

Murugesan, Anand; Tyran, Jean-Robert

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The Puzzling Practice of Paying "Cash for Votes"

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Anand Murugesan, Jean-Robert Tyran

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Poschingerstr. 5, 81679 Munich, Germany

Telephone +49 (0)89 2180-2740, Telefax +49 (0)89 2180-17845, email office@cesifo.de

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The Puzzling Practice of Paying “Cash for Votes”

Abstract

The expression “cash-for-votes” describes a form of vote buying in which candidates for office pay individuals in exchange for their votes. That practice undermines the functioning of democracy but is pervasive in many parts of the world, especially in the Global South. We discuss estimates of cash-for-votes and rational choice theories to explain their existence. Cash-for-votes under secret ballots is puzzling as secret ballots make it impossible to verify an individual’s vote. We discuss the behavioral and experimental literature emphasizing factors such as reciprocity, unsophisticated voting, and inequality aversion, which complement standard economic explanations of the phenomenon.

JEL-Codes: D720, D730, K420.

Keywords: democracy, vote buying, secret ballot, reciprocity.

Anand Murugesan
Department of Public Policy
CEU Vienna / Austria
MurugesanA@ceu.edu

Jean-Robert Tyran
Department of Economics & VCEE
Faculty of Business, Economics and Statistics
University of Vienna / Austria
jean-robert.tyran@univie.ac.at

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Introduction

Cash-for-votes is a form of vote-buying in which candidates for political office pay individual voters in exchange for their votes. The practice has been claimed to be socially harmful in many ways: it undermines the functioning of democracy (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, Stokes et al. 2013), potentially diverts resources from public services, weakens political accountability, and may exacerbate social and economic inequality (Khemani 2015, Leight et al. 2020). Cash-for-votes arguably hampers economic development (Robinson and Verdier 2013, Anderson et al. 2015).

The claim made by the papers cited above might seem puzzling on various grounds. A theoretical objection to the claim is that cash-for-votes is a voluntary transaction and thus mutually beneficial. Why would a voluntary market exchange of a vote for cash have negative social consequences? One reason is that such transactions may generate negative externalities because voting results in inefficient policies that benefit only the buyer and possibly the seller but may harm groups that are not part of the transaction.² Such transactions can result in inequality and power imbalances which undermine the legitimacy of democratic choice.

Another (theoretical) objection to the claim that cash-for-votes is socially harmful is that the practice is unlikely to be effective with a secret ballot (which prevails in most democracies). The reason is that with secret ballots, the buyer cannot verify that a rational and self-interested seller (i.e., voter) honors his part of the transaction. The voter may take the money and vote for his preferred party which, in turn, means that a rational politician or party is not motivated to pay cash in the first place.

² Cash-for-votes may even result in policies that harm everyone, including the sellers of the vote. Consider the extreme example (following Brennan and Lomasky 1993, ch. 4) of a policy P that harms all n voters (each by $-c$) and yields a benefit to a single person A of P . Suppose A offers each voter cash $x > 0$ for handing over the empty ballot to A such that A earns a rent R if P is implemented, $P - xn = R > 0$. Since a single voter can reasonably assume to be non-decisive for the outcome in a large electorate, selling the ballot is a dominant strategy for a rational and self-interested voter. If s/he accepts the cash s/he gets $x - c$ if P is implemented and x if not. If s/he does not accept the cash, she gets $-c$ if P is implemented and 0 if not. Hence, a rational and self-interested voter will sell the ballot even if P is overall inefficient ($P < cn$), benefits a single person ($R > 0$), and harms every single voter ($x - c < 0$). However, matters are entirely different with secret ballots, i.e., if the voter can first decide to accept the cash and then decide (unobserved by A) whether to vote for P . In this case, the voter would accept x but vote against P (which undermines the incentive for A to pay cash in the first place, see our discussion in section 3).

Finally, one may object that even if cash was paid and the voters were honoring their part of the transaction, and even if there were negative externalities, the harm would be negligible because the practice is largely only observed in democracies of the “Global South” that are to some extent dysfunctional for other reasons. Hence, a critic may claim that vote buying does not cause much additional harm and can even marginally improve the lives of low-income voters in these countries.

This article sheds light on the puzzling practice of paying cash for votes by proceeding as follows. Section 2 summarizes empirical evidence from surveys, list experiments, and approaches measuring fluctuations in money demand and consumer spending around election dates. The evidence shows that cash-for-votes is common in many countries of the Global South. However, the evidence on whether cash-for-votes effectively sway democratic decisions is mixed. Section 3 discusses the argument that the introduction of the secret ballot is an effective remedy because it undermines the verifiability of the vote. However, the practice may persist because of imperfections in voting secrecy and lax law enforcement, and in young democracies with weak credibility of electoral promises, cash handouts may signal the candidate’s commitment to redistribute in the future. Section 4 discusses behavioral accounts that invoke reciprocity, voter naïveté, and guilt aversion to explain why the practice may persist despite secret ballots. Section 5 discusses potential remedies to clamp down on the pernicious practice, and section 6 concludes.

The present article focuses on cash-for-votes and does not discuss the many other ways to accomplish the same goal. These other ways often concern legal “wholesale” vote buying (i.e., promising a group of voters a benefit in case of electoral victory) rather than illegal “retail” vote buying (i.e., handing money to an individual voter before the election) as in cash-for votes, or vote trading between political parties across policy issues (see, e.g., Hasen 2000). We do not discuss lobbying (Groseclose and Snyder 1986, Dekel et al. 2009), logrolling (Buchanan and Tullock 1962, Stratmann 2004), and targeted campaign spending (Rekkas 2007, Johnston 2014). Nor do we discuss the literature on the efficiency of vote-trading (Kochin and Kochin 1998, Casella et al. 2012, Casella and Macé 2021, Eguia and Xefeteris 2021) or clientelism (Hicken 2011).

2. Extent and effectiveness of cash-for-votes

Cash-for-votes is a common practice in many parts of the world, especially in the young democracies of the Global South. Suggestive evidence for the prevalence of cash-for-votes comes from voter surveys. In Brazil, 65% of voters were aware of cash exchanged for votes in the most recent election, with 28% reporting having received a recent vote-buying offer according to a survey conducted in 2009 (Sugiyama and Hunter 2013). In the Philippines, one-third of survey respondents reported that they had been offered cash-for-votes, with payments ranging from 1 USD to 30 USD (Cruz 2019). In India, payments reportedly ranged from 17 to 43 USD (Chilkoti, 2014). Blattman et al. (2020) estimate that 40% of voters in Uganda's 2016 elections received substantial cash for their votes. The average payment amounted to a quarter of the minimum monthly wage. According to a survey cited in Mares and Young (2016), 16% of Africans and 15% of Latin Americans reported being offered cash or goods in exchange for votes. In the sixth wave of the World Values Survey (Inglehart et al. 2014), the share of respondents reporting vote-buying was 12% in the OECD, 56% in South Asia, and 76% in Brazil.

List experiments are claimed to provide more accurate estimates of the prevalence of illicit, embarrassing, or socially stigmatized acts than surveys (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al. 2012). To illustrate the method used in a list experiment, consider presenting one group (the control group) of respondents with a list of three activities performed over the past month: (1) I have exercised less than 2 hours every week, (2) I had more than 6 hours screentime (e.g., watching T.V.) per week, (3) I have been eating fast food every week. Respondents are asked to indicate the total number of items (but not which items) that apply to them. Another group (the treatment group) sees the same list but with an added fourth item which reflects the behavior of interest (e.g., (4) I have accepted cash from a candidate). The differences between the aggregate responses of the two groups reveal the prevalence of the illicit behavior of interest in an anonymized way (Raghavarao and Federer 1979, Sniderman et al. 2011). For example, in a list experiment, Çarkoğlu and Aytac (2014) found that more than one-third of the electorate was targeted for vote buying in Turkey's 2011 parliamentary elections, which is twice the proportion willing to admit receiving money when asked directly through a survey. Kiewiet de Jonge (2015) analyzes data from ten Latin American countries, demonstrating that the bias between direct surveys and list experiments tends to be more pronounced among respondents with higher educational attainment, which he explains

by greater awareness of democratic norms among these respondents. A small difference between shares found in list experiments and surveys indicates that cash-for-votes is socially acceptable in a country. For example, no significant differences between list experiments and surveys have been found in Uruguay, Chile, and Bolivia (Kiewiet de Jonge 2015), the Philippines (Cruz 2019), or Indonesia (Muhtadi 2019), suggesting that vote-selling is socially acceptable in these countries.

Aidt et al. (2020) use an alternative approach to gauge the prevalence of cash-for-votes. They use fluctuations in the monetary aggregate M1 (i.e., cash and bank deposits) around election dates in a sample of 104 low- and medium-income countries from 1975 to 2009 as an indicator of cash-for-votes. The authors report that a temporary increase in M1 during election months is more likely to occur in countries where vote buying has been claimed to prevail by international election monitors, especially in close elections. The authors argue that these fluctuations in M1 are likely to be driven by vote buying rather than other factors since the authors find no such fluctuations in countries where vote buying seems unlikely *ex ante*, especially in authoritarian countries and countries with strong political institutions. Aidt et al. (2020) also use daily consumer expenditure surveys to estimate the prevalence of cash-for-votes. The authors show that within-household food consumption increases in the days before elections in these countries. Mitra et al. (2017) also use a similar approach and observe consumption spikes for certain commodities like food and clothes around elections in India.

Is cash-for-votes effective in swaying elections?

The evidence reported above shows that cash-for-votes is common in many countries of the Global South, but the evidence for whether the practice is effective in swaying elections is mixed. One conclusion from the literature is that politicians seem to think that some voters are more responsive, i.e., more likely to honor their side of the transaction, than others. As a consequence, political parties try to target these voters. Evidence from Argentina (Brusco et al. 2004, Stokes 2005), Mexico (Magaloni 2006), Paraguay (Finan and Schechter 2012), and the Philippines (Cruz 2019) suggests that politicians strategically target supposedly responsive voters. Kramon (2016) reports evidence from list experiments that cash-for-votes is an effective strategy in Kenya.

On the other hand, Bratton (2008) finds mixed evidence of the effectiveness of vote-buying practices in Nigeria. Van de Walle (2007) and Lindberg (2013) argue that secret ballots enable

voters to accept bribes while voting for their preferred candidates rather than the ones paying for votes. Conroy-Krutz and Logan (2012) examined survey data before and after the 2011 Ugandan elections to find little evidence of vote-buying effectiveness. Guardado and Wantchekon (2018) found that cash handouts had small to no effect on either turnout or vote shares in the Beninese 2011 presidential election. In a follow-up paper, Guardado and Wantchekon (2021) rely on Afrobarometer survey data from 17 sub-Saharan elections between 2000 and 2005 to show that vote-buying has minor electoral effects despite its widespread prevalence.

Relatedly, Chauchard (2018) argues that candidates competing in an election face a prisoner's dilemma when voters expect to receive cash for their votes. Drawing on qualitative data from a local election in Mumbai (India), he notes that candidates may believe it is risky to deviate from the equilibrium of handing out cash. Chauchard argues that handout-responsive voters and multiple gift-givers in a context of limited information and narrow electoral margins make cash-for-votes a dominant strategy.

3. Ballot secrecy and signaling

The evidence reported in section 2 shows that cash-for-votes is common in many countries of the Global South today, but cash-for-votes was also prevalent in the Global North, including Western Europe, Britain, Australia, and the United States, until the beginning of the 20th century when these countries used open ballot systems (Anderson and Tollison 1990). Aidt and Jensen (2017) emphasize that vote-buying thrives under open ballots because vote-buyers can more readily verify that the seller kept his promise, while secret ballots prevent verification. Indeed, various authors have argued that the practice disappeared in Western countries due to the introduction of secret ballots. For example, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) say about Australia: "In 1856, the state of Victoria ... and the state of Tasmania would become the first places in the world to introduce an effective secret ballot in elections, which stopped vote buying and coercion." The quote states that Australia introduced "effective secret ballot elections," i.e., that the ballots were indeed secret and that violations of voting laws were enforced.³ Many studies suggest that effective secret ballots

³ To be sure, cash-for-votes is illegal (for both buyers and sellers) in most countries we are aware of. For example, in the relevant US legislation (52 U.S. Code § 10307c) states: "Whoever knowingly or willfully ... pays or offers to pay or accepts payment either for registration to vote or for voting shall be fined not more than \$10,000 or imprisoned not more than five years, or both").

make verification costly or infeasible and therefore reduce vote-buying (e.g., Baland and Robinson 2008, Gans-Morse et al. 2014, Mares and Young 2016, Kuo and Teorell 2017).

However, vote secrecy might be compromised in practice. For example, political parties in the Philippines have been reported to provide carbon paper to voters for copying their ballots or lend mobile phones with cameras so cash recipients can take a picture of how they vote (Schaffer and Schedler 2007). Moreover, low voter density per polling station could undermine ballot secrecy (Caselli and Falco 2022). Rueda (2017) finds a robust negative correlation between polling station size and vote-buying in Colombia.

Cash-for-votes may persist despite secret ballots if voters believe that secrecy is imperfect. Low confidence in the secrecy of the ballot increases the likelihood of voting for the paying candidate (Justesen et al. 2021). Based on Afrobarometer data, Ferree and Long (2016) claim that a quarter of the voters in four African countries doubt ballot secrecy. The authors combine the Afrobarometer data from Ghana with an original exit poll conducted during the 2008 Ghanaian election to show that doubts about ballot secrecy correlate with vote buying.

Even under secret ballots, a party paying cash to a voter often can observe whether the voter turns out on election day. Accordingly, Nichter (2008) argues that parties target core supporters to mobilize them by reducing the cost of going to the polling booth rather than staying home. Parties likewise may target non-supporters for cash handouts paying them to abstain, which is easy to monitor (Cox and Kousser 1981, see Murugesan 2020 for a survey).

Signaling models aim to explain why vote-buying can persist even if ballots are (believed by voters to be) secret. In essence, these models claim that voters use the following reasoning: “if a candidate is handing me cash before the election, this is a credible signal that this candidate is of a particular “type” (e.g., competent, caring for people like me), which means that it is likely that the candidate will choose policy P after the election, and P is beneficial for me.”

Whether a law effectively deters cash-for-votes also depends on the extent the law is enforced. However, enforcement is likely to be weak in most countries of the Global South. For example, the Vice president of the Philippines (2016-22), Leni Robredo, “underscored the wide gap between the law and its enforcement and said ‘our eyes should be open to the realities on the ground’ where enforcement is lax and the chance of prosecution slim.” (Philippine Daily Inquirer, Oct. 28, 2021).

Keefer and Vlaicu (2008) argue that candidates strategically use cash handouts to signal their credibility and commitment to future redistribution. The authors argue that the weak credibility of electoral promises in young democracies results in ex-ante targeted transfers such as cash-for-votes rather than promises of ex-post public good provisioning. Keefer and Vlaicu (2017) note that vote-buying is more prevalent in environments where parties are more likely to renege on their promises post-election. In such contexts, cash handouts by politicians can signal to the population of eligible voters the credibility of their campaign promises.

Similarly, Kramon (2016) argues that candidates for office may distribute cash to signal their commitment, i.e., that the candidate cares for the poor and that on winning, such gifts will be followed by more redistribution. If that message can be conveyed credibly, rational voters would support the candidate in expectation of future transfers. The author reports evidence supporting that hypothesis in Kenya, where he presents participants with radio recordings that randomly vary references to vote buying by hypothetical candidates. Information about pre-electoral handouts increases support for a political candidate relative to an otherwise identical candidate, particularly among the poor, while also increasing perceptions of the candidate's electoral viability. The latter is important because, in many countries of the Global South, resources tend not to be distributed based on transparent and predictable rules, but distribution is often contingent on personal connections to political elites. Kramon cites evidence suggesting that co-ethnicity with African presidents improves educational and health outcomes, road infrastructure, and access to foreign aid projects.

4. Behavioral and experimental approaches to explain cash-for-votes

We now discuss behavioral accounts of vote-buying despite secret ballots invoking behavioral factors like reciprocity, naïve voters, and guilt aversion. We then review experimental tests of the behavioral accounts, which attempt to isolate causal mechanisms driving the practice (see Banerjee and Duflo, 2009). Knowledge of causal mechanisms is valuable from a scientific perspective, but it is also important for designing targeted policies to clamp down on the pernicious practice. Experimental approaches to studying cash-for-votes are relatively recent; the corresponding

literature therefore is rather sparse (see Gallego and Wantchekon 2012 for a survey of experiments on the broader topic of political clientelism and vote-buying).

Reciprocity is a leading behavioral explanation to account for the effectiveness of vote-buying. According to Fehr and Gächter (2000), reciprocity “means that in response to friendly actions, people are frequently much nicer and much more cooperative than predicted by the self-interest model; conversely, in response to hostile actions, they are frequently much more nasty and even brutal” (see the pioneering work of Mauss 1923 on positive reciprocity and Falk et al. 2018 for recent evidence on the ubiquity of reciprocity). Reciprocity on the part of voters can transform a non-binding and non-enforceable transaction into an informal psychological contract between buyers (candidates) and sellers (voters). Both parties are assumed to be rational in that account, but voters are assumed to be reciprocal and repay a political party’s “gift” by voting for its candidate if the private cost of inefficient policies is not too high (MacLeod 2007).

Finan and Schechter (2012) show that candidates target “reciprocal” voters for their cash handouts. The authors combine survey information on vote-buying in a 2006 municipal election in Paraguay with experimentally elicited measures of individual intrinsic reciprocity. The authors survey political intermediaries who broker the vote-buying deals between voters and politicians, asking them to guess individual voters’ observable and unobservable traits, such as reciprocity. The authors examine survey responses in the context of a standard trust game, i.e., a non-contextualized measure of reciprocity. The authors demonstrate effective targeting of voters by intermediaries by showing that the guesses of intermediaries about the villagers correlate strongly with their social preferences. Finan and Schechter report that a one standard deviation increase in reciprocity raises the likelihood of being offered cash for a vote by 44%.

Lawson and Greene (2014) similarly argue that receiving gifts, favors, services, and protection creates feelings of indebtedness and gratitude among voters. Hicken et al. (2018) ran a randomized field experiment of cash-for-votes in the Philippines. They consider a voter’s propensity to reciprocate a candidate’s gift through voting as a temptation at the time of voting rather than as an intrinsic, permanent part of the voter’s preferences. They randomize two promise treatments: Promise 1, “not to take money from a candidate,” and Promise 2, “take money but vote your conscience.” They consider three cases in modeling temptation: a fully sophisticated voter (who

correctly anticipates his future temptation), a fully naïve one (who believes he will not face temptation), and a partially sophisticated voter (who anticipates future temptation but underestimates its magnitude). The authors report evidence for the prevalence of partially sophisticated voting because the Promise 1 treatment reduces vote-switching more than Promise 2.⁴

Leight et al. (2020) test a model wherein voters express multifaceted social preferences, including encompassing reciprocity and inequality aversion, in addition to self-interest when voting. In their model, subjects respond positively or negatively to the paying politician and are characterized by inequality aversion (as in Bolton and Ockenfels 2000). Leight et al. conducted lab experiments in the United States and Kenya, finding that observed responses are inconsistent with simple models of money maximization but consistent with a model allowing reciprocity and inequality aversion. Leight et al. report that vote-buying reduced voters' willingness to hold politicians accountable and that voters are more tolerant of corruption by elected politicians, which is consistent with a model of inequality aversion, in addition to reciprocity between the voter and the politician. Leight et al. conclude that vote-buying increases political corruption and reduces voter welfare.

5. Approaches to clamping down on cash-for-votes

Overall, the literature suggests that promising ways to reduce cash-for-votes practices are changing selling norms (e.g., Ferree and Long 2016, Vicente 2014), strengthening vote secrecy (e.g., Justesen et al. 2021), increasing the costs of buying and selling votes (e.g., through more effective law enforcement), and institutional changes such as more and better election monitoring.

Below, we report on experimental studies suggesting that anti-vote-buying campaigns and improving voters' information about the candidates can be effective in reducing the practice.

⁴ The measure of vote-switching was constructed from Philippine voters' self-reports prior to the election: study participants were asked to rate each candidate on a scale. At the end of the survey, all participants were shown a video urging voters not to sell their votes, followed by two treatment interventions: participants were asked either to "promise not to sell their votes" or "vote their conscience." Participants reported whether they had voted, for whom they had voted and rated the vote-buying activities of each candidate in a post-experimental survey. Lawson and Greene compared voters' ratings of candidates before the election and their reported voting for a particular candidate post-election to estimate vote-switching across treatments.

Blattman et al. (2020) estimate the effects of a randomized anti-vote-buying campaign with half a million treated voters across 1,427 villages in Uganda's 2016 elections. The authors study whether the candidates reallocate efforts toward voters not exposed to the anti-vote buying campaign, whether the treated voters are more likely to refuse offers of gifts in exchange for votes; or whether treated voters accept the gifts and then renege by voting for their preferred candidate. Blattman et al. claim that understanding those responses is key to designing effective policies to curb vote buying. The authors find that the anti-vote-buying campaign had significant electoral effects in that the incumbents lost vote shares in the treated areas to the challengers. Perhaps surprisingly, challengers' offers to buy votes increased markedly in the treated areas. When facing vote-buying offers from multiple candidates, voters accepted the gifts but were less willing to reciprocate due to the campaign and voted for their preferred candidate instead. Blattman et al. argue that a combination of vote buying by challenger candidates, changes in village norms, and a shift in reciprocity explains their results.

Schechter and Vasudevan (2023) study the effectiveness of radio campaigns against vote-buying in a field experiment during the 2014 Indian general elections. The authors broadcasted messages with appeals to reject politicians engaged in vote-buying in randomly selected radio stations, emphasizing the incentives of politicians who distribute "gifts" and the likely economic consequences of electing them. The authors find that the campaign significantly decreased the vote share of parties engaged in vote buying and suggest that radio campaigns are a cost-effective method to influence voter behavior compared to more intensive interventions such as door-to-door campaigns (e.g., Banerjee et al. 2010).

The preceding approaches align well with the view proffered by Lawson and Green (2014), who argue that normative changes are required to clamp down on cash-for-votes in societies where the practice is entrenched. The authors note that cash-for-votes persists despite ballot secrecy owing to feelings of reciprocity and obligations to vote for the paying candidate.

Several studies suggest that improving information about candidate quality may reduce the incidence of cash-for-votes. Pande (2011) reviews field and natural experiments examining whether informed voters enforce good governance. A common finding in this literature is that voter behavior is malleable and information about politician performance improves electoral

accountability. The literature evaluating the efficacy of providing voters with information on incumbent performance suggests that better-informed voters change their electoral behavior to select better performers (Ferraz and Finan 2008, Banerjee et al. 2010, Banerjee et al. 2014, Chong et al. 2010). Another set of studies evaluating whether informing voters about the potential costs of electoral malpractice found that areas receiving such information increase voter turnout and reduce electoral malpractice (Collier and Vicente 2014, Banerjee et al. 2011). Voters are willing to update their beliefs in response to new information suggesting that public policies such as mandatory information about politicians improve governance in low-income countries (Djankov et al. 2010).

Garbiras-Díaz and Montenegro (2022) examine whether information and communication technologies help citizens monitor elections in a large-scale field experiment in Colombia. They leveraged Facebook advertisements sent to more than 4 million potential voters to encourage citizens to report electoral irregularities. They found that total reports rose strongly and that electoral irregularity declined. They argue that a “light-touch” intervention is more cost-effective than monitoring efforts traditionally used by policymakers.

6. Concluding remarks

The available evidence clearly shows that cash-for-votes is common in many of the young democracies of the Global South. Why is the practice so persistent despite the introduction of secret ballots (which have been claimed to be the main reason why the practice has been, by and large, eradicated in the more mature democracies of the Global North)? Part of the answer to this puzzle is that while ballots are formally secret and cash-for-votes illegal in most countries of the Global South we are aware of, ballot secrecy is, in fact (or in the minds of voters) imperfect, and enforcement of voting laws is lax in some countries. Another reason suggested in the literature is that electoral promises often have low credibility in many of the young democracies of the Global South. Politicians often renege on their campaign promises which means that ex-ante transfers such as cash-for-votes are more credible than promises of ex-post public good provisioning in the eyes of the voters. Hence, institutional and structural deficiencies are partly to blame for the dismal state of affairs.

However, other puzzles remain. The evidence for the effectiveness of cash-for-votes in swaying elections is mixed. While some voters accept the cash but vote for their preferred candidate, others seem more responsive to cash-for-votes. Political candidates have been claimed to target special voter groups, especially those with reciprocal preferences and thus feel that voting for the candidate that handed them cash is an obligation. Recent experimental studies have shed light on the relevance of “behavioral” factors like reciprocity, voter naïveté, and inequality aversion. These studies suggest that interventions like anti-vote-buying campaigns can help reduce the practice, partly by providing information about the adverse effects of cash-for-votes and strengthening civic norms among voters. These studies are promising attempts to understand better the puzzle of cash-for-votes and, ultimately, to devise policies to clamp down on the practice.

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