WHEN MONEY CAN ’T BUY POLITICAL LOVE: LAB EXPERIMENTS ON VOTE BUYING IN GHANA AND UGANDA

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When Money Can't Buy Political Love: Lab Experiments on Vote Buying in Ghana and Uganda

Dominic Burbidge[a], Nic Cheeseman[b] and Amma Panin[1c]

Abstract

Reciprocity lies at the heart of vote buying but its exact role is nuanced. Politicians often offer money in exchange for votes. Yet citizens who reject bribery in the context of democratic political processes might view the exchange of money for votes as illegitimate, even if they enjoy reciprocal relationships with similar figures in other contexts. We test for the willingness of individuals to accept or reject electoral bribes using lab-in-the-field experiments in Ghana and Uganda. Participants play the roles of voters and candidates. Some candidates can offer a bribe before the vote. Voters are 14 percentage points more likely to vote for a candidate who *had the opportunity to bribe but refrained from doing so*. Cross-nationally, we draw on unique survey data that demonstrates respondents are more likely to reward non-bribing candidates in Ghana where there is a higher quality of democracy and stronger support for democratic norms and values. Individually, we find that voters who have had positive experiences and attitudes towards elections were more likely to vote for a candidate who did not bribe them. Taken together, these findings suggest that the lab-in-the-field results are best explained by the prevalence of democratic values among some respondents.

JEL Classification: D72; O55

Keywords: Elections; Vote-buying; Bribery; Lab-in-the-field experiment; Ghana; Uganda

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1. Introduction

Almost all states in sub-Saharan Africa now hold multiparty elections of one form or another, but the quality of these contests varies markedly and very few countries can be considered high quality democracies. This undermines economic development as low-quality democracies are often associated with diverted public funds and sub-optimal provision of public goods (Burgess et al 2015; De Luca et al 2018; Keefer 2007). There is broad consensus that one of the many challenges to "free and fair" elections on the continent is the prevalence of "vote buying". Candidates for elected positions are frequently observed to hand out money – or its equivalent in terms of gifts of food, clothing, and equipment – both during their time in office and especially during election campaigns (Ekeh 1975; Bayart 1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; de Sardan 1999; Lindberg 2003; Wantchekon 2003; Finan and Schechter 2012; Burbidge 2015).

The literature has traditionally emphasised reciprocity as an explanation for why vote buying persists (Finan and Schechter 2012; Vicente 2014)[2]. Yet these accounts might underestimate the determination of citizens to reject political bribery in emerging democracies (Cheeseman et al 2020; Kao et al 2022). An emerging literature instead identifies other channels that lead to transactional exchanges between politicians and voters around elections. Rather than being the main explanation for vote buying, reciprocity plays a smaller role in these mechanisms. For example, Cheeseman et al (2020) describe how transactions around elections are embedded in long-term relationships of care between politicians and voters. Other work describes how transactional exchanges arise in communities that follow "practical norms" that prioritise efficient allocations of resources over adherence to formal rules (de Sardan et al 2018; Burbidge and Philp 2020).

According to these and similar arguments, vote buying only works when a wider and deeper web of social relations confer moral authority to gifts of "something small" (Nugent 2007). Without such moral authority, values entrenched by positive experiences of democratic processes may hold more purchase and practices that look like vote-buying will be rejected as illegitimate. We contribute to this emerging literature by using lab-in-the-field experiments in Ghana and Uganda to test for support for democratic values in an electoral context. Our experiment is simple and allows us to cleanly answer a set of tightly linked questions. Do voters show a

2 Reciprocity in such electoral contexts is driven by offers of cash or gifts of a modest value, hence the common use of the phrase "something small".

preference for reciprocity by rewarding candidates who buy their votes or do they act in a manner that is consistent with democratic values by rejecting such candidates? Are these preferences associated with positive electoral experiences at the individual or the national level?

Our experiments provide complementary evidence to a broader body of work that has studied why vote buying persists, its effects, and the efficacy of policies to reduce its incidence. One reason that vote-buying has remained stubbornly pervasive is that it is a system that allows politicians to deliver private benefits to voters at the expense of investments in public goods (Anderson et al 2015). Voters may tolerate a level of corruption in their politicians as long as they receive the private transfer (Leight et al 2023). Such effects will be exacerbated by voters who feel an obligation to respond reciprocally by giving their votes in return for a gift, and evidence shows that politicians indeed target voters who have stronger preferences for reciprocity (Finan and Schechter 2012).

Attempts to reduce vote-buying have shown that emphasising the social cost of vote-buying can effectively reduce support for vote-buying candidates through two distinct mechanisms. First, by emphasising that it leads to the election of corrupt officials and so bribes should be rejected, and second by encouraging voters to accept bribes but to nevertheless "vote with their conscience" given the secrecy of the ballot (Vicente 2014; Hicken et al 2014; Blattmann et al 2022; Schecter and Vasudevan 2023). Our experimental study helps to explain which contexts are most conducive for these different mechanisms: We provide evidence consistent with the argument that positive electoral experiences have led some African voters to embrace democratic values. Outside long-term relationships of care which confer moral authority to transactional exchanges, such voters are more likely to reject vote-buying as illegitimate. In such contexts, the reciprocity norm is already weakened and a campaign may be more effective if it focuses on the risks of electing a corrupt candidate. On the other hand, precisely in settings where transactional gifts enjoy a form of moral authority and an associated sense of reciprocal obligations, the reminder that accepting "something small" does not oblige a voter to vote for the candidate is the only strategy likely to have a chance of success. Our arguments and evidence further suggest that making positive electoral experiences salient may be a promising third mechanism to deploy in campaigns against vote-buying.

We tested whether voters would respond reciprocally—or reject—vote-buying in an electoral context where vote-buying was legal but shorn of the moral legitimacy of any long-term relationships of care: lab-in-the-field experiments, in Ghana and Uganda, two countries with similar institutions but very different electoral histories. We designed the experiments to parallel three features of mechanisms that link reciprocity to vote buying. First, to study vote buying we needed to have a vote. Participants were split into either the role of the Voter or a Candidate. There were two candidate roles, Candidate A and Candidate B. To parallel the transfer of a monetary gift, Candidate A moved first and chose whether to pay a bribe by offering "something small" to the Voter. As noted above, this term is widely understood in both countries to refer to a financial inducement to vote for a candidate in the context of an election.

Next, the Voter learned whether Candidate A had sent something small and decided whether to vote for Candidate A or Candidate B. The candidate who won the vote received an additional monetary payoff. Candidate B did not take any decisions in the game but was included to parallel the third key feature of this situation—that votes successfully bought by a candidate impose an externality on other candidates and members of society. Participants in the experiment were randomly assigned to groups of three. Each player in the group played one of the distinct roles. Players were anonymous and each role was played in a separate room.

We structured payoffs so that the Voter would always get the highest monetary payoff by voting for Candidate B. This was critical so that we could interpret a vote for Candidate A as being motivated by something other than a desire to maximise monetary payoffs. Specifically, we were interested in whether votes for Candidate A were consistent with a rejection of bribery in political contexts, and hence—potentially though not conclusively—support for the democratic value of voting for the candidate who does not offer a bribe. In a setting where monetary transfers from the candidate are enough to trigger reciprocity, voters would be more likely to vote for a Candidate A who "sent something small" compared to a Candidate A who did not make the transfer (Malmedier and Schmidt 2017). By contrast, in a setting with widespread rejection of political bribery , a monetary gift would not induce reciprocity but rather would be called into question as problematic, meaning that receivers would not feel compelled to provide their vote in return for a cash gift (Cheeseman et al. 2020). We would expect to see greater votes for Candidate As who sent something small if reciprocity is dominant, and fewer votes if attitudes and beliefs more consistent with democratic values and norms are at play.

In both Ghana and Uganda, we found that behaviour in the game was not determined by reciprocity. Instead, there was clear evidence that voters not only sought to avoid rewarding candidates who offered bribes, but actually went out of their way to support candidates who could have bribed but decided not to. On average, voters were 14 percentage points more likely to reward a Candidate A who did not bribe than to vote for a Candidate A who did bribe. The effect was smaller in Uganda than Ghana.

There are a number of possible explanations of this outcome. One is that individuals are simply against bribery in any context. A second, supported by the literature, is that voters might believe that less competent candidates are more likely to offer bribes (Schechter and Vasudevan 2023), so a vote for the candidate who did not offer a bribe is also a vote for a candidate who is more likely to be effective in office. A third explanation is that participants were influenced by the fact that they were voting in an election, and their choices were shaped by holding certain democratic values, such as that leaders should not be elected on the basis of how much money they have distributed. We argue that there is overwhelming evidence in favour of the latter interpretation. This is for five main reasons. The first two speak against the alternative hypotheses. First, if the observed behaviour was simply due to a generic rejection of bribery, we would not expect to see variation across countries or individuals within the same country, and yet we identify considerable variation. Second, we deliberately designed the experiment to shut down mechanisms that go through beliefs about candidates' future competence. Payoffs to voting were known at the time of the decision and the payments were made shortly after the votes. There was no uncertainty about the benefits to the voter from voting for Candidate A or Candidate B. While the competence channel is likely one of many that may matter for voting decisions generally, with this experiment we are interested in cleanly identifying the role of reciprocity in responses to vote buying.

Three more reasons speak in favour of the argument that reciprocity is mediated by support for democratic values. First, data collected by democracy ratings indices and survey data specially collected for this project demonstrates that there is a higher quality of democracy and stronger support for democratic values in the country in which rejection of vote buying was higher (Ghana) as compared to the country in which it was lower (Uganda)—as explored in greater depth in Section 2. Second, the pathways through which this mechanism works can be observed at the individual level, where we find that voters in the game who have had more positive experiences with and attitudes towards elections were more likely to vote for a candidate who did not bribe them, as set out in Section 4. Third, this interpretation is further supported by a growing literature that demonstrates through survey and ethnographic research the expansion of certain democratic beliefs in the two countries (Shaker et al 2019; Amakye-Boateng et al 2021).

Against this backdrop, it is important to note that it is not simply the case that voters decided against voting for a candidate who had bribed them. Voters who rewarded Candidate A's who did not bribe actually decided to take a smaller payoff in order to give their vote to a candidate who had decided not to bribe them. Accepting a financial loss to reward an individual for upholding the formal rules of electoral competition - vote buying was within the rules of the game, but is illegal in elections in Ghana and Uganda - is the strongest possible statement in favour of upholding democratic values possible within the context of the game.

The experiments also contribute to methodological discussions about the role of lab games in research on bribery and corruption. Researchers studying these topics often turn to lab games because of ethical concerns around more intrusive studies that induce people to pay or accept bribes (Abbink and Serra 2012; Abbink, Irlenbusch and Renner 2002). However, the lab-based literature has been criticised as being artificial and lacking generalizability (Gualla and Mittone 2005; Henry 2008). Responses to these criticisms have shown that measures of bribery in the lab predict bribery in the field (Armantier and Boly 2013; Armand et al 2023) and that bribery in the lab does indeed correlate with the norms and cultural values that are part of participants' backgrounds outside the lab (Barr and Serra 2010; Banerjee 2016; Dai et al 2018). Our results are consistent with the ethnographic evidence presented by Cheeseman et al (2020), who argue that citizens in Ghana and Uganda express support for democratic norms such as the principle of free elections, but not necessarily at the same levels.

2. Contrasting explanations of vote buying and elections in Ghana and Uganda

We played the game in Ghana and Uganda because they are two African countries that reintroduced multi-party politics following the "third wave of democratisation" in the continent. They are also both former British colonies that feature similar political systems, in which the direct election of the president goes hand-in-hand with a "Westminster" first-past-the-post electoral system for legislative elections. One feature of this kind of parliamentary electoral process is that it places considerable pressure on Members of Parliament (MPs) to deliver development and resources to their constituents. In turn, the emphasis on MPs as personalised welfare states, and the desperation of politicians to secure access to power – and hence resources – has helped drive the commercialisation and monetisation of politics (Cheeseman 2014). Indeed, the centrality of money to elections is suggested by political candidates themselves, who often complain about the high cost of elections and the constant public demand for "something small" (Cheeseman et al 2020). Independent assessments of the "Cost of Politics" also find that MPs are spending more money than ever before, and that a considerable proportion of this is being driven by the cost of campaigning (WFD 2020).

While this common institutional design ensures that the contexts are comparable, Ghana and Uganda also vary in an important respect that we anticipated could influence how individuals engage with practices such as vote buying. Ghana is often seen as one of Africa's leading democratic lights, having evolved a strong two party system with tightly contested elections that has given rise to transfers of power in 2000, 2008 and 2016 (Cheeseman et al 2017). Although political competition has inspired an expansion of clientelism and led to a steady increase in the cost of politics, the transfers of power have given both political elites and the wider public confidence that the democratic process can deliver meaningful political change. The situation is rather different in Uganda, where elections have not led to opposition victories. Instead, President Yoweri Museveni has governed since taking power following a long-running insurgency, or "bush war", in 1986 (Tripp 2010). Although opposition leaders have regularly mobilised strong support, especially in urban areas, tight government control over the political and electoral process means that transfers of power are much more difficult.

Indeed, recent elections in 2020 and 2016 have proved to be highly contentious due to the use of a wide range of illegitimate strategies including the repression of opposition supporters and the arrest of opposition leaders (Ahluwalia 2021). This reflects a deeper contrast between the two countries, in which Ghanaian politics has left behind the era of coup and contrecoup to become profoundly civilian, while Museveni has been accused of ruling through a "military aristocracy" that is hostile to political reform (Bareebe 2020). Consequently, the experience of ordinary Ghanaians and Ugandans has been quite different: while Ghanaians have consistently been given reasons to believe in the power of the ballot box, Ugandans have been repeatedly taught that elections can be undermined when key aspects of democracy – such as independent institutions and respect for civil liberties – are not present (Cheeseman et al 2020). Prior research suggests this is likely to have a substantive effect on attitudes.

According to Michael Bratton (2014), for example, popular support for democratic government increases after a transfer of power. This is particularly significant given that Ghana has experienced three transfers of power, while Uganda experienced none.

As Bratton's research suggests, this difference in experience appears to have impacted how individuals feel about core democratic principles such as how elections should be run. To better understand public opinion in our case study countries we conducted nationally representative surveys of 1,200 people in both countries in 2016. In both cases, the survey was conducted 2-6 months before a general election to ensure comparability. The survey asked individuals about how they felt about a number of different electoral abuses. Clear majorities said that exchanging "money for votes" was "wrong and should be punished" in both countries. However, in more democratic Ghana this figure was higher, at 68%, whereas in less democratic Uganda it was lower at 59%. This suggests two points that are important for the way in which we interpret our data. First, there is a widespread understanding that vote buying is against the rules and this has translated into a general rejection of the practice when it is presented in the form of "cash for votes", as is the case in our game. Second, there is variation between the countries, with stronger rejection of cash for votes in Ghana.

Playing the game in two locations therefore enables us to both assess how individuals respond to electoral bribery and to consider how political context shapes how voters engage with elections.

If the prevalence of clientelistic modes of politics means that there are fairly universal attitudes and understandings of elections and the role that money plays within them, we would expect to see the same outcome whether the game is played in Ghana or Uganda. It is worth noting that there is a broad literature in favour of this expectation. On this account, the patrimonial nature of politics in states such as Ghana and Uganda has permeated electoral practices to the extent that democratic norms and values have failed to take hold (Chabal and Daloz 1999). One of the consequences of this form of politics is that voters are drawn away from supporting candidates that would provide valuable public goods in a responsible way by the offer of electoral bribes from wealthier candidates who often secure their funds by diverting public funds and participating in corrupt political networks. Underpinning this depiction is often an overly simplified but nonetheless often repeated assumption that while African citizens may broadly speaking prefer democracy to other forms of government, they are locked into patrimonial relationships with political leaders that bind them to deliver votes to candidates who are not good for their own best interests.

This kind of "patrimonial" politics is often said to be rooted in the expectation of a reciprocal and preferential relationship between patron and client, often rooted in ties of ethnicity or kinship, in which clients owe their patrons loyalty not just because they have agreed to a transactional contract, but because that contract is embedded within a set of supportive social norms or, to use March and Olsen's (2011) terminology, "logics of appropriateness". Because this kind of patrimonial politics is seen to be a common feature of African polities in which the imposition of the "modern state" in the colonial period did not take hold, this approach would expect the same outcome in both Ghana and Uganda.

By contrast, if as some have hypothesised (see for example Lindberg 2010), certain kinds of civic values are entrenched by experience of democratic processes and in particular electoral turnover, we would expect to see considerably greater rejection of vote buying in Ghana than Uganda. The literature in favour of this interpretation is less voluminous, but is growing. While recognizing the salience of patrimonialism, a number of scholars have also argued that this has not prevented the emergence and in some cases entrenchment of support for core democratic ideals such as meritocratic leadership and governments that deliver for all, not just for their own communities – what Cheeseman et al (2020) refer to as a "civic register of virtue". Evidence for this comes from high levels of public support for key democratic procedures – such as choosing leaders through elections (Grácio and Vicente 2021) and respect for presidential term-limits – as well as ethnographic research in countries such as Ghana, Kenya and Uganda that reveals that voters often reject candidates seen to have distributed funds in ways that were seen to be locally illegitimate.

Cheeseman et al (2020) argue that this demonstrates two key points. First, that civic values have considerable purchase, at least with a considerable proportion of voters. Second, even where patrimonial considerations sway voters, they only do so in cases where the giving of money is "converted into some kind of moral authority" (Nugent 2007: 255) by being embedded as part of a broader relationship legitimated through consistent care and engagement outside of elections. As a result, "the candidates that spend the most do not always win" (Cheeseman et al 2020: 1), and offering voters cash outside of an ongoing relationship can actually be counterproductive, raising suspicions of an individual's character and moral standing. If this is the case, individuals might be expected to refuse to sell their vote in a game played under lab conditions precisely because it is shorn of the broader contextualization that would normally legitimise such practices.

Playing the game in both Ghana and Uganda thus enables us to both test popular support for vote buying practices in a mock electoral context, and to assess whether attitudes to the transfer of votes for cash are shaped by their different political experiences over the last twenty years.

3. Experimental design and predictions

We ran the experiments in May 2018 in Ghana and Uganda. We set up temporary experimental labs in classrooms. Games were run on weekends and research assistants from Ghana and Uganda assisted with the implementation. The main details of the experiments and hypothesised treatment effects were written in a pre-analysis plan and registered with the Open Science Foundation[3]. Further details of recruitment, the game protocol, and payments are given below. The section ends with a discussion about how behaviour in the game maps onto the different notions of reciprocity that might apply in the vote buying context.

3.1.1 Participant recruitment

In each country the game was played in a relatively urban area: Kumasi in Ghana, and Mukono in Uganda. Participants were selected in a quasi-random fashion by positioning recruiters in areas of different socio-economic status near the location in which laboratory games would be played. Recruiters then approached every fifth person who walked past with an invitation to attend. The invitation informed the recipient that they had been invited to participate in a research study, provided the time and location of the lab games, and informed them they would receive expenses to cover travel.

We deliberately avoided giving specific information about the games in the invitation and we did not mention there that the games would generate the chance to win real money. These steps were taken to prevent rumours from circulating about the nature of the game; to make sure that potential participants did not confer ahead of the game to guarantee certain outcomes, and to ensure that the games could be administered safely.

[3] See project "The Impact of Elections" https://osf.io/4e3jp/.

In each country our aim was to recruit around 120 people. Based on pilot experiments, this number would give us 80% probability of identifying a treatment effect to being bribed, should the effect actually exist. Knowing that a significant proportion of those we invited to participate would not attend, we deliberately over-recruited. As only some of those who were approached attended, the sample is skewed towards lower income groups, who were more willing to give up their spare time (see Descriptive Statistics below for more details) – but it is important to note that this not unreflective of the broader societies in which the games were played, in which poverty rates remain high (55% below $5.50 a day in Ghana; 88% in Uganda, World Bank Development Indicators).

3.1.2 Game protocol and management

We describe the game and associated payoffs in terms of Ghanaian Cedis because the payments in Ghana lent themselves to more straightforward round numbers. At the time of the game, 1 USD = approx. 3.8 GHS Cedis. The experiments in Uganda followed the same structure.

Experiments were run in sessions of about fifteen Voter-Candidate A–Candidate B triplets per session. As soon as sufficient numbers of players had arrived to play a round of the game, participants were randomly divided into three equal groups (Candidate As, Candidate Bs and Voters). Each role played the game in a different room, and matches were made randomly and anonymously. Participants were not told the identity of those they were matched with, only that they were present and participating in other rooms. The Candidates were told that their aim was to secure the "vote" of the Voter, which added 25 GHS to their payout.

At the start of the game, Candidate A was given 1 GHS, while Candidate B and the Voter began the game with nothing. The Candidates were told that they would only receive an additional payout if they secured the Voter's vote.

Candidate A – and only Candidate A – had the opportunity to send "something small" to the Voter in order to secure their ballot, by transferring the 1 GHS to them. This term is widely understood in both countries to refer to a financial inducement to vote for a candidate in the context of an election. Candidate A only had the option of sending the whole amount or nothing.

Candidate A was told that if they did send "something small", the size of the bribe would be increased so that the Voter received 5 GHS rather than just the 1 GHS that the Candidate had sent. We made the decision to increase the amount transferred from 1 GHS to 5 GHS following early workshopping and the results of the pilots experiments, which suggested that considerable levels of poverty meant that many players would be risk averse where money is concerned, and that if we gave Candidate As $5 to start with, a very high proportion would simply decide to keep the money rather than risk leaving with nothing. By contrast, 1 GHS was felt to be a small enough amount that participants would be willing to consider losing it by offering it as something small to the Voter as a vote buying move.

The role of the Voter was to choose whether to cast a ballot for Candidate A or Candidate B. There was no option to vote for "none of the above" or spoil the ballot. The Voter made their decision after they had been informed of whether Candidate A sent them something small or not. Voters were told that – in addition to the something small they might be sent – they would receive 10 GHS if they voted for Candidate A, and 15 GHS if they voted for Candidate B. Voters kept any money transferred from Candidate A regardless of their vote. This meant that the Voter stood to lose financially by voting for Candidate A, as they would maximise their return by backing Candidate B. Candidate B could not offer "something small" and had to wait for the decisions of Candidate A and the Voter to play out.

Table 1: Payoff tables for the Voter, Candidate A and Candidate B. All amounts in Ghana cedis.

		Payoff to Voter Voter's decision		Payoffs to Candidate A Voter's decision		Payoffs to Candidate B Voter's decision	
		Vote A	Vote B	Vote A	Vote B	Vote A	Vote B
Candidate A's decision	Bribe	15	20	25	0	0	25
	Don't bribe	10	15	26	0	0	25

Instructions were read out in Twi (Ghana), Swahili (Uganda) and English (both countries). Participants were also provided with a sheet of written instructions and visual representations of the outcomes of the games (See Appendix). Before the games began, participants were asked short questions to make sure that they understood how the game worked. All participants understood the instructions sufficiently to continue to play the game.

The full set of instructions for each of the three types of player are available in the Online Appendix.[4]

3.1.3 The inclusion of an "election observer"

We pre-registered a cross-over treatment that was intended to make the official nature of elections salient. In this treatment, a person dressed up as an election monitor stood next to the ballot box in the Voters' room while the Voters were making their decisions. We expected that this treatment would make the civic register more salient, leading to higher rates of rejecting the bribe. Unfortunately, in some cases the enumerator playing the official did not follow the protocol correctly, so that this treatment was inconsistently implemented. We therefore control for the official in all regressions, but do not analyse and discuss the impact of the "observer" being present in the room.

3.1.4 Payments

In each country the payment schedule was calibrated so that the maximum pay out was roughly US $8, and the range of pay outs was therefore US $0 - $8. This represents a considerable amount of money in countries in which around a third of the population lives on less than US $2 a day, and the median wage is around US $800 a

[4] A pre-analysis plan can be found at https://osf.io/4e3jp/. The pre-analysis plan was prepared ahead of the pilot study, which took place in Kenya. Due to changes in experimental game structure between the pilot in Kenya and the game's application in Ghana and Uganda, only the findings from Ghana and Uganda are offered here for comparative analysis. The main difference between the two game structures was that the final experimental game in Ghana and Uganda offered voters a choice between two political candidates (Candidate A and Candidate B), whereas the Kenya pilot only offered the option of voting for, or not voting for, a single candidate. Making the game about choosing between two candidates was believed to much better simulate a democratic election. The details of all decision nodes and corresponding payoff structures for the experimental game as deployed in Ghana and Uganda are provided in the experimental design section of this paper. The decision nodes and payoff structures for the Kenya pilot are provided in the pre-analysis plan, with results in online appendix B.

month. It was therefore deemed to be a sufficient incentive to ensure that participants would be invested in the game and would think seriously about their decisions.

All participants were also given around US $2.5 to cover their expenses and travel to the venue. Drinks (a soda) were also provided to individuals during parts of the process during which they had to wait while outcomes and payments were being coordinated. At the end of the game, participants who had just completed the exercise were kept apart from those who were coming to participate in a later session and asked not to discuss how the game worked with anyone until the next day.

3.2 Experimental predictions

The game is designed in such a way that the Voter will always get less money from voting for Candidate A. Therefore, we can interpret a vote for Candidate A as an indication of something other than maximising financial returns. The only signal Candidate A can send to the Voter is to either offer or withhold the offer of "something small".

Candidate A could choose to send something small out of pure altruism towards the Voter but this is unlikely as it was explicitly framed as an inducement in the game. Moreover, if Candidate A sends something small, and the voter votes for B, then candidate A will be significantly worse off than all the other players in the game. A body of experimental research suggests that people are more likely to be altruistic in the lab only when their altruism leaves them ahead of their peers (see for example, Charness and Rabin 2002). Rather than altruism, the offer of "something small" from Candidate A is likely to be viewed as an invitation to reciprocity.

We are interested in how Voters respond to this invitation. In a setting where individuals generally expect that monetary transfers will be sufficient to trigger reciprocity, we would expect to see Voters responding favourably to the bribes. The bribe might not be sufficient to induce all Voters to give up the higher rewards that come with voting for Candidate B. Nevertheless, if acceptance of the logic of reciprocity is widespread we would expect to see more Voters voting for Candidate A when Candidate A has sent something small, compared to when Candidate A has chosen not to send something small.

On the other hand, the offer of something small in this game is far removed from the long-term relationships of dependence described in some of the literature (Bayart

1993; Chabal and Daloz 1999; Cheeseman et al 2020). Play in the game happens over one anonymous round. Voters who reject bribery or hold democratic values might be more likely to *reject* an offer made in this context. Or, equivalently, such voters might *reward* a candidate who refrains from making such an offer. It is important to note that the payoff structure of the game makes this response costly in two ways. First, when a Voter rewards Candidate A with a vote, the Voter is accepting less money for themselves (a vote for Candidate B always yields the highest returns to the Voter). Second, a voter who rewards Candidate A with a vote is consequently withholding a vote from Candidate B. This means there is also a social cost to voting for Candidate A. Therefore a vote for Candidate A after the candidate has refrained from sending a bribe can be seen as a costly expression of support for democratic norms.

We can also gain insights into how individuals think about reciprocity by examining the behaviour of the Candidates. If candidates expect that a monetary offer is likely to trigger reciprocity, then we would expect to see a high proportion of Candidate As sending something small. On the other hand, if candidates expect that voters will reject bribery, for example because they hold certain democratic values, then the candidates would be better off refraining from trying to bribe.

Although we do not have a clear benchmark for a "high rate of Candidate As" sending something small as this is the first study of its type[5], we can hypothesise that if political context shapes behaviour in the game, Candidate As in Uganda will be more likely to send something small than Candidate As in Ghana. Similarly, if broader public attitudes shape outcomes in the game, we would expect that players in Ghana will be more willing, on average, to reject bribes than players in Uganda.

To summarise, our reading of the literature, along with the explicit design of the game, leads us to expect that Votes for Candidate A will be informative about the nature of prevailing reciprocity norms. If money is a legitimate way of triggering reciprocity, a higher proportion of the votes for Candidate A will go to Candidate As who sent something small. On the other hand, if participants generally subscribe to democratic norms, a higher proportion of the votes for Candidate A will go to Candidate As who refrained from sending something small. Based on this understanding and the pay-off structure of the game, we derive three main hypotheses:

5 In a related, neutrally framed, game in Mozambique 91% of first movers sent a bribe. This would be consistent with Mozambique having a less established democratic tradition than either Ghana or Uganda.

Hypothesis 1: Voting for Candidate B will be the modal response, as a vote for Candidate B yields the most money for the voter.

Hypothesis 2: Ghana and Uganda will display differences in the proportions of votes for Candidate As who bribed and for Candidate As who refrained from bribing. Because of the more democratic electoral history and greater rejection of vote buying in Ghana, participants there will be more likely to reward Candidate As who refrained from bribing.

Hypothesis 3: Candidates in Ghana and Uganda will anticipate different prevailing norms, and this will lead to Candidates in Ghana being less likely to offer something small in the first stage of the game.

4. Results

Table 2: Summary statistics of experiment participants

	Ghana		Uganda	
	Experiment	Nationally representative	Experiment	Nationally representative
Male	0.51	0.5	0.52	0.5
Age	28.23	37.7	31.17	36.92
Completed secondary school	0.25	0.46	0.17	0.31
Gone without basic commodities (index)	0.45	0.21	0.79	0.51
Believes elections fair	0.9	0.92	0.25	0.41
Will vote next election	0.95	0.91	0.67	0.76
Believes democracy good	0.83	0.83	0.8	0.8
N voter-candidate triples	121		125	

Notes: Summary statistics of the main demographic and political attitude variables collected during the experiment. Nationally representative data come from Round 7 of the Afrobarometer.

We present summary statistics in Table 2. Participants in our experiments are compared with samples from the Afrobarometer, selected to match the country, region and urban settings where we run the experiments. From Table 2, we see that participants in our experiment were slightly younger, were more likely to have gone without basic commodities and were less likely to have completed secondary school than the averages in the Afrobarometer sample. This is consistent with the types of people who are willing to participate in a research study.

Turning to the political variables, we see that Ghanaians generally perceive the last general elections to be free and fair (90% in our sample, 82% in the Afrobarometer) and that the figure is much lower in Uganda (25% in our sample and 41% in the Afrobarometer). This may help to explain why the vast majority of Ghanaians report an intention to vote in the next election (95% in our sample, 91% in the Afrobarometer), while the figure is considerably lower in Uganda (67% our sample, 76% Afrobarometer).

In other words, we find that experiment participants in Ghana—like their fellow citizens—tended to have more favourable experiences of elections compared to participants and citizens in Uganda, which confirms our expectations – and hence the appropriateness of our hypotheses.

Table 3 Main results: probability that candidate A bribed and probability that a voter voted for A given a bribe

	Dependent variable: Candidate bribed		
	Ghana	Uganda	Pooled
Panel A: Candidate bribed			
Official present	−0.118	−0.160*	−0.143**
	(0.088)	(0.090)	(0.062)
Constant	0.436***	0.480***	0.462***
	(0.065)	(0.057)	(0.043)
Observations	121	125	246
R^2	0.015	0.025	0.021
Panel B: Voter voted for A			
Candidate bribed	−0.182**	−0.111	−0.144**
	(0.083)	(0.087)	(0.060)
Official present	−0.070	−0.064	−0.076
	(0.080)	(0.087)	(0.059)
Constant	0.370***	0.400***	0.389***
	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.048)
Observations	121	125	246
R^2	0.042	0.016	0.027

Notes: Probability that Candidate A bribed and-probability that the voter voted for Candidate A, estimated by OLS. Standard errors in parentheses.

In Table 3, we present the main results of the experiment. Panel A shows the probability that candidate A bribed, and Panel B shows the probability that a voter voted for Candidate A. Overall, we find roughly similar rates of bribing in Ghana and Uganda. Thirty-seven percent of Ghanaian participants bribed compared to 42% of Ugandan participants (pooling across sessions with and without the official). Although this is in line with H2, this difference is not statistically significant. Turning to the behaviour of the voters, we find that approximately 70% of the voters in both countries and across sessions with and without the official voted for Candidate B. This confirms H1, and represents a reassuring consistency check as Candidate B offered the highest returns.

We are most interested in how being bribed changed votes for Candidate A, for which results are presented in the first line of Panel B. In Appendix Table A1, we show voters who were bribed and those who were not bribed do not differ in terms of those individuals' demographic or political variables. In Panel B of Table 3, in the pooled sample, we find that bribing by Candidate A reduced the vote by 14 percentage points. The pooled results mask heterogeneity between Ghana and Uganda. In Ghana, candidates who bribed received about 18 percentage points fewer votes, a statistically significant difference. In Uganda, this difference was only 11 percentage points, and it was not significant. The fact that we find a stronger reaction to the bribes in Ghana is consistent with H2, and the higher levels of democracy and stronger rejection of vote buying that is present in that country as compared to Uganda. Next, we examine how individual experiences of democracy influenced voter reactions to the bribe.

Table 4: Heterogeneity—how does experience with elections affect response to the bribe?

	Dependent variable: Voter voted for A					
	Ghana	Uganda	Pooled	Ghana	Uganda	Pooled
Panel A: Voter was bribed						
Believes elections fair	−0.340	0.200	−0.078			
	(0.203)	(0.192)	(0.123)			
Will vote next election	0.343	0.153	0.191			
	(0.304)	(0.164)	(0.127)			
Believes democracy good	−0.074	−0.064	−0.033			
	(0.175)	(0.191)	(0.128)			
Democracy index				−0.100	0.123	0.027
				(0.121)	(0.091)	(0.070)
Official present	−0.110	−0.336**	−0.178**	−0.065	−0.293**	−0.182**
	(0.122)	(0.148)	(0.089)	(0.120)	(0.133)	(0.089)
Constant	0.387	0.499	0.530***	0.334*	0.638**	0.582***
	(0.340)	(0.327)	(0.193)	(0.170)	(0.269)	(0.174)
Observations	45	52	97	45	52	97
R^2	0.136	0.222	0.121	0.060	0.197	0.099
Panel B: Voter was not bribed						
Believes elections fair	0.185	0.277*	0.200*			
	(0.201)	(0.143)	(0.111)			
Will vote next election	−0.209	−0.014	−0.012			
	(0.276)	(0.129)	(0.115)			
Believes democracy good	0.011	0.305**	0.117			
	(0.129)	(0.142)	(0.094)			
Democracy index				0.018	0.219**	0.122*
				(0.106)	(0.083)	(0.062)
Official present	−0.103	0.040	−0.033	−0.099	0.009	−0.037
	(0.119)	(0.119)	(0.083)	(0.117)	(0.116)	(0.082)
Constant	0.389	0.243	0.306*	0.354**	0.607***	0.484***
	(0.356)	(0.241)	(0.178)	(0.175)	(0.207)	(0.146)
Observations	76	73	149	76	73	149
R^2	0.032	0.154	0.045	0.016	0.124	0.035

Notes: Probability that the voter voted for Candidate A, estimated by OLS. Standard errors in parentheses. The following demographic variables are included as controls in all regressions but they are not shown in the table: gender, age, education, and an index indicating material deprivation. The 'Democracy index' takes a value of 1 if 'Believes elections fair', 'Will vote next election' and 'Believes democracy good' are all true and a value of 0 otherwise. Pooled regressions include a dummy for observations that come from Ghana.

Table 4 presents regression results where the dependent variable is a dummy that takes a value of 1 if the Voter voted for Candidate A. We run separate regressions for the subsets of voters who were bribed and not bribed and include variables that capture a range of experiences and attitudes towards democracy[6]. We present results for each of these variables separately, as well as results combined into a "Democracy Index" which takes on a value of 1 if all the sub-components and 1 and 0 otherwise. Amongst voters who were not bribed, the democracy index associated with a greater propensity to vote for the candidate who did not bribe them. This effect is positive in both Ghana and Uganda and in the pooled sample, although it is not significant in Ghana. The finding that more positive experiences and attitudes towards elections are associated with rewarding candidates who refrained from bribing is consistent with H2.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Behaviour in these games suggests the limited power of reciprocity in a mock political environment. In both countries, Voters were more likely to support Candidate A when Candidate A refrained from sending "something small". This decision costs the Voter in purely financial terms, as the Voter always receives a greater pay off by supporting Candidate B. It cannot be explained by reciprocity alone because in these cases Candidate A chose not to send anything to the Voter, and so has explicitly decided not to enter into this kind of relationship. It cannot be explained by inferences about the candidates' competence as this information was made public with no uncertainty. The interpretation left is therefore that Voters sought to reward Candidate As who did not offer a bribe for this decision. This interpretation is confirmed by the fact that in both countries a small number of Voters chose to reject the gift of something small—in some cases by leaving the payment envelope on the table, in others by actively returning it to one of the research team—because they did not wish to profit from an action in the game that had featured bribery.

While in principle this finding could be driven by a rejection of any kind of bribery or reciprocal logic, we argue that there is strong evidence that the electoral framing of the game shaped how participants played. Drawing on a combination of individual level analysis of behaviour in the game and survey research, we show that our findings are consistent with the hypothesis that voter bribery is more likely to be rejected by

[6] Results where we pool the data across bribed and not-bribed and add an interaction term are presented in the Online Appendix.

individuals who have more positive experiences and attitudes towards elections. Although further research is required on this point, this finding is also suggestive of a broader link between holding what Cheeseman et al (2020) have branded civic values and rejecting voter bribery.

It is important to exercise caution in generalising these results, given that we are only able to compare two countries, and did so based on two lab games played in specific locations. Other factors may potentially impact citizens' willingness to bribe, including the party identity of the briber, and the intensity of political competition, and more research is required to fully understand how this shapes patron-client relationships across different contexts. This caveat notwithstanding, however, when read in the context of the recent literature highlighted earlier, our findings suggest that voters in countries such as Ghana and Uganda are far less willing to engage in practices such as vote buying than is generally recognized. In turn, this conclusion calls for more nuanced explanations of the role reciprocity plays in sustaining vote buying. Of course the lab is an inherently artificial setting in which the Voter has the minimal possible relationship with Candidate A. However, the setting still provides a test for the beliefs and practices that participants bring from their outside lives into the lab. The support for candidates that did not seek to buy voters therefore represents an exciting result, and one that provides an important corrective to depictions of African politics as being motivated purely by patrimonial or transactional logics.

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