

CULTURAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF VOTE BUYING: A CASE STUDY OF ELECTORAL PRACTICES IN BULGARIA

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Abstract. This study examines vote buying in Bulgaria as a culturally embedded and economically driven practice, analyzing its mechanisms, adaptability, and persistence in the face of institutional reforms. The research aims to explore the interplay between cultural norms, socio-economic dependencies, and weak institutional enforcement that sustains vote buying as a distinct form of clientelism. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study utilizes 24 semi-structured interviews with vote brokers and voters from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. The findings reveal that vote buying in Bulgaria operates within hierarchical community structures and is framed as a legitimate, reciprocal exchange rooted in traditions of mutual obligation and survival. Mechanisms such as staged payments, social monitoring, and informal sanctions ensure compliance while highlighting brokers’ adaptability to technological changes, including machine voting. This paper underscores the limitations of existing reforms and advocates for comprehensive approaches addressing the socio-economic and cultural drivers of vote buying to enhance electoral integrity.

Keywords: vote buying; clientelism; electoral integrity; cultural norms; socio-economic dependency; Bulgaria

Introduction

Vote buying, a pervasive phenomenon in electoral studies, involves the exchange of material benefits for electoral support, often shaped by cultural norms, economic dependency, and institutional fragility. This paper examines vote buying as a distinct form of clientelism, highlighting its transactional nature and adaptability across diverse political contexts. Building on the case of Bulgaria, it explores how systemic poverty, hierarchical community structures, and weak enforcement sustain these practices, despite technological reforms. By integrating theoretical insights and empirical findings, the study underscores the need for culturally sensitive and comprehensive reforms to address the socio-economic drivers that entrench vote buying.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Vote buying, a key concept in electoral studies, entails the exchange of material benefits for electoral support. Defined by its immediacy, conditionality, and opportunistic nature, vote buying differs from broader practices such as clientelism and patronage. More specifically, it can be defined as an “offer of financial or material inducements by candidates or political parties to voters during an election campaign or on election day, in exchange for electoral support” (Joseph & Vashchanka 2022, p. 6). This transactional relationship primarily occurs during electoral periods, with material exchanges contingent on voter compliance (Muhtadi 2019, p. 9).

Unlike policy-based voting, which reflects ideological alignment, vote buying emphasizes immediate voter gratification. Schaffer and Schedler challenge the framing of vote buying as inherently corrupt, noting its alignment with cultural norms in contexts where it signifies reciprocity and solidarity (Schaffer & Schedler 2007, pp. 17 – 19). In Benin and Thailand, for instance, electoral gifts reflect community obligations rather than undermining democratic processes (Schaffer & Schedler 2007, pp. 22 – 23).

Vote buying constitutes a specific aspect of clientelistic relationships, particularly in communities where clientelism is deeply embedded. While clientelism fosters enduring, reciprocal bonds between patrons and clients, characterized by the sustained provision of resources in exchange for long-term loyalty, vote buying is a more transient and transactional practice. In traditional clientelistic settings, vote buying often reflects social norms rooted in collective obligations, reinforcing hierarchical community structures. However, in modernized communities, this practice increasingly adopts a market-based logic, detached from long-term relational commitments. Instead, it functions as an opportunistic, individual transaction, reflecting the commodification of political behavior. This shift underscores the adaptability of vote-buying practices, persisting even in contexts where broader clientelistic systems are weakening. Empirical cases such as the exploitation of welfare schemes in Hungary or the persistence of transactional political exchanges in transitional democracies like Georgia and Moldova highlight how institutional fragility sustains both traditional and market-oriented forms of clientelism (Mares & Young 2019, pp. 121 – 123; Gherghina & Volintiru 2023, pp. 35 – 37).

In contrast to vote buying, patronage represents a more structured and institutionalized form of resource distribution aimed at securing political loyalty. While vote buying emphasizes individualized and often ephemeral transactions, patronage relies on the allocation of public resources through formalized networks, creating a broader and more enduring system of political dependency. For example, in Cameroon, patronage networks are centralized under the executive, with state resources strategically distributed to reinforce political control (Mișcoiu & Kakdeu 2023, pp. 49 – 67). Yet, these practices are not mutually exclusive; in some contexts,

such as rural Romania, vote buying and patronage coexist, reflecting the diverse mechanisms through which political actors maintain power (Mares & Young 2019, pp. 122 – 124).

Cultural Embeddedness of Vote Buying

Vote buying is often integrated into local traditions of reciprocity and care, challenging its universal categorization as corrupt. In rural Benin and Thailand, electoral gifts are viewed as expressions of social solidarity, aligning with cultural norms of mutual obligation (Schaffer & Schedler 2007, pp. 22 – 23). Similarly, in Indonesia, brokers mediate vote-buying exchanges through culturally ingrained expectations of trust and relational obligations (Muhtadi 2019, pp. 163 – 164).

Cultural norms also intersect with institutional contexts. In transitional democracies like Georgia and Ukraine, economic instability and institutional fragility facilitate clientelist practices, entwining them with traditions of reciprocity and patronage (Gherghina & Volintiru 2023, pp. 37–39). These dynamics are also evident in authoritarian regimes like Cameroon and hybrid regimes like Russia, where cultural expectations of loyalty and care reinforce vote-buying networks (Mișcoiu & Kakdeu 2023, pp. 49 – 67; Saikkonen 2023, pp. 63 – 65).

Even in advanced democracies, distributive practices adapt to institutional constraints while maintaining cultural resonance. In Australia, for example, pork-barrel politics aligns with local norms of representation and resource distribution (Denemark 2023, pp. 10 – 31).

Vote buying operates at the intersection of cultural, institutional, and structural dynamics, reflecting a diverse range of practices across political contexts. Understanding its cultural embeddedness is essential for designing electoral reforms that address the phenomenon without disregarding the socio-cultural realities that sustain it.

The Case of Bulgaria

The Bulgarian context exemplifies how vote buying and clientelism adapt to and are sustained by socio-political and cultural environments characterized by systemic vulnerabilities, institutional weaknesses, and socio-economic disparities. As highlighted in prior analyses (Stoychev 2017), vote buying in Bulgaria reflects broader patterns observed globally while also presenting unique mechanisms tied to local conditions.

Vote buying in Bulgaria operates as an institutionalized mechanism rather than a sporadic electoral irregularity. This practice thrives in conditions of poverty, inequality, and weak rule of law. Organized crime networks and local brokers serve as intermediaries, leveraging economic desperation and social fragmentation to secure votes. These brokers, often embedded within their communities, exploit voters' dependence on material benefits, which many perceive as rightful compensation for

electoral participation rather than as corrupt practices (Tsoneva et al. 2011; Center for the Study of Democracy 2017).

Cultural dimensions further legitimize vote buying in Bulgaria, particularly in marginalized regions where material inducements address basic survival needs. In such contexts, voters view electoral transactions through the lens of reciprocity and care, aligning with international patterns observed in societies where economic precarity intersects with cultural norms of mutual obligation.

Bulgaria's clientelist networks are hierarchical and deeply intertwined with political processes. Political patrons at the top direct resources through local brokers, who act as intermediaries to secure voter loyalty. These networks extend beyond electoral cycles, embedding themselves in public governance. Public resource allocation, including welfare benefits, employment opportunities, and government contracts, is often mediated informally, fostering dependency and reinforcing loyalty (Kopecky & Scherlis 2008).

This integration of clientelistic practices with governance aligns with Helmke and Levitsky's (2004) concept of "informal institutions," which operate alongside or in tension with formal democratic processes. In Bulgaria, these practices sustain party patronage systems, consolidating elite control while marginalizing institutional accountability.

The persistence of vote buying and clientelism in Bulgaria reflects an interplay between cultural norms, socio-economic pressures, and institutional weaknesses. Poverty and inequality create economic conditions that make voters susceptible to electoral manipulation, while fragmented party systems and weak enforcement of electoral laws minimize the risks for brokers and candidates (CSD, 2016). Historical transitions and economic hardships reinforce the acceptability of vote buying. Electoral inducements are often framed as redistributive rather than corrupt, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. This framing complicates efforts to stigmatize or regulate vote buying, as it aligns with local norms of reciprocity and survival.

Methodological Framework

This study examines the socio-cultural dimensions of vote buying in Bulgaria, building on established research that employs diverse methodologies to capture the multifaceted nature of vote buying. Survey-based methods, regression analyses, and ethnographic approaches have been widely used to uncover structural drivers and cultural dynamics of vote buying (Muhtadi 2019, pp. 171, 212 – 215; Joseph & Vashchanka 2022, p. 24). While quantitative approaches are effective in isolating socio-economic factors, qualitative methods offer the depth required to explore cultural framing and community-specific nuances (Mares & Young 2019, pp. 122 – 124). Therefore, this study prioritizes qualitative methods to align with its focus on the social and cultural underpinnings of vote buying in Bulgaria.

The empirical analysis is based on two datasets comprising 24 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2024 by the Laboratory for Electoral Systems and Technologies. The participants include:

1. Vote Brokers (7 interviews): Brokers were questioned on mechanisms of vote buying, strategies for compliance, and cultural justifications of the practice.

2. Voters (17 interviews): Voters from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, including marginalized Roma communities, private and public sector employees, and unemployed individuals, provided insights into coercion, motivations, and perceptions of vote buying.

The semi-structured interview format reflects the qualitative tradition in vote-buying research, allowing for thematic flexibility while ensuring consistency in data collection (Joseph & Vashchanka 2022, p. 24). This dual focus on brokers and voters echoes Muhtadi's methodological emphasis on capturing multiple perspectives to understand the relational dynamics of vote buying (Muhtadi 2019, pp. 163 – 164).

A thematic analysis was applied to uncover patterns and contextual nuances within the data. The coding process focused on identifying recurring themes related to:

1. Mechanisms and Compliance: The role of brokers in organizing vote-buying transactions and ensuring voter compliance.

2. Cultural Reciprocity: Norms of mutual obligation and community solidarity that rationalize vote buying as a social norm.

3. Hierarchical Relationships: The influence of community leaders and other intermediaries in enforcing electoral manipulation.

This approach parallels case studies from Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, where vote buying is deeply embedded in social norms and power hierarchies (Schaffer & Schedler 2007, pp. 72 – 75; Mares & Young 2019, pp. 122 – 124).

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. Participants were anonymized using alphanumeric identifiers, and all data were securely stored. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

Findings

Vote buying in Bulgaria is a deeply entrenched phenomenon, sustained by a complex interplay of cultural norms, socio-economic pressures, and institutional weaknesses. Rooted in traditions of reciprocity, mutual obligation, and community solidarity, these practices have evolved into normalized survival mechanisms within marginalized communities. Brokers and voters alike view electoral transactions not as corrupt acts but as pragmatic responses to systemic neglect and economic vulnerability, reflecting deeply embedded socio-cultural dynamics.

The resilience of vote-buying practices is further reinforced by mechanisms of compliance that intertwine trust, kinship, and hierarchical relationships. Social networks play a crucial role in facilitating these exchanges, while informal monitoring and enforcement strategies ensure voter participation. Despite

attempts to counter these practices through technological and institutional reforms, brokers have adapted with remarkable flexibility, maintaining their influence within communities and preserving the socio-cultural dynamics that underpin vote buying.

This analysis explores the cultural and economic dimensions of vote buying in Bulgaria, examining the roles of brokers, the framing of legitimacy, and the socio-economic dependencies that perpetuate these practices. It also addresses the mechanisms of compliance and the adaptability of vote-buying networks, offering insights into the challenges of reform and the need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive approaches to addressing this entrenched issue.

1. Cultural and Economic Dynamics of Vote Buying in Bulgaria

Vote buying in Bulgaria is deeply entrenched in cultural norms of reciprocity, community solidarity, and hierarchical social structures, as well as systemic neglect and economic vulnerabilities. Brokers and voters alike perceive these practices as pragmatic responses to socio-economic realities rather than violations of democratic principles. This normalization transforms vote buying from a transactional act into a survival mechanism embedded within the social fabric of marginalized communities.

1.1. Brokers as Cultural Mediators and Enforcers

Brokers act as intermediaries between political parties and voters, leveraging trust and kinship within communities to mobilize electoral support. Their legitimacy stems from long-standing relationships, positioning them as benefactors rather than manipulators. Respondent F2, a religious leader, explained: *“People look to me for guidance, not just spiritually but also practically. When elections come, they ask me who to vote for. I make sure they understand how to vote and help them earn some money while doing it.”* Similarly, Respondent F1 noted: *“They come to me because people here trust me, and I can mobilize them.”* Brokers often collaborate with family or community leaders, as Respondent F5 described: *“I work with family heads. They collect money for their household – usually 100 leva per person – and ensure everyone in their family votes as instructed.”*

1.2. Cultural Framing of Legitimacy and Reciprocity

Vote buying is often framed as a legitimate and reciprocal exchange that fulfills practical needs in economically disadvantaged communities. Material benefits are viewed as compensatory returns for electoral participation, aligning with cultural norms of reciprocity and survival. Respondent F6 remarked: *“Elections are like an extra payday. For someone like me, who works only part of the year, 100 leva per vote is a big deal.”* Hierarchical community structures further reinforce this dynamic, where leaders mediate transactions on behalf of constituents. Respondent C1 explained: *“The community leader decides for everyone, and if we don’t follow, we lose what little support we have.”*

1.3. Economic Vulnerability and Dependency

Poverty and employment dependency are key drivers of vote buying. In regions with high unemployment, elections provide critical financial relief. Respondent C4

from Pazardzhik observed: *“If we don’t vote how [the community leader] wants, we lose access to everything – jobs, loans, even food.”* Dependency on employers and institutional leaders also fosters compliance. Respondent A2 recounted: *“My employer provided voting ‘recommendations,’ with implied consequences for non-compliance.”* Public sector workers face similar pressures, as noted by Respondent B2: *“She reminded us that ‘participation in the process is noticed.’”* These dynamics highlight how systemic economic dependency erodes voter autonomy.

1.4. Institutional Weaknesses and Structural Inequality

Institutional weaknesses exacerbate vote buying, enabling brokers and political actors to exploit gaps in electoral enforcement. Respondent E2 remarked: *“Local bosses use every trick in the book – jobs, loans, even food aid – to make sure we vote the way they want. After so many years, you start to accept it as normal.”* Structural inequalities further sustain these practices, with elections framed as opportunities for economic relief rather than political engagement. Respondent F3 noted: *“People don’t see elections as political—they see them as a way to make ends meet.”*

1.5. Adaptability of Vote-Buying Practices

Regional disparities shape the specific manifestations of vote buying, reflecting localized socio-economic conditions. In economically depressed areas like Vidin, unemployment and poverty compel voters to comply with electoral transactions as a means of survival. Respondent D2 explained: *“I had no choice but to comply. My family needed the money, and there were no other jobs available.”* In urban neighborhoods such as Fakulteta, brokers enforce compliance through tight-knit community networks and informal monitoring. These practices highlight the adaptability of vote-buying networks, ensuring their resilience even in the face of technological and institutional reforms.

2. Mechanisms of Compliance in Vote Buying

Vote-buying practices in Bulgaria are sustained through a combination of social monitoring, staged payments, and informal sanctions, adapting to both cultural norms and institutional changes. These mechanisms leverage social cohesion, economic dependency, and incremental enforcement to ensure voter compliance.

2.1. Social Monitoring and Cultural Enforcement

Compliance is maintained through informal social monitoring rooted in cultural norms of reciprocity and collective accountability. In tight-knit communities, voting as instructed is perceived as a communal duty, supported by visible oversight. Respondent F7, a broker in Fakulteta, described this dynamic: *“We monitor polling stations and check off names as people vote. If someone hasn’t gone by the afternoon, we remind them or even accompany them to the station.”* In Roma communities, this dynamic is intensified by hierarchical relationships with community leaders, who act as enforcers of compliance. As Respondent C2 noted: *“If you refuse to vote for the party [the leader] supports, you’ll lose access to jobs and even food. Nobody wants to risk that.”* These practices exploit social cohesion and economic dependency, ensuring compliance through informal but highly effective means.

2.2. Split Payments as a Compliance Tool

Split payments are commonly used to reinforce voter obligations by tying full payment to proof of compliance. Brokers provide an initial payment before the election and deliver the remainder only after verifying participation. Respondent F1 explained: *"We give half before the vote and the other half after we confirm they've voted as promised."* This staged approach reflects both practical enforcement strategies and cultural norms of incremental reciprocity, maintaining trust between brokers and voters while securing compliance.

2.3. Social Sanctions and Reputation Management

Informal sanctions such as public shaming and exclusion from community resources serve as powerful enforcement tools, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Non-compliance is penalized by undermining an individual's reputation and access to communal support. Respondent C4 emphasized: *"If someone doesn't comply, they risk losing access to jobs and help. Nobody wants to be seen as disloyal."* These sanctions embed vote buying within community norms, tying participation to social standing and reinforcing compliance through collective pressure.

2.4. Adaptations to Technological Barriers

The introduction of machine voting posed logistical challenges, especially for older or less technologically literate voters. Brokers adapted by providing direct assistance, reinforcing their roles as trusted intermediaries. Respondent F5 explained: *"Older people find it difficult, so we spend extra time explaining how to vote. Some are scared, but they trust us to guide them."* This assistance underscores how brokers maintain influence and ensure compliance, aligning with cultural expectations of trust and obligation despite institutional reforms.

Machine voting reduced the visibility of individual voter choices, prompting brokers to refine their monitoring strategies. Instead of observing ballots directly, they now rely on turnout tracking and social networks to verify compliance. These adjustments highlight the adaptability of brokers, who navigate technological barriers without undermining their ability to enforce compliance.

3. Summary of Findings

The empirical findings reveal that vote buying in Bulgaria is sustained through a combination of socio-cultural and economic dynamics, facilitated by brokers who leverage trust, kinship, and community structures to mediate electoral transactions. Mechanisms of compliance, including social monitoring, staged payments, and social sanctions, ensure voter participation while blurring the line between voluntary engagement and coercion. These practices are deeply embedded in hierarchical relationships and survival strategies, reflecting systemic neglect, poverty, and institutional weaknesses. Despite efforts to disrupt these networks through technological reforms, the adaptability of brokers underscores the resilience of vote-buying practices within Bulgaria's socio-economic and cultural framework.

Conclusion

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of vote buying, emphasizing its theoretical underpinnings, cultural embeddedness, and specific manifestations within Bulgaria's socio-political and economic context. By bridging conceptual frameworks with empirical analysis, the paper highlights the resilience of vote buying as a practice rooted in socio-cultural norms, economic dependency, and institutional weaknesses.

Vote buying represents a distinct form of electoral exchange, defined by its immediacy, conditionality, and opportunism. The theoretical analysis positions vote buying within the broader spectrum of clientelistic practices, distinguishing it from long-term patronage and emphasizing its transactional nature. While often framed as corrupt, vote buying can align with local cultural norms of reciprocity and care, as evidenced in both transitional and hybrid regimes. This duality underscores the importance of understanding vote buying not solely as a democratic aberration but as a practice shaped by contextual dynamics, including systemic neglect and cultural expectations of redistribution.

The conceptual framework of this article also highlights the evolution of vote buying, transitioning from traditional clientelistic relationships to market-based transactions in some contexts. This shift reflects the commodification of political behavior, where vote buying persists even as broader clientelistic networks weaken, illustrating its adaptability to changing political and economic landscapes.

The Bulgarian case study provides a nuanced understanding of how vote buying operates within a specific socio-political and cultural context. Brokers emerge as central actors, leveraging trust, kinship, and community ties to mediate electoral transactions. Mechanisms of compliance—such as social monitoring, staged payments, and social sanctions—ensure voter participation while blurring the lines between voluntary engagement and coercion. These practices are embedded within hierarchical relationships and survival strategies, reflecting systemic poverty, institutional fragility, and structural inequalities.

Technological and institutional reforms, such as the introduction of machine voting, have not significantly disrupted vote buying in Bulgaria. Instead, brokers demonstrate remarkable adaptability, refining monitoring strategies and leveraging cultural norms to maintain control. These findings reveal the limitations of reforms that fail to address the underlying socio-economic and cultural drivers of vote buying.

The study employs a qualitative methodology to capture the relational dynamics of vote buying, focusing on the perspectives of both brokers and voters. This dual approach provides a deeper understanding of the cultural framing and compliance mechanisms that sustain vote buying. The use of semi-structured interviews ensures thematic flexibility while maintaining consistency, aligning with best practices in qualitative electoral research. By contextualizing the findings within broader patterns observed in transitional democracies, the study contributes to the comparative understanding of vote buying as a global phenomenon.

The findings emphasize the need for comprehensive reforms that address the structural drivers of vote buying. Tackling systemic poverty, economic dependency, and institutional deficiencies is essential to disrupting the conditions that sustain this practice. Electoral reforms must be culturally sensitive, recognizing the socio-cultural realities that legitimize vote buying as an act of reciprocity and survival in marginalized communities.

Technological interventions, such as machine voting, must be accompanied by robust enforcement mechanisms and community-centered approaches to foster trust in democratic processes. Efforts to combat vote buying should also focus on strengthening formal institutions and promoting transparency in resource distribution, reducing the reliance on informal networks that perpetuate clientelistic practices.

Addressing vote buying requires moving beyond superficial regulatory measures to implement structural reforms that foster economic security, institutional accountability, and cultural change. Only by disrupting the socio-economic and institutional conditions that sustain vote buying can genuine electoral integrity and democratic resilience be achieved.

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