism and vote buying may generate excessive redistribution at the expense of the provision of public goods and may therefore be seen as bad for growth. Yet, these strategies are proved to be electorally effective (Wantchekon, 2003; Keefer, 2005; Vicente, 2007).

This misalignment between development and electoral incentives is the reason why one of the most prominent policy goals of the political economy of development has been to find ways to make growth-promoting policies attractive for office-seeking candidates. This issue is of

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primary importance in the context of Africa, where the traditional political-science literature has been pointing to clientelism and vote buying as a structural phenomenon, part of the local political culture, and even as a necessary stage in the process of political development of the continent (as opposed to emphasizing electoral motives and circumstances¹).

This paper proposes an in-depth study of the consequences of clientelism and vote buying in developing societies. We are interested in measuring their effectiveness in terms of various electoral outcomes. In particular, we believe it is of special relevance to identify the sub-populations with whom these strategies are successful. We argue that experimental methods offer a precise and reliable framework to estimate these effects. We focus our attention on African settings and report on the basic design and most pertinent results of field experiments purposely conducted to study these phenomena in Benin and Sao Tome and Principe. Based on this work, we underline policy-oriented lessons (such as institutional reforms that could help mitigate growth-depressing effects of clientelism and vote buying) and point to what we do not know, i.e. open research questions.

We begin by reviewing the theoretical literature on voting markets, while focusing on welfare implications and on our main concepts of interest: clientelism as the exchange of votes for favours conditional on being elected (e.g. jobs in the public sector), and vote buying as votes-for-cash, or votes for other fungible goods, before the election. We discuss conditions under which opening a market for votes is not Pareto-improving, namely when political parties do not stand for long-term growth (if we follow Dekel *et al.*, 2008), and argue that those conditions may be underlying most African settings, consistent with the findings of Keefer and Vlaicu (2008), who analyse democracies where politicians are not able to make credible commitments.

We then make the case that for empirically inferring causal effects of clientelism or vote buying on voting behaviour, we need to focus on appropriate experimental methodology at the microeconomic level. We contrast this approach to standard observational techniques and discuss external validity. We argue that field experiments, while conserving a reasonable extent of external validity at the country level (when comparing to controlled experiments), offer precise identification of our parameters of interest, in the presence of well-known endogeneity of political variables. We also discuss the importance of a suitable design of outcome measurement within experiments.

The setting of the field experiments we conducted in Benin and Sao Tome and Principe is then reviewed. In the first experiment (to the best of our knowledge, the first field experiment implemented during an African election—see Wantchekon, 2003, 2007), the content of electoral campaigning was randomized across villages, with a clientelism group, a public-policy group, and a control group (with both types of campaigning messages). In this project, active participation of the parties was central to its design. In the second experiment (see Vicente, 2007), an informational campaign against vote buying was randomized across census areas. This campaign was sponsored by the electoral commission of Sao Tome and Principe, as a voter-education initiative. In these experiments measurement of outcomes came from surveys and (for Sao Tome and Principe only) official electoral data at the ballot station level. We discuss difficulties and pitfalls of implementation of these randomized designs.

We subsequently devote our attention to interpreting the main findings of these experiments (analysed together). We underline that while clientelism works particularly well for incumbents, vote buying seems to be more effective for challengers. Note that while

¹ See Lemarchand (1972) and Bayart (1994).

clientelism induces ‘bought’ voters to vote for the ‘buying’ candidate (since only if this candidate is elected, do voters receive the agreed benefit), vote buying does not have a clear vote-enforcement mechanism. We may then hypothesize that, from the politicians’ perspective, clientelism is taken as more ‘efficient’. The bias in favour of the incumbent may then be simply rooted in a pre-election disproportionate control of public resources and allocations. We also note clear positive effects of vote buying on electoral participation/turnout.

Finally, we discuss development policy implications and propose directions for future research. More specifically, we underline the importance of empowering women (who seem to be less prone to clientelistic messages), and the effectiveness of voter-education interventions, especially if targeting the uninformed and the less educated voters. We make the case that bundling development with voter education within aid interventions at the local level may be particularly valuable in counteracting clientelism and vote buying. For future research, we underline the need for new theoretical work to make sense of the empirical findings from our experimental work, on the relation between clientelism and vote buying, namely on its relative use by the different candidates. We also point to the importance of learning more about the design of the contents and means of communication of cost-effective voter education campaigns. Finally, we highlight that we have very limited knowledge about self-enforcement mechanisms in vote buying transactions.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We begin by a review of the theoretical literature on clientelism and vote buying. We then discuss methodological issues related to field experiments. In section IV we review the field experiments, emphasizing implementation and policy implications. We finally conclude by pointing to open research avenues.

II. Theory

The buying and selling of votes has long been studied in the political science and economics literatures. In this context, lobbying theory prominently led to a better understanding of how democracy works. It also brought a general sense of optimism regarding the implications of interest groups on policy efficiency. However, this positive tone relied on an important hypothesis seldom present in the developing world: interest-group competition (Becker, 1983) and informed voters (Grossman and Helpman, 1996). And, in fact, if we reduce our scope to stylized models of voting markets, we find that no clear consensus has emerged in terms of welfare implications.

A number of important contributions² helps us make this point. Weiss (1988) begins by showing the well-known result that no equilibrium exists for a majoritarian voting game with vote-selling: for positive prices anyone on the losing side will want to sell his or her vote, i.e. there is excess supply, and for zero prices there is excess demand. However his main results regard the relative welfare properties of the strategies that follow the introduction of vote-selling: Weiss argues that these strategies are suboptimal. Philipson and Snyder (1996) circumvent the non-existence technical difficulty by assuming a market ‘specialist’, who directs vote trading. Under this assumption, equilibrium always exists and involves vote

² Note that all electoral competition games relate to the Colonel Blotto game (see Roberson (2006) for a review), where two opposing parties simultaneously allocate forces among a finite number of battles. Each battle is won by the party that allocated a larger force in that specific front. The overall winner is the party that wins a majority of the battles.

selling only when it implies a Pareto-superior outcome. Dal Bo (2007) pursues an alternative approach: he assumes that a committee is set to vote on an issue and that a principal seeks to influence the voting outcome through vote buying. Dal Bo finds that the principal can influence the committee's decisions at no cost and induce inefficient outcomes. He argues that secret ballots hinder vote buying when buyers condition on pivotal votes.

Most recently, Dekel *et al.* (2008) adopt a model where two parties compete in a binary election and may purchase votes in a sequential bidding game. These authors analyse campaign promises that are contingent on the outcome of the election (what we define as clientelism) and upfront binding payments (what we see as 'enforceable' vote buying). It is found that under campaign promises, total payments received by voters are higher and less widespread than with upfront vote buying.³ Moreover, efficiency is found to be independent from the presence of vote selling and from the specific forms that it may take.

Note that, in this context, the only optimistic results regarding the efficiency of opening a voting market (Philipson and Snyder, 1996) may be founded on unrealistic assumptions regarding market information, particularly if we think of African countries where media and public opinion are not developed: i.e. the existence of an all-powerful market auctioneer, who directs transactions. In the more realistic scenario studied by Dekel *et al.* (2008), it is a clear implication that vote buying may lead to parties' valuations rather than voter preferences being the driving force that determines the winner. Thus, nothing can be said in general on whether a voting market is likely to produce higher total utility than simple voting. In fact, if anything, we may recall that African politicians/parties are often known for disregarding the interests of large sectors of the electorate, making it easy to argue that voting markets do not induce welfare improvements. The next strand of the literature makes sense of this known pattern by focusing on institutions and initial conditions.

Robinson and Verdier (2002), Robinson and Torvik (2005), and Keefer and Vlaicu (2008), on more applied theoretical settings, propose the idea that inefficient redistribution arises as a consequence of specific institutional deficiencies, i.e. low ability of political competitors to make credible pre-electoral commitments to voters. Specifically, Keefer and Vlaicu assume that politicians can either try to build reputations (informing voters on electoral promises and following up on those pledges) or rely on mediating patrons that are by definition credible with voters. This model is able to explain why public investment and corruption are higher in young than in old democracies. In addition, it illustrates the idea that reliance on patrons may in the long run undermine the emergence of credible political parties.

Other important contributions to our theoretical understanding of vote buying include Groseclose and Snyder (1996), who explain why non-minimal coalitions are bought in equilibrium; Lindbeck and Weibull (1987) and Dixit and Londregan (1996), who find conditions for the targeting of swing voters in the presence of special interests; Myerson (1993), who studies incentives to make campaign promises that favour small groups, rather than appealing equally to all voters, under different electoral systems; and Lizzeri and Persico (2001), who take a similar approach while focusing on public-good provision as the outcome of interest.

³ These patterns are consistent with the historical studies of Cox and Kousser (1981), Cox (1987), for late nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain and the USA. These authors report that before secret ballots were introduced in these countries, upfront vote buying was widespread and consisted of small amounts of money being offered to voters.

III. Experimental methodology

In recent years, experimental methodologies have become increasingly popular in the development economics literature. This trend has been boosted by the need to evaluate precisely aid policy interventions. Observational studies always struggled with selection into policy adoption. And convincing instrumental variables, disentangling causality from simple correlation, are not possible to find in a systematic way. The novel idea within the development literature was to induce randomization of policies so that treated and control groups are comparable in terms of unobservable characteristics and statistically-consistent causal effects can be estimated. With this methodology (field⁴ experiments), numerous advancements are reported to have been achieved in our understanding of incentives, social learning, and inconsistent time preferences in the developing world (see Duflo, 2006, for a review).

As in the development literature, political-economy studies have been using field experiments progressively more (see Druckman *et al.*, 2006, for a review). Following an early literature initiated by Gosnell (1927), which embedded some statistical limitations, Gerber and Green (2000) marked the beginning of a new series of experimental studies with their influential large-scale experiment related to non-partisan voter turnout in the USA.

Indeed, research on politics already profited significantly from experimental work. To provide a prominent example, when analysing campaign expense effectiveness, the literature, which almost uniquely focuses on American elections, departs from Jacobson (1978), who argued that challengers' expenses are more effective (Jacobson mainly used ordinary least squares (OLS)—his observation was reinforced by Jacobson, 1985, 1990, and Abramowitz, 1988). Later Green and Krasno (1988), Levitt (1994), Gerber (1998), and Erikson and Palfrey (2000), found that effectiveness of campaign spending is comparable across incumbents and challengers and close to zero. These authors used more precise econometric techniques, with a wider set of control variables and better instrumental variables, and following candidates over time through the use of panel data. In this context, Gerber (2004) constituted a turning point. This author recovered the pattern of Jacobson (1978), challenger-favouring, by analysing several randomizations of direct mail-based campaigning in a number of different elections in the USA. In face of the described state-of-the-art of observational studies—arguing for no effects of campaign spending—experiments clearly changed the course of this literature.

Illuminated by this recent experience, we argue that, if our focus is the study of the effects of clientelism and vote buying on voting behaviour in developing countries, we ought to consider the use of field experimental methods. In addition, since our research interest resides primarily on individual voting behaviour, we are interested in adopting a microeconomic lens. This perspective is contrary to what is the norm in political economy, which generally takes on an explicitly comparative standpoint and looks at cross-country data patterns. At the same time, we aim at making causal statements. And, as conveyed above, the literature has been emphasizing the benefit of having, by design, comparable treatment and control groups to assess the effects of an otherwise endogenous political variable.

But what are we giving out in exchange for having such an advantageous research technology? We think there are two important shortcomings with experimental methods for studying clientelism and vote buying.

⁴ 'Field' stands for maintaining the natural conditions of the real world, in opposition to 'laboratory' or 'controlled' experiments, where stylized games are played and the pay-off structure is constructed by the researcher.

The first is external validity. Generally we will have limitations in applying our research statements to different settings. This is because most experiments that can be done will have attached the very specific conditions that enabled them to be carried out—for example, we will not be able to conduct an experiment in the highly insecure 2008 Zimbabwean elections. This means there is certainly selection into being able to conduct an experiment. It is therefore safer not to apply the results of our research to Zimbabwe. However we must stress that the fact that we are focusing on real world conditions—in ‘field’ experiments—is already minimizing the ‘external validity’ problem that applies to most ‘controlled’ experiments. This is at the expense of being able to identify the exact source of the observed effects—in field experiments we are frequently limited to the analysis of sets of changes to the environment (treated as a ‘black boxes’), without being able to distinguish between those changes.

The second weakness is randomization, and that links up with the first shortcoming. The problem is that randomization is difficult to achieve on any policy intervention in the real world. And despite the examples provided in this paper, it is even more difficult to convince policy-makers to randomize an intervention if we are talking of an election. Stakes may be too high to be exchanged for a better learning technology. Since we definitely do not want to sound pessimistic, we will turn to an overview of successfully implemented examples in the next section.

We finish this section with an important word of caution about the design of experiments. This is becoming perhaps the most compelling challenge for a researcher in this area: learning from an experiment requires that we are able to measure the right mechanisms, at different points, and in an unbiased manner. Surveys are the usual answer when we ask about how to measure outcomes. However, surveys are themselves external interventions (to the target research environment), which can have effects over the variables of interest. At the same time, surveys are still the easiest way to gather a plethora of outcomes, closely fitting the mechanism under study at different points (say, from perceptions to real behaviour of the subjects).

There are three general guidelines one should follow, when faced with a measurement challenge. First, one should diversify risk by pointing (measurement) batteries at different/competing mechanisms or theories. Second, surveys should be coupled with less intrusive data collection (e.g. gathering of archival data—in the examples studied in this paper, these are disaggregated actual electoral results). Finally, close attention should be paid to surveying techniques that minimize survey bias (an example is provided in Vicente (2007) regarding the measurement of artificial conformity of the respondents to the message of the treatment).⁵

IV. Field experiments in African elections

In this section we contrast the design, implementation, and results of recent randomized experiments conducted in West Africa, in Benin (for the presidential elections of 2001), and

⁵ More standard techniques range from careful wording of the questions to controlling for interviewer fixed effects. It is worth noting that recent work in developing countries has seen a number of measurement innovations originating from other social sciences such as psychology—see Green and Paluck (2008) for an example, where focus group discussions were analysed quantitatively.

Sao Tome and Principe (for the presidential elections of 2006). While the first drew upon the randomization of clientelistic campaign platforms with the agreement of the main political parties, the second was based on the randomization of a voter-education campaign against vote buying (sponsored by the local electoral commission).

Wantchekon (2003, 2007) analyses the main results of the Benin experiment. These papers identify the effect of voting platforms on voting behaviour using an experiment that exposed randomly selected villages to ‘purely’ redistributive/clientelistic or ‘purely’ national public-goods platforms, while the remaining villages were exposed to the default mixed platforms. The experiment took place during the first round of the presidential elections. Sixteen candidates, representing or endorsed by 16 parties, took part in the first round of these elections. The research team identified the most important candidates, and invited four of them to participate in the experiment.

The experiment was conducted by candidates only in their respective stronghold districts. A district was defined as a party’s stronghold if the party gained at least 70 per cent of the votes in each of the previous presidential elections (1991 and 1996). Using this definition, 70 out of the 77 districts in Benin were classified as strongholds of one party, while the other ones were classified as competitive. Once the strongholds were identified, two of these districts were randomly picked for each of the four parties participating in the experiment. In each chosen district, two villages were randomly selected to take part in the experiment. If the two villages were less than 20 kilometres apart, the second village was put back into the pool and another village was picked. Then a coin was flipped to decide which one of the two villages would be in the public-goods treatment group, and which one would be in the clientelistic treatment group. A representative survey of all villages covered by the experiment was conducted after the elections. The submission of the corresponding questionnaire enabled the collection of demographic and electoral behaviour data.

Vote buying in Sao Tome and Principe, defined as the exchange of cash for votes before elections, has been a rampant phenomenon in that country. In fact it was reported to have increased dramatically after the late-1990s’ oil discovery (see Vicente, 2009). Vicente (2007) describes the results of the Sao Tome and Principe vote buying experiment. Its main results regard the effect of the anti-vote-buying campaign on voting behaviour (turnout and specific voting decisions). The design of the experiment also enables the identification of the effect of vote buying on voting behaviour: by using the campaign as an instrumental variable, and assuming that its effect on voting behaviour is channelled through repercussions on vote buying (this constitutes the main proposed mechanism—note that vote buying was measured through a number of survey questions). The voter-education campaign was based on the distribution of a leaflet, encompassing the slogan ‘Do not let your conscience be bent by vote buying—Your vote should be free and in good conscience’, an allusive drawing for the illiterate, and passages of the STP law (Constitution and Campaign Financing Law) regarding the illegality of vote buying. Ten thousand leaflets were distributed, which averaged one per household in treatment locations.

The campaign was implemented in 40 of the 149 census areas of the country. These locations were selected randomly among a group of 50 representative census areas. A panel survey, encompassing 1,275 individuals, was implemented before the electoral campaign and after the elections in these 50 villages/neighbourhoods. The survey was used to gather data on demographics, perceptions, and experience about vote buying, voting intentions (before), and reported voting behaviour (after). The design allowed controlling for self-report biases

regarding vote-buying measures.⁶ Vicente (2007) also uses official voting results per ballot station/census area as an alternative outcome measure.

(i) Implementation

The implementation of these field experiments required an intensive presence of the research teams in the field at all times of both the campaigns/treatments (designed electoral campaign in Benin and anti-vote buying campaign in Sao Tome and Principe) and measurement activities (post-election survey in Benin and panel survey in Sao Tome and Principe). However, neither experiment would have happened without the support of local policy-makers.

For the Benin experiment, probably the most difficult set of conditions was achieved: having politicians randomizing the content of their campaigns, but, most of all, having them agreeing not to diffuse clientelistic messages in some villages. Of course some details helped the completion of this design. First, the close local knowledge of the researcher was instrumental in earning the confidence of the parties. Second, only strongholds of each party would be targeted by the experiment, meaning that the probability that the experiment would change the electoral aftermath was low. Third, all major candidates were brought into the deal, which reinforced the idea that no real effects on aggregate electoral results were likely to arise.

In Sao Tome and Principe, the aimed level of collaboration of the local authorities was less ambitious. The researcher designed the contents of the leaflet in strictly legalistic terms in order to secure the support of the Sao Tomean Electoral Commission. The high degree of independence of that public body, together with the non-existence of a clear prior regarding the effects of the informational campaign, helped to secure the Electoral Commission's sponsorship of that campaign.

We must mention that in both experiments it was crucial to collaborate closely in the implementation of the treatments. That is to say, the research team was involved in the conduct of both the clientelistic/public-policy electoral campaign and the anti-vote-buying campaign. This active participation was aimed at guaranteeing that the experimental procedures were followed with precision, namely on location coverage, the campaigning scripts, and the targeting of subjects within treatment locations (when relevant).

We also underline, in terms of implementation of these experiments, that a competent matching between treated subjects and surveyed respondents was crucial for the success of the experimental designs. In Sao Tome and Principe, specific attention to this issue was paid. The fact that our Sao Tome and Principe campaign was door-to-door (the subject of the campaign was sensitive and we tried to make interaction with campaigners as private as possible) increased the difficulty/importance of precise matching. Since the author designed the treatment to be contemporaneous to the pre-election survey, he was able to submit the leaflet primarily to surveyed households.

Finally, not enough emphasis can be given to the need to keep randomization procedures to the researcher, or at least giving the researcher the possibility of monitoring such decisions.

⁶ Since the baseline measurement of vote buying (in the pre-election survey) concerned an anterior date (the relevant questions were asked about the 2006 parliamentary elections, which had taken place approximately three months before), and provided the leaflet was shown/discussed to/with the respondent just before asking about vote buying in the pre-election survey, Vicente (2007) is able to measure conformity bias, as the difference between treatment and control at the baseline.

The whole point of running an experiment is to be able to select statistically similar treatment and control groups. In addition, a precise sampling framework (making use of census data, voter registration data, auxiliary maps of villages/neighbourhoods) is essential for a suitable choice of treatment subjects and rigorous measurement of outcomes through surveys or official voting data.

(ii) Overview of results

Wantchekon (2003) shows that clientelism is electorally effective, i.e. works for all types of candidates, in particular for regional and incumbent candidates. The Benin experiment shows that incumbent candidates benefit more from clientelistic appeals (understood as individual or community-level promises⁷) than challenger candidates, who seem to be gaining from an attachment to national public-good platforms. The results also indicate that, because most clientelistic-type policies disproportionately benefit men over women, or because rural women might value child-welfare policies more highly than men do, women are more likely than men to have a preference for public goods. The same result applies to co-ethnics of the candidates and to those with better access to information (Wantchekon, 2007)—indeed, respondents from cosmopolitan districts tend to respond positively to public policy messages and those from more insulated districts tend to be more responsive to clientelism.

Most importantly, these observations bring light to the consequences of specific campaigning strategies by incumbent as opposed to challenger politicians. The results indicate that the accessibility of clientelistic goods and associated credibility of clientelistic appeals may be behind a crucial effect on voting behaviour. More specifically, incumbent candidates seem to have an advantage in adopting clientelistic platforms, most probably by displaying control of public allocations and resources before the elections.⁸ As a response, opposition candidates may have a comparative advantage in emphasizing the limitations of the incumbent in providing public goods or in other vote buying strategies (as we see next).

The demographic patterns of these effects provide a better understanding of the determinants (or at least the microeconomic correlates) of clientelism. From the above findings we can clearly infer that clientelism seems to be particularly suitable to men, and to less informed and segregated voters. These observations open avenues for policy intervention, as we argue in the next sub-section.

Vicente (2007) shows that the anti-vote-buying campaign was effective in terms of diminishing the frequency of vote buying, but mostly in terms of diminishing its impact on voting choices (as perceived by the respondents in the panel). This is consistent with the message of the campaign that underlined the need to ‘vote in conscience’ (more than that of not accepting gifts).

Concerning voting behaviour, Vicente (2007) finds that vote buying induces higher voter turnout (working as an energizer of the electorate). In that paper it is also concluded that the campaign had a clear and significant effect on increasing the vote transfers (from intention before elections to actual voting reported after elections) towards the incumbent, which is

⁷ Note that community-level promises may be made conditional on community-level electoral results. This type of clientelism is therefore enforceable as is the (individual-voter) prominent ‘public-sector job’ example.

⁸ Note also that, historically, a disproportionately high proportion of African elections featured incumbents winning (see Bratton, 1998). This fact (the frequent expectation that the incumbent will win) may add to the incumbent advantage in undertaking clientelism at any specific election.

consistent with a setting where the incumbent has a relative advantage in doing clientelism and the challenger can only buy votes through offering cash before the elections. Indeed, Vicente (2007) explicitly identifies vote buying to be favouring the challenger over the incumbent.⁹ In that paper, it is also checked whether the campaign had an effect on the actual election results: this is done by exploring effects on per-ballot-station data, whereby consistent (with the panel-based results) and robust estimates are found.

Vicente (2007) also performs a number of robustness tests on his main findings: evidence of conformity biases in some but not all of the vote-buying outcomes is provided (which offers an assessment of the quality of the measurement of the various vote buying outcomes), the demographic profile of the subjects that responded most to the intervention, in terms of vote buying and voting behaviour (in parallel to the analysis for the Beninese experiment), is identified to be composed of less schooled and poorer voters,¹⁰ and contamination of control areas is ruled out.

The big picture we take from these experiments is then that, while clientelism works particularly well for incumbents,¹¹ vote buying seems to be more effective for challengers. This pattern may be due to the fact that clientelism is a safer way to buy voters—since voters then have the incentive to vote accordingly (the counterpart for the vote comes only after the election and only if the buying candidate is elected—e.g. a public-sector job, to take the prominent example in Robinson and Verdier, 2002). On the contrary, cash-for-votes before elections does not embed any obvious enforcement (of transactions) mechanism.¹² At the same time, incumbents are in a better position to offer credible clientelistic proposals: they hold the public-sector resources and allocations before the elections.

(iii) Policy implications

The clearest result of the Benin experiment, that clientelism seems to provide incumbents with a patent advantage in terms of political competition, has a very direct policy implication: incumbents should see their power limited or regulated. Term limits, clean campaign financing, and an independent electoral commission constitute the most obvious specific counterparts for that general prescription. But the results in Wantchekon (2003) are more specific: they indicate that voting behaviour is far from being entirely determined by ethnic affiliation and, more importantly, that clientelistic appeals—even if they are strong in many cases—are not universally accepted even among poor voters.

The result on gender gap has important policy implications. In a given region or within a given ethnic group, the promise of government jobs may be less appealing to women than to men because men are more likely to be the beneficiaries or because women care more about

⁹ This finding, revealing that vote buying is, indeed, driving voters, is consistent with earlier work by Brusco *et al.* (2004) in Argentina. Note, however, that their observational findings are based on direct survey questions about the effectiveness of vote buying.

¹⁰ This finding provides reassuring evidence about the proposed mechanism of the experiment in the sense that subjects that were *a priori* taken as more exposed to vote buying—see evidence by Brusco *et al.*, 2004—constituted the realized active targets of the campaign.

¹¹ Collier and Vicente (2008) also present evidence that this is the case. Specifically in Nigeria, for the 2007 round of federal and state-level elections, it was found that the incumbents were mainly using clientelism and fraud (given their control of state resources and bodies), while marginal challengers were using violence and intimidation.

¹² Indeed, Vicente (2007) finds that rural locations are more prone to vote buying, which implies that enforcement may be easier in these settings (where people are less anonymous).

such public goods as health and education. In other words, electoral promises related to public health or child welfare, such as vaccination and education campaigns (public-good platforms), could have a greater impact than patronage jobs on women's voting behaviour. This would imply that initiatives to promote women's participation in the political process at all levels of government have the potential to help improve the provision of public goods. That is, indeed, the hope of quota systems that have been implemented in developing countries—see Chattopadhyay and Duflo (2004) for an example in India.

The influence of voter information and media access on the effectiveness of clientelism shows that voter education and media coverage/quality expansion may improve public governance: informed voters are more willing to support candidates who want to run on public policy platforms. This may be a crucial result in view of development policy, as indeed it provides a clear endorsement for recently popularized local accountability interventions, such as the World-Bank-sponsored 'community-driven development' projects, which are directed at small (mainly rural) communities, have a clear political component, and emphasize local downward accountability.

Vicente (2007) shows that if one is interested in increasing electoral competition or counteracting the incumbent's clientelistic advantage (i.e. levelling the field for the challenger), cash-for-votes before the election may help (by helping mostly the challenger).¹³ In addition, vote buying seems to be increasing voter turnout in Sao Tome and Principe (this finding could arguably be plausible for clientelism as well), which is generally taken by policy-makers interested in political participation as a positive effect. If one believes in partial equilibrium (since the informational campaign was highly unanticipated by most political players), these seem to be competition- and participation-improving effects of cash-for-votes.

However, if one is interested in longer-term political accountability, letting vote buying thrive may prove to be harmful for development, as the political system may then be biased against public-good provision. Like clientelism, vote buying may be a substitute for public-good accountability. If that is the case, vote buying has a weakness that clientelism does not have: it has a weaker enforcement mechanism, as the cash or other fungible goods are transferred to voters before the election. Measures to protect the secrecy of the ballots (so that conditioning on observable voter behaviour is made impossible¹⁴) are historically proven to reduce the prevalence of this phenomenon.

Finally, the experiment in Sao Tome and Principe showed that specific and directed voter education can be highly effective in changing voters' electoral behaviour. Even if one cannot easily convince poverty-ridden voters not to accept cash before the election, one can still persuasively argue in favour of money-free voting decisions ('voting in conscience'). That was clearly driving most of the voting changes in the Sao Tome and Principe setting. Moreover, less educated (like in Benin) and poorer voters seem to be the centre of action for vote buying. This observation reinforces the idea that voter education bundled together with local

¹³ Note that, in the case of Sao Tome and Principe, the presence of both main-candidate vote-buyers is reported to be statistically similar (by the surveyed respondents) in terms of location coverage. This fact leads us to infer that, even in absolute terms, the incumbent does not seem to gain from vote buying.

¹⁴ There are, indeed, several reports in Sao Tome and Principe that voting was undertaken in public gatherings in some rural locations, cameras were used to photograph filled ballot papers, pre-filled papers were substituted for genuine ballot papers (with the genuine papers serving as proof of the agreed substitution), and known opponents' identity cards were bought before the election day (to prevent those citizens from voting). These phenomena are, however, reported to be statistically unimportant in Vicente (2007).

development interventions may be a very focused and effective way to counteract vote-buying and clientelism-based politics.

V. Future research

In this paper we emphasize the need to understand electoral incentives in developing countries. We review the theoretical literature on clientelism and vote buying, while underlining that opening markets for votes is likely not to be welfare-improving in the average African society. We then present an overview of field experiments on the effectiveness of clientelism and vote-buying in generating electoral support. The results indicate that clientelistic and vote-buying appeals, although generally strong, are not homogeneously effective, even among poor voters in low economic development settings—education seems to be a crucial dimension. The findings also indicate that the use (by politicians) and effects (on voters) of clientelism and vote buying can be controlled with civic campaigns around elections. Our main policy prescription then goes in the direction of local accountability interventions bundling development with voter education.

Some final remarks are due on research questions that were made open to us after we began this research agenda.

First and foremost, when recalling our theoretical literature review, we see that there is clearly a need to understand our main empirical finding in the context of a stylized model of political competition: that incumbents benefit more from clientelism, while challengers are very effective with vote buying. The distinction, itself, between these two vote-selling concepts is only broached in Dekel *et al.* (2008).

More broadly, we feel that the political economy of developing countries needs more attention from theorists, who have been accustomed to reason in contexts with considerable electoral competitiveness and reasonably informed voters. For example, extreme electoral strategies such as violent intimidation and ballot fraud, very frequent in Africa, are seldom studied in theory (see Collier and Vicente, 2009, for a recent exception).

We also need to know what the characteristics of a cost-effective voter education campaign are (i.e. identifying the features of the intervention that are actually ‘carrying’ the voters, quantifying their effects, and recording their costs). More effort is welcome on the design of these interventions, many times seen as ‘black box’ interventions. In this vein, Wantchekon (2008) reports on a new randomized experiment in Benin (which took place in the presidential elections of 2006) where there was a deliberation intervention through which voters were consulted on policy issues that were subsequently presented as purified campaign platforms (with no clientelistic component). Preliminary results point to public deliberation as a highly attractive feature of clientelism-free campaigning.

Related, in order to assess the benefits of the pro-accountability campaigns covered in this paper, we need to know about persistence of their effects. Generally, the development literature on local informational campaigns is still in its infancy in this regard, so there are no robust reference points when asking such questions for voter education initiatives.

Other strands of potential future research effort are (the continuation of) the study of ways to increase female political empowerment and the analysis of self-enforcement of vote buying transactions—this is arguably the main driver of vote-buying effectiveness in countries such as Sao Tome and Principe, and probably the main remaining mystery concerning this phenomenon.

The second research topic may, indeed, lead to more precise empirical statements about ways to undermine the effectiveness of vote buying transactions. For instance, if the main mechanism for self-enforcement is taking vote buying as signalling for good policies during the mandate, that is relevant information to be fed into effective voter education campaigns. We are convinced that experiments (perhaps this time to be undertaken in the laboratory) are the appropriate methodology to target the identification of the (potentially subtle) psychological drivers of self-enforcement in vote-buying transactions.

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