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LISA BJÖRKMAN

“you can’t buy a vote”: cash and community  
in a Mumbai election

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## Abstract

The 2012 Mumbai Municipal Corporation elections were characterized by reportedly-unprecedented flows of cash – a phenomenon has been described in both popular and scholarly accounts as “vote buying.” Drawing on ethnographic research on cash exchanges during the run-up and aftermath of the election, the paper probes some of the presumptions embedded in concepts of “vote banking” and “vote buying,” thereby unsettling the theoretical and normative frameworks through which practices of popular politics in contemporary India have been outlined. The ethnographies reveal multiple logics operative in election-time cash flows; actors involved with moving money have divergent and sometimes conflicting aspirations, motivations and agendas, within which cash itself plays various roles simultaneously: firstly money is used – somewhat conventionally – as a medium of *exchange*, to pay for campaign-related expenses including employing a slew of temporary workers as hired crowds. Secondly, cash is productive and performative of enduring socio-economic *networks* that infuse everyday life far beyond election day. Thirdly, cash is *sign* of other forms of present and future knowledge and authority, generating intense speculation and political realignments during the run-up to election day. The account that emerges suggests neither a heroic narrative of subaltern resistance to bourgeois capitalism, nor a dystopic scenario of mass exploitation in which forces of ‘marketization’ empty the act of voting of meaning. Rather, it is argued, election-time cash inhabits a deeply-political landscape of contestation within which issues at the heart of Mumbai’s modernity – land use, infrastructural investment, and business prospects – are negotiated.

## Author

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The 2012 Mumbai Municipal Corporation elections were characterized by reportedly-unprecedented flows of cash.<sup>1</sup> While candidate (and party) beneficence at election time is certainly nothing new in Mumbai (or in India), the prominence of cash in recent elections has been accompanied by a distinctive shift in popular and scholarly discourse about election-season giving to the voting poor. Election-time distributions of goods, as well as particularistic benefits towards specific constituencies – infrastructural investments in roads, drains, or water pipes for instance – have generally been described as part of a broader politics of ‘patronage’ said to have characterized Indian democracy at least since Independence, albeit in changing ways. *Patronage* giving is held to comprise more than “mere material exchanges to buy the votes of citizens votes” (Breeding 2011), and has generally been explained – with varying degrees of celebration, resignation, and disdain – as evidence of the socially-embedded, “vernacular” (Michelutti 2007) character of Indian democracy. *Cash* transfers, by contrast, are described in both popular and scholarly accounts in the language of purchase: votes, that is, are now for sale. “Vote buying” is thus characterized as far more pernicious than older forms of patronage,<sup>2</sup> held to be both cause and sign of the deterioration of ‘traditional’ bonds of reciprocity and social trust between people and community leaders, but without the emergence among the masses of ‘modern’ forms of political autonomy and subjectivity. The voting poor, that is, are now simply willing to auction themselves off to the highest bidder. To what extent has the vote become freely exchangeable as a ‘total commodity’? This paper engages this questions through an ethnographic exploration of cash transactions in a single electoral district – Ward 228<sup>3</sup> – during the run-up and aftermath of Mumbai’s 2012 Municipal Corporation election.

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1 Mumbai’s 227 electoral wards were contested by 2233 candidates (an average of 10 candidates per ward); with the conservative assumption that of these, only half were “serious candidates” (that is, not “dummy” candidates, standing not to win but to divide opposition votes; “serious candidates” might be presumed to include the five major party candidates in each ward – although my research found that unofficial pre-poll alliances at the local level mean that even major party candidates can sometimes function as “dummies”), and that each spent only the minimum estimate of 20 lakhs (*HT* 2012) then campaign expenditure over the two week prior period to Mumbai’s Municipal Corporation election reached more than Rs2 billion (\$44 million) – approximately 1% of the Corporation’s annual budget of Rs 21,000 crore (\$4.2 billion) – control over which, needless to say, the election would decide.

2 As the following discussion will explain, it is also sometimes cast as a far-more pernicious *brand* of patronage.

3 The district numbers are obscured to preserve anonymity.

The paper is motivated by a puzzle: while election season in ward 228 was indeed characterized by impressive – and quite visible – flows of cash, the final vote tally did not reflect monetary expenditure. That is, the candidate who spent the most money came nowhere near winning the election, while the candidate who won (by a landslide) spent nowhere near as much money as some of her rivals. In Ward 228, 16 candidates were on the ballot, of which 5 were affiliated with registered political parties. While the official limit for campaign spending stood at Rs. 5 lakh<sup>4</sup> (an inflation-inspired five-fold increase over the 2007 election spending limit), actual expenditures were reported to have been significantly greater. The English-language media – which doggedly pursued cash-related stories – found that that minimum campaign expenditures for serious candidates<sup>5</sup> started at 20 lakh, reaching as high as a crore<sup>6</sup> for “prominent candidates” (*HT* 2012). My own research in Ward 228 found similar figures, with expenditures reported to range from Rs15 lakh (about \$30,000) to a crore (about \$200,000).

The lack of correlation in ward 228 between expenditure and electoral outcome suggests that perhaps all the talk about ‘vote buying’ is a lot of nonsense. A cash-flush city simply got carried away, and anxious candidates threw money at voters thinking that they could buy votes – which ultimately they could not. Indeed, this line of explanation was frequently offered (by voters and candidates alike) in the aftermath of the election. Yet at the same time, a parallel discourse emerged from the ranks of the party workers with whose ultimately-unsuccessful campaign I had been embedded: the money had been mismanaged. The wrong people had been put in charge of distributing money. Favoritism had been shown in cash distributions. And finally: not *enough* money had been distributed. Given the lack of correlation between total expenditure and electoral outcome, how should these grumbings be interpreted? Should election-season giving – particularly in the form of cash transfers – be understood as the marketization of the vote? If not – and indeed, I will argue that it has not – then how might we understand the significance of cash at election time? In other words, what is all that money actually *doing* if it is not buying votes?

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4 Rs one lakh is equal to Rs100,000. Five lakhs equals 500,000 rupees – or approximately \$10,000 at the contemporary exchange rate of Rs50/dollar.

5 See footnote 1

6 A crore is a unit of measure equal to 10 million.



## Vote Buying and Vote Banking: unpacking concepts

The idea of “vote buying” – which suggests an unholy marriage of the modern institutions and universalist imaginary of liberal democracy with particularistic and short-sighted impulses of marketized exchange – demonstrates both continuity with as well as divergence from the concept of ‘patronage politics,’ often known in the Indian context as ‘vote banking.’ It is thus worth spending a moment to unpack the ‘vote banking’ idea, and to situate it within the broader historical framework of Indian political development. In his classic 1955 essay on “The Social Structure of a Mysore Village,” written during the first decade of Independence, M.N. Srinivas famously introduced the term “vote bank” into discussions of India’s post-independence electoral politics:

The coming of elections gives fresh opportunities for the crystallization of parties around patrons. Each patron may be said to have a ‘vote bank’ which he can place at the disposal of a provincial or national party for a consideration which is not mentioned but implied. The secret ballot helps to preserve the marginal affiliation of the marginal clients (Srinivas 1955).

In Srinivas’ formulation, “vote banking” describes a process involving three different categories of actor: voters, parties, and “middlemen.” The interconnections among these actors are characterized as vertical in structure, involving two separate spheres of caste-inflected patron-client interface: first, between the voter and the middleman, and then between the middleman and the party. Each domain of interaction is mediated by a different set of social obligations: relations of patronage between voters and middlemen, Srinivas explains, are mediated at the local (village) level by caste and class: middlemen are higher-caste landowners and money lenders, with whom poorer and lower-caste masses have longstanding ties of social, ritual, and economic obligation. At election time, these social ties are activated in order to deliver votes to a preferred party. For Srinivas, transfers of material goods (the “consideration which is not mentioned but implied”) were not simple market exchanges or purchases, but rather as productive of “bonds” between the masses and the party, mediated by relations of social trust already existent between voters and their local ‘leaders.’ By providing gifts via ‘middlemen’ to the voters, Breeding (2011: 76) explains, parties “demonstrated to citizens that the party would look after citizens’ interests.” In the second sphere of interface – between the middlemen and the party – the patronage goods placed at the disposal of local leaders serve to shore up the power and authority of village-level caste elites in the face of social churning, tamping down any potential

or actual challenge to privilege posed by post-independence lower-caste movements (Breeding 2011: 76).

Srinivas' account of "vote banking" in Mysore, published so soon after Indian Independence, provided a disappointing account of the extent to which the universalist ideals of universal suffrage upon which the Congress-led nationalist movement was based had been internalized by the Indian electorate. As political historian David Gilmartin (2007) explains, Indian election law framed in the constitution "celebrates the legal status of the individual not as the bearer of a particularistic culture, but as a universal vessel of free will and legal rights. That an official, legally recognized 'voter' is a rational, autonomous actor is the conceit that justifies government by consent – and defines the people" (Gilmartin 2007: 56). Indeed, India's 1951 Representation of the People Act had as a central aim the safeguarding of the individually-reasoning voter from "undue influences" emanating from society, banning

... the systematic appeal to vote or refrain from voting on grounds of caste, race, community or religion or the use of , or appeal to, religious and national symbols, such as the National Flag and the National Emblem, for the furtherance of the prospects of a candidate's election (cited in Gilmartin 2007, 75).

The phenomenon of 'vote banking' gestures at the tensions between an ideal of an individual voter articulating personal, autonomously-generated opinions and the reality that "voters are not simply individuals defined by the universalistic claims of law, but cultural beings, defined by fluid, particularistic, and often highly affective bonds and prejudices" (56).<sup>7</sup>

Srinivas' description of vote bank politics is echoed in scholarly accounts (Yadav; Kothari; Kohli; de Wit) of post-independence Indian politics more broadly: until the general election of 1967, Indian elections were dominated by the highly-centralized Indian National Congress party, with electoral mobilization strategies and party authority hinging on what Rajni Kothari describes as "intermediate networks which take on the form of autonomous sub-systems."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Kohli (1990) describes how the "Congress system," operated through a "chain of important individuals stretching from village to state, and eventually to the national capital, welded by bonds of patronage" (Kohli 1990: 186).

7 This tension, Gilmartin notes, must not be interpreted as a clash between western ideals and Indian society, but rather, as inherent in liberal democratic theory itself, was imported "full-blown" to India (56).

8 Rajni Kothari (1970: 91) uses the term "system" to describe Congress-dominated politics of the early Republic.

The dramatic reconfigurations in India's socio-economic, demographic, cultural and institutional landscapes since the 1970s,<sup>9</sup> scholars have argued, altered patterns of political patronage. Jaffrelot (2007: 78) notes the breakneck speed at which the Indian electorate expanded during these decades (increasing from 173 million in 1952 to 400 million in 1984), with increased rates of voter participation among non-elites (and non-literates), and a proliferation of regional-level opposition parties. When in 1989 the head of the newly-elected National Front coalition, V.P. Singh, announced that 27% of all government jobs would be reserved for India's Other Backward Castes (OBCs),<sup>10</sup> caste identity gained a new kind of political salience in Indian electoral politics. While Singh's decision to implement the Mandal Commission Report's recommendations for OBC reservations contributed to the National Front government's electoral failures the following year, as Corbridge and Hariss (2000: 220) point out, the new laws about OBC reservations had significance insofar as they altered "the terms of political debate"; for the first time, Corbridge and Hariss maintain, caste identities were conceptualized and politicized as a way to access the power of the state, and lower caste Indians began to participate in electoral politics at unprecedented rates. While caste identity had always been politically important, (mobilized at the local level via the vote banking processes characteristic of the Congress system, and later by regional opposition parties in the 70s and 80s),<sup>11</sup> what we see in the 90s, Yadav (1999: 2398) argues, is the emergence of caste as part of a "politics of presence," in which it became "respectable" to "talk about caste in the public-political domain" (Yadav 1999: 2397).

As regional, linguistic, and caste-based identities gained new political salience in Indian electoral politics, historians have shown, state-level party organization became more significant, with state and local elections consistently seeing higher voter-turnout levels than general elections. Reflecting the growing significance of identity politics, general elections saw a proliferation of regional, linguistic, and caste-based parties, as well as an explosion in the number of candidates contesting elections. It was in this context of a dramatically increased and largely-illiterate electorate that the Indian Election Commission introduced new procedures designed, as Jaffrelot (2007: 79) puts it, to "create the conditions for rational and independent voting" – that is, in order to thereby curb the kinds of clientelist dynamics described by

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9 What Yadav (1999) has described as the "democratic upsurge" of India's "second electoral system."

10 22.5% were already reserved for so-called "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes"

11 For discussion, see Yadav (1999).

Srinivas as “vote banking”: the use of electoral symbols aimed to empower illiterate voters; more-stringent enforcement of the secret ballot sought to allow the voting of *individual* preferences without fear of retribution; introduction of electronic voting machines promised to curb electoral fraud. Jaffrelot finds that voting technologies designed<sup>12</sup> to “free” the voter from social dependencies and traditional solidarities in order to produce a modern, independently-reasoning electorate of “citizen-individuals” have, in India, been put to work for quite different ends by low-caste groups who have used electoral processes to pursue “community” goals.

Indeed, while accounts of ‘vote banking’ have continued to dog both scholarly and popular accounts of Indian politics, contemporary observers have noted the *changing* nature of such practices in light of the dramatic institutional, cultural, and socio-economic and demographic transformations just described. Breeding (2011), for instance, has argued that increasingly-stringent enforcement of the secret ballot has not done away with, but rather has *transformed* dynamics of patron-client obligation in specific ways. In Srinivas’ account, she points out exchanges of material goods for electoral support take on something of the character of a *contract*, with gifts functioning (in a Maussian sense), as productive of enduring social obligations that, if not reciprocated, carry prohibitive social, ethnical and economic sanctions. With institutional reforms shoring up secrecy of the ballot, Breeding points out, “citizens can accept gifts from all parties and still vote however they desire.” Patronage gifts, in this post-reform context, should be understood as largely “symbolic”: “Parties supply benefits as gestures,” Breeding argues, “often to their already loyal supporters” (2011: 73).

In a similar vein, citing the increased political competition resulting from the proliferation of parties, Ranajit Guha has suggested that the notion of ‘vote banking,’ while still relevant, has taken on a new meaning:

We still use the term coined by Srinivas; however, we mostly mean it now to capture a solidarity that is horizontal rather than vertical. “Vote bank” is not what a single patron commands; rather it denotes a collective political preference exercised by a particular interest group. In India, this interest is defined principally by primordial identity — of caste or religion or language. But one can also think of “vote banks” being constituted by shared material or moral interests (Guha 2008).

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12 Pels demonstrates that the ideology of the secret ballot attributes the technology with “an intrinsic persuasive force, such that it’s implementation is a necessary and almost sufficient condition to create an inexorable movement towards the democracy of the citizen-individual” (Pels 2007: 5).

For Guha then, it is not the form but the direction of influence characterizing vote bank politics that has changed: while stricter enforcement of the secret ballot means that vote buying has lost much of its coercive character, institutional reforms have not produced an electorate of autonomously-reasoning voters, freed from the “undue influences” of community and society. On the contrary, liberation from the vertical ties of patronage has shored up *horizontal* social identities, ultimately deepening the tendency of the Indian electorate to vote as ascriptively-delineated social groups – to market *themselves*, that is, to various parties as “vote banks.”<sup>13</sup> By obscuring the extent to which a social grouping reciprocate gifts with votes, Guha argues, the electoral reforms have helped to reverse the direction of vote-bank influence, transferring the moral hazard from voter to party, who is left with little assurance that material inducements will actually secure the sought-after votes of a particular group.

In a slightly different vein, Chatterjee critiques the notion articulated by Guha that the “interests” of vote banks are given by ascriptive identities like caste or religion, pointing to the fundamentally modern spheres of politics in and through which such groups and their claims are articulated. Community groupings offering votes in exchange for material benefits, Chatterjee suggests, should be understood as part of a broader “strategic politics” through which the urban poor in modern<sup>14</sup> India make claims on the state (Chatterjee 1998). The imperatives of democratic legitimation, Chatterjee argues, produce “political obligations” (1998: 281) for state actors to “deliver civic services and welfare benefits” to the urban poor, who are excluded from formal spheres of rights and citizenship by virtue of the fact that their “habitation or livelihood lies on the other side of legality” (Chatterjee 2004: 56). The extent to which the poor are able to make such claims effectively hinges – to “effectively make its claim in political society” – Chatterjee suggests, upon the “moral rhetoric of community” (281) through which a “population group” articulates itself as a proper and deserving recipient of governmental beneficence. Chatterjee argues that although the relations produced in political society may appear to “resemble the supposedly traditional forms of patronage and clientelism,” the sphere of political practice taking place in political society is a more recent phenomenon, inextricably intertwined with the “governmental practices” of the modern state in the past few decades. Groups

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13 This shift from vertical patronage ties to horizontal networks of authority in Mumbai is characterized by Hansen (2001: 72) the supplanting of ‘ma-bapism’ by ‘dadaism.’

14 Chatterjee suggests that the sphere of political society is a modern phenomenon, “enmeshed in an entirely new set of governmental practices that are the functions only of the modern state in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century” (1998: 282).

constituted in political society, Chatterjee maintains, “make instrumental use of the fact that they can vote in elections” in order to forge useful connections with powerful actors. “Communities,” Chatterjee contends, are “some of the most active agents of political practice” in contemporary India, for whom the vote is strategically-used tool for extracting material benefits from the bourgeoisie capitalist state (Chatterjee 1998: 282).

While accounts such as those of Chatterjee, Guha, Breeding and Jaffrelot – for all their differences – gesture towards the redistributive, if not quite *emancipatory* potential of contemporary forms of vote-bank political practice,<sup>15</sup> other theorists – particularly those of the liberal tradition – have been more skeptical. In his work on Tamil Nadu, for instance, de Wit has argued that the political developments of recent decades have supplanted what he characterizes as the genuinely-redistributive system of Congress-era clientelism (in which “very considerable patronage” resulted in significant infrastructural, educational and industrial investments) with a more pernicious form of “machine-style” politics characterizing contemporary Tamil Nadu. De Witt’s discussion of the machine politics draws on Scott’s (1972) classic formulation:

The machine politicians could be viewed as brokers who, in return for financial assistance from business elites, promoted their policy interests when in office, while passing on a portion of the again to a particularistic electorate from which they “rented” their authority” (Scott 1972: 149, cited in de Witt 1996: 60).

Indeed, De Wit describes how, beginning in the 1970s, Tamil Nadu politics has become more “machine like,” with parties courting the political support of “banks” of ascriptively-defined groups of voters (“specific castes, poor women, Dalits and public sector workers”) with “schemes and subsidies designed to benefit specific groups of voters” (de Witt 1996: 72). By “appeasing” target groups with material benefits and short-sighted welfare schemes – that is, by prioritizing “short-run particularistic gains at the expense of long-run transformations” – machine-style politics, Witt argues have had overwhelmingly-negative effects on both social welfare as well as socio-economic prospects (de Wit 1996: 72), not only for the targeted groups, but in the state as a whole. With election-time exchanges theorized as ‘machine-like,’

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15 There are additional ways in which patronage politics are theorized as beneficial to recipients: Banegas (2007) for example, in his discussion of cash disbursements in electoral campaigns in Benin, writes describes how elections provided an opportunity for “ordinary citizens” to “exact a historical revenge on the political ‘big men’” (Banegas 2007: 188) Cash, in this formulation, becomes a stand in for *retributive* if not quite democratic justice.



socially-identified banks of voters are cast not as agentive collectivities possessed, as other theorists suggest, of real bargaining power, but rather as manipulated and exploited subalterns, victimized by what Witt calls a “politics of illusion” wherein “the Tamil Nadu poor are tied to the political system by (promises of) material benefit and by almost personal, emotional ties to the highest authority” (de Wit 1996). By de Witt’s account, poor voters are not modern political subjects (Pel’s independently-reasoning citizens) but rather are inextricably entangled in “emotionally”-inflected traditional solidarities and social relations that prevent them from acting (or perhaps even perceiving) their own as well as society’s ‘real’ interests.

De Witt’s account of the difference between Congress-era clientelism and contemporary “machine-style” politics in Tamil Nadu mirrors a theoretical distinction drawn by Schaffer (2007) between “patronage” and “vote-buying” as one based largely on the different *temporalities* characterizing each modality of exchange.

Vote buying is a last-minute effort to influence electoral outcomes, typically taking place days or hours before an election, or on election day itself. The benefits derived from patronage, in contrast, tend to be less episodic and election-centered, since they are distributed within the context of enduring relationships between patrons and their clients (Schaffer 2007: 6)

Whereas “patronage politics” produces and shores up “enduring relationships” between particular groups of voters and political leaders, Schaffer suggests, the *immediacy* of election-season “vote buying” transactions – in which cash is given as a direct payment for votes at election – lends such exchanges the character of market purchase.<sup>16</sup> Vote buying, Schaffer suggests, is in a number of ways more harmful to

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16 Schaffer places “vote buying” at the far end of a theoretical continuum of electoral campaign practices through which material benefits are directed at voters: from “programmatic” to “clientelistic.” In “programmatic” offers, Schaffer writes, “candidates package material benefits into policy programs that are available to everyone, supporters and opponents alike”; clientelistic inducements, by contrast, direct benefits only to a candidate’s supporters, and only at election time (Schaffer 2007: 4-5). On the “programmatic” end of the spectrum are “allocational” policies directed at categories of beneficiaries across the entire electorate (‘the unemployed’ or ‘the elderly’); next, “pork barrel” promises offer policies and public works projects specifically to the geographic districts of a particular candidate; “patronage” politics involves “material support” to “individuals, families or communities within the context of enduring asymmetric, but reciprocal, relationships”; finally, at the far “clientelistic” end of the spectrum, “vote-buying” offers “particularistic material rewards to individuals or families.” Schaffer’s programmatic-clientelistic spectrum thus involves variation along two axes: the recipient of the benefit (general or specific) and the time-frame of the exchange (long-term or immediate).

democracy than is patronage, having negative implications for democratic accountability:

If politicians get elected on the basis of short-term contracts – money for votes – they have little reason to care about the formulation of policies, the construction of programmatic parties, and practices of accountability. In the best cases, vote buying establishes a continuous obligation to provide clientelist services to constituencies. In the worst cases, it cuts the nexus of representation between voters and politicians. Once votes are paid for, politicians may feel free of any debt to their voters. In this case, purchased delegation is unconstrained delegation (Schaffer 2007: 11).

Cash transfers, Schaffer thus argues, suggest a situation wherein politically immature voters simply auction their votes off to the highest bidder, forfeiting any claim to substantive representation as well as any hope that politicians might act in the ‘public good.’ Indeed, an additional democratic deficit suggested by Schaffer’s formulation is that vote buying “subverts the meaning of elections as instruments of collective decisionmaking, since it tends to replace deliberation over public issues with narrow calculations of individual interest” (Schaffer 2007: 9). The voting poor, that is, have assumed the modern mantle of individual rationality in matters of short-term benefit and market exchange, but without becoming mature, autonomous political subjects with proper, *programmatically* political preferences vis-à-vis questions of the broader public good.<sup>17</sup>

To summarize: scholars of Indian politics generally agree that the decades since the 1970s have seen the decline of the kinds of hierarchical patronage patterns that Srinivas describes as “vote bank” politics, and the emergence of new forms of ‘banking’ wherein material goods and particularistic benefits are directed towards horizontal, caste and community-based social groupings in exchange for a block vote. Debates have hinged largely on whether this new form of vote-bank politics represent exploitative, machine-style politics in which the poor are excluded from true democratic participation and debate on questions of governance and social policy, pacified and purchased with short-term particularistic welfarism, or whether vote bank-

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17 Notably, the idea that votes have been commoditized – as the “vote buying” idea suggests – exists in theoretical tension with the concept of “vote banking”: if votes are freely exchangeable by individual voters according to a single measure of value (money), then what are we to make of the continued political salience of groups of voters – “vote banks” – to whom money is ostensibly distributed as a marketized exchange for votes? That is, if material benefits are distributed to voters through the mediation of traditional forms of authority and identity, then what sense does it make to speak of these transfers in the language of individual rationality and market purchase?



ing might be possessed of redistributive possibility and even emancipatory potential. The distinction is adjudicated by the question of temporality: if material benefits are productive or demonstrative of enduring commitments to particular groups of voters, they are less pernicious, perhaps even democratic; if instead the transaction begins and ends with the act of voting then it suggests the forfeiture on behalf of voters of any claim to longer-term programmatic benefits.<sup>18</sup>

The notion that the influx of money means that individual votes have now become freely-exchangeable as marketable goods engages longstanding theoretical debates over the extent to which money possesses, as Bloch and Parry put it, “an intrinsically revolutionary power which inexorably subverts the moral economy of ‘traditional societies’” (Bloch and Parry 1989: 12). By introducing a single measure of value into social spheres previously governed by other moralities or logics of valuation, money is theorized as to have the potential to transform previously non-purchasable things into equivalent, freely tradable commodities: “It is in the nature of a general-purpose money,” Bohannan (1959), writes, “that that it standardizes the exchangeability value of every item to a common sale” (cited in Bloch and Parry 1989: 13). Theorists of money from Marx to Simmel have emphasized money’s particularity as an object of exchange that renders “everything quantifiable according to one scale of value” (Maurer 2006: 20). Anthropologists have thus stressed the socio-cultural effects of the introduction of money into previously non-economic spheres of life. By rendering comparable – that is, measurable by equivalent units of value – objects and relations that were previously governed by other logics or systems of value, these systems and moralities are held to deteriorate. The effects of this ‘great transformation’ (Maurer 2006: 19) on socio-cultural life has been both celebrated and condemned: on the one hand, money’s “qualityless” quality has been feted for ‘freeing’ people from oppressive gender, caste, or other hierarchical institutions; on the other, this same qualitylessness has been cast as amorality, with money accused of undermining and disembedding other socio-cultural institutions, relations and moralities. “If modern man is free,” Simmel (1907) writes, “– free because he can sell everything and free

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18 Chatterjee attempts to navigate this terrain by theorizing “community” groupings not in ascriptive terms, but as “strategic” and post-political. Yet the kinds of political concessions that community groupings are able to “extract” from the state in Chatterjee’s formulation are suggestive of short-term welfarism rather than longer-term political projects. Chatterjee nonetheless insists on the democratizing, emancipatory potential inherent in “political society” wherein he holds that “the actual transactions over the everyday distribution of rights and entitlements lead over time to substantial redefinitions of property and law within the actually existing modern state” (2004: 75).

because he can buy everything – then he now seeks... in the objects themselves that vigor, stability and inner unity which he has lost because of the changed money-conditioned relationships that he has with them” (cited in Maurer 2006: 23). In the case of votes, liberal democratic theory holds that votes ought not to be exchanged for immediate monetary gain, but rather should be governed by logics of ‘public good,’ and ‘democratic accountability.’ It is the presumed undermining of these democratic moralities that invites the condemnation of the exchange of votes for cash.

Yet conflating the presence of cash with ‘vote buying’ narrows the scope of inquiry to the question of how voter “compliance” with the cash-for-vote ‘contract’ is generated under conditions of voter balloting.<sup>19</sup> In what follows, I instead take an *ethnographic* approach to the subject of election season cash transfer, thereby allowing other meanings of money to emerge. The following accounts of election-time cash flow probe some of the presumptions embedded in concepts of “vote banking” and “vote buying,” thereby unsettling the theoretical and normative frameworks through which practices of popular politics in contemporary India have been outlined. The ethnographies reveal multiple logics operative in election-time cash flows; actors involved with moving money have divergent and sometimes conflicting aspirations, motivations and agendas, within which the cash itself plays various roles simultaneously. The following sections outline three distinct but interrelated uses of election-time cash: firstly money is used – somewhat conventionally – as a medium of *exchange*, to pay for campaign-related expenses including employing a slew of temporary workers as hired crowds. Secondly, cash is productive and performative of enduring socio-economic *networks* that infuse everyday life far beyond election day. Thirdly, cash is *sign* of other forms of present and future knowledge and authority, generating intense speculation and political realignments during the run-up to election day. The account that emerges suggests neither a heroic narrative of subaltern resistance to bourgeois capitalism, nor a dystopic scenario of mass exploitation in which forces of ‘marketization’ empty the act of voting of meaning. Rather, it is argued, election-time cash inhabits a deeply-political landscape of contestation within which issues at the heart of Mumbai’s modernity – land use, infrastructural investment, and business prospects – are negotiated.

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19 Schaffer, for instance, differentiates between “instrumental” and “normative” compliance, where the former involves monitoring turnout and incentivizing fulfillment of the vote-buying ‘contract,’ while the latter involves leveraging social resources such as “gratitude” and “personal obligation” (Schaffer 2007) to enforce compliance.

Before getting into the accounts, just a word about methodology and how it relates to structure of the narrative. During the campaign period, I was embedded with a single campaign in a single electoral ward. On the invitation of the candidate herself – a woman named Seema running on a National Congress Party ticket; I accompanied the candidate to the vast majority of meetings, rallies, and staged events that took place between the announcement of her candidature and election day. In addition to this ethnographic work, I conducted – for comparative purposes – extensive interviews and more-limited participant-observation in four additional electoral wards: two adjacent, and two in other parts of the city. The narratives that follow thus reflect these multiple research methods: the next two sections on ‘mediating everyday emerge and ‘the politics of elections’ draw on *interview*-based research, and are therefore presented as second-hand accounts rather than in an ethnographic voice. The following three sections (‘hired crowds,’ ‘cash as gift,’ ‘un-purchasable loyalty,’ and ‘money as sign’) however draw on ethnographic research and are thus highly descriptive and diachronic; some of the narrative accounts are excerpted directly from fieldnotes as a way to demonstrate certain arguments. The conclusion resumes an analytical tone bringing the ethnographic accounts in conversation with the theoretical questions animating the research.

## Mediating Everyday Life

The activities leading up to polling day – and the role of money in these activities – must be understood in relation to the materialities and political economies that infuse everyday life in Mumbai beyond election season. Mumbai’s electoral Ward 228 is a working-class neighborhood that is described by Municipal authorities as a “slum” – a characterization that, in contemporary Mumbai,<sup>20</sup> carries a connotation of illegality and informality.<sup>21</sup> 228 is, technically speaking, neither a slum, nor are its residents living there illegally. The neighborhood, rather, is a municipal resettlement colony dating from 1976, when the Municipal Corporation issued a demolition notice to the neighborhood of Indira Nagar (itself a resettlement colony), citing a need to reclaim the Municipally-owned land for another “public purpose.” Indira Nagar’s residents were given plots of land in a nearby area, on public land zoned for

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20 The politics of “slum” in contemporary Mumbai mirrors the way the term has, in recent decades, come to be used in development policy discourse more globally.

21 For a discussion on the discourse of “slum,” see Björkman (forthcoming 2013).

“public housing.” While 228 is not a slum, the current political climate is such that the neighborhood is popularly and politically *treated* as a slum; the neighborhood was surveyed *as* a slum in conjunction with the 1999 Slum Survey carried out by the Government of Maharashtra. This means that neighborhood residents are vulnerable to the vagaries of slum laws and policies, which effectively restrict the kinds of infrastructural and other investments that can be made in the neighborhood, while rendering legally precarious the lives and livelihoods of area residents. In 228 (as in Mumbai more generally) everyday activities – accessing municipal water, applying for or renewing identity documents (passports, drivers licenses, ration cards, voter identification cards) securing permission from the municipal authorities to carry out home renovations, getting a child registered for school, applying for a school-fee waiver, registering a birth, marriage or death in the family, starting a business, disposing of garbage, unblocking gutters, taking out a low-interest loan – generally require mediation by someone who can provide needed information and technical assistance. Indeed, in the legal vagary and contradiction that characterizes everyday life in “slums,” both production and maintenance of a neighborhood’s physical form and infrastructure, as well all manner of business activity generally involves some kind of mediation by someone who has access to various kinds of knowledge and resources that are necessary (or are at least believed to be necessary) for navigating the physical, legal, and economic opacities of the city.<sup>22</sup> For instance, mediation is particularly sought-after when some required work requires residency proof: a water new connection, for example, or inclusion in a slum rehabilitation scheme. This is especially true for the vast numbers of people living as renting tenants,<sup>23</sup> for whom residency proof is exceedingly-difficult to procure. In such cases, official applications are generally believed to have a better chance of being processed if they are accompanied by a letter from a politically-connected person (a police officer or an elected official, for instance) verifying the address of the applicant.<sup>24</sup> Self-proclaimed

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22 Elite Mumbaikars, incidentally, also rely on mediators for such things, albeit in somewhat-different ways. Hence such a high percentage of voters come from Mumbai’s working classes, this research focuses on a non-elite neighborhood.

23 Tenants comprise an estimated 60% of so-called ‘slumdweller,’ who themselves are estimated at more than 60% of Mumbai’s official population.

24 More important than the office or official position implied in the signature is the networks of power and authority that are implied in any particular signature. A powerful social worker, for instance, has no need for a corporator’s signature, and conversely, an unknown corporator can accomplish very little without his social workers. A common mistake made by scholars and theorists working on such issues is to assume that author-

“*kariyakartas*” (or social workers)<sup>25</sup> will therefore often maintain business relations with an area’s elected Corporator, even if a social worker is affiliated with – and had even campaigned for – a candidate from another political party.

‘Social work’ is a way for an enterprising young person to generate employment for him or herself, while opening up his own future business or political prospects. One imaginative young man named Abdul, for instance, the child of an indisputably-poor, North Indian Muslim family, explained to me that he began his own social work career at the age of 11 or 12 when he self-selected as a neighborhood police informant. Spending afternoons loitering around the police station – bringing tea, running errands, delivering messages – Abdul soon found a way to make himself useful to a broader audience when the police station’s water connection went dry. With a letter from an inspector, Abdul took to spending long hours in the local water department office, securing approvals for station-bound water tankers. Since the police station could only use a fraction of the 10,000 liters in the tanker, Abdul took it upon himself (with the blessing of his contacts at the police station) to distribute the remaining water up and down the adjacent lanes – to homes, schools, and masjids. Soon, community leaders and masjid directors were seeking out his services, which Abdul performed happily, accepting “chai-paani” tips, but not charging any fees. Abdul soon became a regular around the water department, where he would perform favors, fact-gathering missions, and informant services for the municipal engineers. Abdul became well-enough acquainted with the ward staff that his wait-times decreased; by the time I met Abdul he needed only to phone the sub-engineer in charge of tanker approvals in order to have his application approval called over to the dispatch office. During the run-up to the 2009 Legislative Assembly elections, Abdul was in high demand, with party campaigns competing for his services, offering significant fees in exchange for tankers delivered to various party workers to be distributed in water-scare neighborhoods. As Abdul’s trajectory indicates, establishing oneself as a social worker begins with acts of generosity: running errands for the police and water department earned him the privilege of distributing water around the neighborhood.

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ity inheres in the post itself. My research finds instead that the direction of influence is the inverse, with the authority that an elected corporator is able to wield stemming from the fields of knowledge, authority and influence from which he was elected. Hence, this prior question of *who* becomes corporator – or whom among social workers is awarded the party ticket – becomes quite interesting.

25 The popularity of the English word “social worker” perhaps reflects the dramatic rise in the number of NGOs in these neighborhoods in recent years – a fascinating subject that is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Distributing water earned him the trust of community leaders, who began to compensate him for his services. His reputation as a reliable supplier of water made him an indispensable asset at election time, as parties competed to attach the party name to Abdul's reputation, thereby winning the votes of the families who had come to trust in Abdul's abilities as social worker. My research revealed that social workers' histories tended to follow a similar pattern, with the bestowing of small favors and gifts eventually shoring up strong networks of local knowledge and authority that are increasingly compensated with tips or fees.

The scope of the activity locally-described as 'social work' is, however, not limited to mundane, household-level issues. Ambitious social workers – particularly those with political aspirations of their own – set their sites on the resources of the Municipal Corporation, seeking to direct flows of investment (particularly infrastructural investment) towards their neighborhoods. Self-styled "plumbers," for instance, have enormous amounts of influence in the municipal water department, where their knowledge of local infrastructural networks frequently exceeds that of municipal engineers. The official expertise of state officials often stems directly from the intimate material knowledge of local social workers. Indeed, infrastructural works – even large-scale interventions – frequently can trace their origins to social workers. As one senior water department engineer explained to me in reference to a major water main upgrading initiative recently completed in electoral ward 228, while the final plan was ultimately drawn by him, it was 228's incumbent corporator – Fareed – who had originally approached the water department with the idea. "The final plan was ours," he explained, "but every plan needs someone to initiate it. So Fareed made the request on letterhead for new pipelines [...]. We took the Deputy's [Hydraulic Engineer] sanction and then it was included in G Budget." While the engineer recalls that this particular plan was *presented* by Fareed, it was conceived not by Fareed himself, but by his social workers (or 'plumbers' as social workers with water specializations are known). Indeed, when I ran into one of Fareed's plumbers in the municipal water department office during the week of the 2012 election, he told me about a *new* initiative that they were planning to pursue upon Fareed's reelection (in which he had full confidence): while they had already convinced the water department to enlarge the mains along each of 228's two main roads, this had not entirely solved the neighborhood's water problems. Now, they would request the redrawing and subdivision of the neighborhood's distribution zones, "so that there's better water pressure." In addition, he adds, "we're asking for a [storage tank], so that we can decide our own



distribution timings.”<sup>26</sup> The reach and effectiveness of social workers’ networks, as this example indicates, can sometimes exceed that of an elected corporator him- or herself. Indeed, a powerful social worker has no need for a corporator’s signature to get work done, while conversely, an unknown corporator can accomplish very little without his social workers. Since the authority that an elected corporator is able to wield stems from the fields of knowledge, authority and influence from which he was elected, the question of who among social workers becomes corporator – as well as how electoral victories are accomplished – becomes quite interesting.<sup>27</sup>

A note on terminology: the mediating work described here is popularly described simply as *kam*, which translates as “work,” with the person doing the work described as either a *kariyakarta* – which translates as “doer” or “worker” – or else using the English term *social worker*.<sup>28</sup> While the work of *kariyakartas* is at the heart of local politics, the term itself, significantly, is politically neutral; even when a person maintains a long-time affiliation with a particular party, he or she is often referred to either as a *kariyakarta*, or else according to his or her trade or field of specialization: “plumber,” “contractor,” “paniwalla” (water vendor), or, indeed, “social worker.”<sup>29</sup> While the ambiguity of this terminology might be precisely the point, the present narrative remains faithful to terminological vagueness (albeit at the risk of producing confusion). Although there are of course, long-time *kariyakartas* who overtly claim party affiliation and hold party posts, in practice (as the following narratives demonstrate) the partisanship even of party ‘loyalists’ is quite fluid at the local level. For the sake of clarity, I sometimes refer to long-established *kariyakartas* overtly claiming party affiliation as “party workers,” and everyone else as either *kariyakarta* or *social worker*.<sup>30</sup>

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26 It is not uncommon for plumbers themselves (that is, social workers with water expertise) to be offered party tickets in Municipal elections.

27 By contrast, scholars and theorists working on such issues problematically tend to assume that authority inheres in the post itself.

28 The popularity of the English word “social worker” reflects the dramatic rise in the number of NGOs in these neighborhoods – a fascinating subject which is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

29 Elsewhere I have theorized these various activities as “knowledge brokering” – thereby placing an emphasis not on the *person* doing work, but on the activities themselves through which aspiring young people seek to insert themselves into local economies of knowledge and expertise exchange (Björkman 2013a). Scholars of Indian politics (e.g., Anjaria 2011; Hansen and Verkaaik 2009, etc.) have used terms such as *broker*, *middleman*, or *agent*.

30 The number of young men and women self-identifying as “*kariyakartas*” and “social workers” has dramatically expanded in recent years; as one young man put it, “these days,

## The Politics of Elections: social worker (re)alignments

The electoral successes and political fortunes of a corporator hinge upon his or her relations with area social workers, on whose networks of knowledge a corporator's efficaciousness depends. At the same time, as already discussed, social workers' *own* work is often facilitated by the corporator. As a Shiv Sena party worker named Vidhu explained to me, "I spend from my own pocket sometimes [paying area residents' school fees, hospital bills, funeral expenses etc.], but its an investment that I get back because when [the local Shiv Sena corporator] is reelected then my work gets done." To unpack the operative chain of logic here: Vidhu uses his own resources – time, money, and knowledge – in cultivating trust-based reciprocal relationships with area residents. Aware that Vidhu's strength as a social worker is a result of his trans-local knowledge as well as his network of political and administrative contacts, at election time residents who have come to rely on Vidhu will have no hesitation in supporting whichever candidate Vidhu tells them is "ours." That is, while some social workers maintain close relations with particular parties – and indeed, many social workers begin their careers *as* party-affiliated,<sup>31</sup> social workers are often somewhat ecumenical in their partisanship, working (also) with whichever party happens to be in office. In 2009, for instance, I accompanied a Samajwadi Party (SP) corporator for dinner in the home of some area social workers known to be affiliated with the rival MNS party. "Those boys are in my area," the corporator explained when I asked her about the purpose of the dinner meeting "so they've asked me to spend my funds to do their work." Indeed, when I asked social worker (from neighboring ward 229) named Khan about his party affiliation, since he had actively campaigned for the Samajwadi Party candidate during the 2009 Parliamentary election but was standing firmly alongside the incumbent Congress-party candidate – Mr. Kamble – during the 2012 Corporation campaign, he responded firmly:

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everyone's a social worker!"

31 The Shiv Sena party has particularly strong organizational structure for putting young men and women to work in their neighborhoods. As Vidhu explained, "the corporator controls all the area business, so for boys who need work, [the Shiv Sena mandal] is a good way to start. The corporator has connections – he says go clean this drain, go clean that drain, and gives you some money to get it done. For an account of Shiv Sena mandals, see Hansen (2001).



**Khan:** I work for myself and for my people here; Kamble supports us.

**Me:** But how do you convince people to vote for him?

**Khan:** I just tell them how to vote and they do.

**Me:** why don't they just nod and then vote for who they want?

**Khan:** They don't know who they want, so they ask me. They trust me to tell them who will protect us – who will do their work.

While Kamble won his 2012 reelection by a comfortable margin, drawing on strong networks of trust and authority that he had cultivated over two decades of social work, including ten years as an elected councilor, Seema began election season almost entirely unknown to her 40,000-voter-strong constituency.

A standing corporator in the neighboring Ward 230, Seema was rendered ineligible to re-contest from her own Ward due to changes in 230's reservation – from “open female” to “OBC open.”<sup>32</sup> Seema was not alone; a newly-implemented 50% seat-reservation requirement for women (up from 30% in 2007), in combination with the existing 30% (combined OBC, SC and ST)<sup>33</sup> caste reservations, unseated 70% of Mumbai's sitting corporators during the 2012 election, while frustrating the aspirations of scores of would-be candidates. Moreover, on top of the gender and caste reservations, all of Mumbai's major political parties formed pre-poll alliances during the 2012 corporation elections.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while the party leadership hammered out seat-sharing agreements and candidate lists for the 227 wards, reports emerged from across the city (stories reported on gleefully by the city's excitable media) of bare-knuckled jockeying and threats of defection, with multiple social workers in each ward claiming it was ‘their turn’ to contest the election on the various party tickets.

Unmoored from an area where she – by her own estimate – commanded the loyalty of at least 2000 karyakartas,<sup>35</sup> Seema had approached party higher-ups and expressed

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32 Seema does not hold an “Other Backward Class” certificate, while the 50% reservation for women meant that tickets for seats not reserved for women would almost certainly be given to men.

33 Other Backward Class, Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe

34 In an effort to avoid splitting the so-called “secular” vote, the Congress Party joined forces with the National Congress Party. After weeks of high-profile horse-trading, the senior leadership of each party settled on a formula that gave 169 seats to Congress and the remaining 58 to NCP. Meanwhile, the “saffron” alliance between the Shiv Sena Party and the Bharitya Janata Party (BJP) joined forces with Dalit leader Ramdas Athavale's Republican Party of India (RPI), settling on a formula allowing each party to contest 135, 63 and 29 seats respectively.

35 In a constituency of 40,000 people, this means that social workers comprise 5% of the population. While this number may seem like an exaggerated estimate, the notion that

interest in contesting from Ward 228, where she had resided since marriage but where she was unknown as a social worker. Seema was eventually awarded the National Congress Party (NCP) ticket in Ward 228 at the expense of at least four other social workers, each of whom claimed a right to the ticket. A long-time Congress party social worker named Juned, for instance, was incensed that despite his years of work, the Congress Party leadership had ceded 228 to NCP. As he saw it, the ticket was his rightful due – or at least that of his family; with the women’s reservation, he had lobbied Congress leaders for a ticket in the name of a close relative. While Juned made his anger publically known early on – boycotting party meetings and allowing rumors to circulate about which candidate might be on the receiving end of his electoral might – conversations with other social workers suggested that Juned’s huffing and puffing was largely for show, an effort to communicate to the newcomer that she needed *him* more than he needed her. Indeed, since 228 falls within the boundaries of a legislative assembly district held by NCP leader Mastan Aziz (popularly known as Mastanbhai), it was hardly surprising that 228 was given to NCP. “Why don’t you call him?” a veteran Congress Party loyalist counseled Seema early on during the campaign, when Juned’s allegiances were still up for grabs. The man explained that Juned himself had indicated that he was boycotting Seema’s campaign only because she had not yet approached him “nicely,” acknowledging his position and formally requesting an alliance.

Another frustrated contender was Hasina, the area’s former NCP corporator from two terms prior (the last time the seat was reserved for women). As one long-time party worker explained to me, Hasina had been confident that she was in line for the ticket again, and had already spent months shoring up her social networks and mulling over possibilities for future collaborations, particularly with the party’s ward president – a woman named Sushma. When rumors began to circulate that the ticket would go to Seema – an area newcomer – an incensed Hasina convinced Sushma to approach Mastanbhai with an ultimatum: if the ticket was given to Hasina then Sushma would throw her weight wholeheartedly behind the party; otherwise Sushma *herself* would contest the election as an independent, taking along her loyal voters, including the hundreds of women participating in the local savings groups (*bachat khata*) that Sushma facilitated. When Seema’s candidature was announced, Hasina promptly declared independence, filing a candidature application on behalf of her

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one out of every 20 people (5 households) engages – at least on occasion – in some form of “social work” does not seem far fetched.

niece (a budding social worker in her own right). Sushma, the NCP district president who had apparently been convinced by Hasina's claim that she would get the ticket and had thus taken pains to distance herself from Seema, phoned Seema in a panic to explain and mend fences: Hasina had only been using her, Sushma explained, offering her loyalty to Seema.

Seema thus began campaign season not only entirely unknown, but faced with a socio-political landscape riven with deep wounds and fissures from the bitter fights over the party tickets. In this context, the first order of business was to corral the support of the social workers, particularly those with those with Congress or NCP affiliations who were presumably amenable to alliance. Indeed, while Seema herself was unknown, her party of course, was not; the NCP boasted a strong network of social workers, many having longstanding personal loyalties to Mastanbhai, the standing MLA. Once her NCP candidature was announced, Seema thus found herself under the tutelage of a sprightly, diminutive, seasoned social worker named Hakim. Hakim's specialization is water, and before his kidneys failed he used to spend long hours at the local water department office, pushing papers and negotiating hydraulic favors for area residents. Hakim is well known in 228 – for his temper, his impatience, and above all for his unwavering work ethic. One well-known story has Hakim waiting for a municipal work crew, which he had summoned to unblock a clogged drain. When the crew failed to arrive by mid-day (thereby putting Hakim's reputation on the line), the exasperated social worker is storied to have leapt into the open drain, clawing out the muck and filth with his bare hands. Hakim's affiliation with Mastanbhai is longstanding, and his loyalty unwavering – particularly in the years since the MLA began picking up the bill for Hakim's monthly dialysis treatments. Indeed, not even when Hakim's own niece accepted a nomination from a rival party was Hakim's commitment to Seema's campaign called into question. This would not be the first time that Hakim would manage a campaign for a newcomer: Hasina's own victory a decade earlier is widely attributed to Hakim's reputation and networking skills; before that, Hakim had installed a woman named Sowmya in office on behalf of the Janata Dal.<sup>36</sup> So it was with confidence that, with Hakim at the helm, Seema set out to build a network of support for her candidacy.

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36 “Hakimne usko jitaya” – Hakim made her win – was how Sowmya's victory was generally explained.

## Hired Crowds

Seema quickly found her schedule packed with invitations from social workers, welfare associations, religious organizations and businesspeople; the weeks before polling day were spent balancing full days of door-to-door campaigning and rallies with a frenzied schedule of relationship-building meetings, negotiations and exchanges that regularly kept Seema out long after midnight. On the night after Seema's candidature was announced, Hakim counseled Seema that their first order of business was to sort out the troubled relations with NCP and Congress party workers. Sushma, Hasina, Juned and another longtime NCP party worker named Sonu who had been seeking the ticket for his wife. Most important were Sushma and Hasina, who seemed open to collaboration. Juned and Sonu, who were reported to already have aligned themselves with the SP campaign, were quickly dismissed as lost causes. Despite Hasina's declaration of her niece's independent candidature, she had made it known (through carefully-spread rumors) that she would withdraw the application only if Mastanbhai would call her personally to seek her support for Seema. As Seema explained, the only way that Hasina could re-join the NCP campaign while preserving her reputation and dignity would be if she could proclaim that Mastanbhai himself, recognizing her influence, had personally requested that she withdraw her niece's candidacy. Mastanbhai, however, was having none of it; as he explained to a gathering of 150 or so party workers a week before polling day, "Hasina? The public rejected her. She asked for the ticket, but we did a survey in the area – her image was tarnished.<sup>37</sup> [...] We told her 'we'll give you other responsibilities and then next time we'll see.' She said ok, but then put up her niece!" The standoff between Mastanbhai and Hasina was never resolved and Hasina did not withdraw her niece's candidacy.

As for Sushma's, her reputation as a powerful social worker was rumored to have an extended reach<sup>38</sup> and Hakim counseled that Seema do well to have Sushma on their side – or at least not campaigning against her. Indeed, after Sushma's initial phone call – during which she had apologized and pledged her support – the NCP

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37 During her tenure as corporator Hasina had become famous for extorting exorbitant cash payments from families making renovations or extensions on their homes – an activity that, since the neighborhood is treated a 'slum' is considered to be illegal. Mastanbhai later made it clear to Seema that "it was not her job" to either protect or report on construction activities in the neighborhood.

38 "Us ki public bahut hai" or "us ki public kuch bhi nahi hai" – "she has a lot of public" or "she doesn't have any public" were phrases commonly tossed around in reference to the rumored size of a social worker's business.

ward president had been conspicuously absent and difficult to reach, having yet to come and meet Seema in person. Seema had requested a meeting earlier that very afternoon, but Sushma had put her off, telling her to “come tomorrow.” Sitting in Hakim’s home late that first night, Seema phoned Mastanbhai to ask his advice: “Leave her behind,” Mastanbhai counseled; “we’ll get a new ward president. She’s out of the party.” Seema, however, was not convinced and went to meet Sushma the following day. Mastanbhai had called a meeting of party workers for the following evening, Seema explained, and she needed a crowd; Sushma is the NCP ward president and “her people” were needed. While I was not present at Seema’s meeting with Sushma, the ward president reportedly reaffirmed her pledge of support to Seema, and to send 100 “loyal supporters” to the meeting the following evening.

Seema spent much of those first days in this way, rounding up social workers for the inaugural campaign meeting, where the strength their various constituencies would be assessed. The evening before the meeting we thus found ourselves (at the invitation of a childhood friend of Seema’s husband) in the 5,000-voter-strong neighborhood of Phule Nager, where Seema addressed a gaggle of social workers, instructing each of them to bring at least 50 women to Mastanbhai’s inaugural party worker meeting the following evening. Thereafter, Seema continued, she would need these women to work for her – to accompany her on rallies. “They’ll be fed and paid,” Seema explained, at the rate of Rs200 each per day.” Seema clarified that the money would not go directly to the women, but rather as a lump sum paid to each *social worker*, to be distributed to the women as he or she saw fit. “Bring your 50 women tomorrow,” Seema concluded, “and then we’ll count them.” This social worker meeting was one of many that we attended that in the initial days of the campaign, as Seema reached out and took stock of her existing support.

People arrived in droves to the party meeting, and the 2000 chairs rented for the occasion quickly proved insufficient to accommodate the crowds, who stood in lines along the back wall. Seema was visibly relieved at the impressive turnout. Seema’s sister Razia explained: “they’re all *karyakartas*; this is a *karyakarta* meeting, not a *public* meeting. Most of the people here are paid to be here.” Indeed, Razia and a few other of Seema’s relatives were standing at the entryway of the school grounds and circulating through the rows of seats to write down the names of social workers and count the number of supporters that each had brought. (Sushma’s “hundred women” turned out to number around twenty, and Seema’s team set about speculating over whether this disappointing attendance was a sign of Sushma’s weakness, or of her lack of commitment to Seema’s campaign). Such assessments of party worker

strength and loyalty – indicated by the numbers of each party worker’s “people” who turned up – was, Razia explained, the primary purpose of the meeting.<sup>39</sup>

Yet extrapolating from the evening’s events, the meeting served a number of other functions simultaneously, holding different meanings for different actors. For Mastanbhai, starring in such a large and elaborate event allowed him to demonstrate his personal commitment to Seema’s campaign and to signal his longer-term interest in the goings-on of the neighborhood. The first half of the two-hour meeting was thus devoted to inviting on stage a parade of prominent party-affiliated social workers<sup>40</sup> to be garlanded by Mastanbhai in the presence of the 2000-person strong audience. Among those thus honored, significantly, were a handful of high-profile defectors from rival parties: a senior party worker from the Republican Party of India (RPI) for instance, was summoned onstage along with – notably – four of her young karyakartas. Mastanbhai took care in recognizing each boy individually with a garland and a handshake, introducing him by name to the 2000-person strong audience. The tone of the meeting was celebratory, with the audience’s status as honored and invited guests signaled by an elaborately-choreographed (and what would otherwise have been disproportionately time-consuming) distribution of wobbly little cups of scalding tea. Mastanbhai made it clear that he intended for Seema to win, and the pomp and ceremony with which he recognized and honored the social workers in the audience signaled that those among them who would help Seema win might in the future be able to leverage Mastanbhai’s support – and his network of powerful contacts – in their future work.<sup>41</sup>

Yet from the perspective of the social workers themselves, the meeting held a somewhat-different significance: “we need to show Mastanbhai how much strength we have,” one young karyakarta explained; “he should see that we’re getting him

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39 The people who the various party workers brought were described as both *karyakartas*, as well as simply *log* (people). One party worker explained that “in every lane there will be some *main* person (*har ek gali me koi main rahega*) to whom people go when they need help; that’s the person that we bring.”

40 Including the mysteriously-absent Hasina (who was reported to have been called on an urgent trip “to the village”) and a chastened Shushma (who was, however, spotted not long after at a Samajwadi Party rally, flanked by her trademark following of fully-veiled, “nosepiece walli” women).

41 This dynamic was again evidenced on the eve of the election when neighborhood’s elected Member of Parliament made an appearance in Seema’s office. The half hour that this senior Congress Party member spent in the little office was devoted to meeting and taking down the names of Seema’s 15 or so most-active campaign workers. The purpose of the list remained unspecified, but clearly suggested a promise of future favors.



attention.” Indeed, whatever Mastanbhai’s intentions for the meeting, social workers described the meeting primarily as an opportunity to represent *themselves* to Mastanbhai and Seema as important wielders of power and influence. By showing up with large crowds, each social worker attempted to portray him- or herself as someone who commanded the confidence of many voters – someone to whom the party would be indebted in the event of a victory. Indeed, the goals of social workers (to demonstrate personal strength) can sometimes work at cross purposes with the needs of the campaign (to assess the strength of various social workers’ loyal constituencies), insofar as the personal and political aspirations of individual social workers can lead not-infrequently to the passing of misinformation to party higher-ups. As one *karyakarta* explained, “see, the lower level workers are also looking out for themselves. If they’re working in a certain area then they have to make it seem like they are the important one.” Pointing at a young boy who had just delivered tea, he continued: “If you’re Mastanbhai and you come to me and I introduce you to this fellow here and I say, “he is one of my men – he’s a very big and important man in the neighborhood!’ now, why would I do that? Because then Mastanbhai will think “oh what important and powerful people I have in my team!” And I gain esteem. So, you see, sometimes the *karyakartas* don’t give good information.”

## Cash as Gift

Given that such rallies seemed to offer seemingly-mutual (if sometimes contradictory) benefit to both Seema’s campaign and to various social workers, what should be made of the distribution of cash? At one level, the cash that Seema funneled through area social workers functioned rather straightforwardly, as wage-like payments for the work of accompanying Seema on rallies; the women would be “fed and paid,” Seema had promised the room full of party-allied social workers the day before Mastanbhai’s inaugural rally, “at the rate of Rs200 each per day.” The work accomplished by cash distributions to social workers, however, has another, more crucial dimension, as productive and performative of alliances between Seema and the social workers – alliances that cash disbursements profess to *represent*. Seema’s campaign energies were largely devoted to intense relationship-building and alliance-forging activities, in which gifts, promises, and especially money played a central role in both assessing and producing loyalties.

The night Seema's candidacy was announced thus found us snaking our way through the dark lanes of 228, until we emerged in an open expanse on the edge of a marshland; we had been invited by a local community leader who had immediately reached out to Seema's cousin's-uncle's-brother (who lives in the area) to arrange the meeting:

*We duck into a small anonymous-looking structure. Inside the tiny space at least 30 not-young men in tall green hats are seated on the floor, facing a small shrine at the front of the room, next to which is seated – on a large orange pillow – a large, imposing man in bright white elaborately-embroidered kurta. Behind the seated men in the hats, the walls are lined with younger men – at least 15 of them, casually dressed, social worker types. They're Elae Hadis, Seema's husband tells me, from Ajmer; there are probably about 2000 voters from their community here in 228. They're strong Congress supporters, he tells me, and they invited Seema as soon as they heard about her NCP candidacy. We sit down in front of the man on the pillow, but he doesn't look at me or at Seema; he talks to the men – first to Seema's cousin's-uncle's-brother. Seema's cousin's-uncle's-brother hands the man on the pillow a thick wad of thousands-rupee notes, which he promptly refuses. Seema's cousin's-uncle's-brother laughs nervously, insisting "it's just our donation – for renovations." The man on the pillow nods and directs Seema's cousin's-uncle's-brother to hand the cash to another man, seated behind us, who accepts the money and touches the notes to his forehead. The man on the pillow says to Seema's husband "we won't run around for you, but Seema can count on the vote here." Seema hands the man on the pillow her business card and says "if you have any work then call my man and we will be here in 15 minutes; we live close by." The man on the pillow laughs as he accepts Seema's card and places it on the shrine: "yes, we plan to call you; that's why we invited you and took your card."*

This particular meeting seems to have served two purposes: first, in the context of widespread defections among Congress party workers, man on the pillow clarified to Seema any confusion over whether or not his people would vote for her, communicating to Seema that her future win would put her in debt directly to them. The meeting, in other words, firmed up an agreement: votes now in exchange for "work" over the next five years. The formal offering of a cash gift thus functioned neither to *purchase* the votes of the individuals in the room (the leadership of which had already decided to support Seema), neither did it carrying any burden of *reciprocity* (votes were promised in exchange for future *work*). Rather, the cash worked as a public performance of Seema's access to powerful, moneyed networks, as well as a show of generosity. By handing over cash – not in an envelope moreover, but as a thick stack of notes – Seema demonstrated not only her beneficence, but also – significantly – that she has the means, knowledge, and material resources to act on it.



At the same time, the man on the pillow made it clear to the senior members of his community – as well as to the crew of presumably Congress-affiliated neighborhood social workers lining the walls – that they were to support Seema. The man on the pillow’s proclamation that the people of his community would not “run around” for Seema’s campaign is thus significant. The area is a Congress-stronghold, and the NCP-Congress pre-poll alliance had, as already discussed, produced something of a scramble among Congress-affiliated social workers (such as Juned) for whom working for the campaign of another (indeed lesser-known) social worker held little appeal. The solemn, almost ritualistic quality of the meeting formalized the agreement, working to produce trust in both directions – by reassuring area social workers that they advise their neighbors to support Seema in the confidence that, in the future, their work would get done, while demonstrating to Seema that, even though people from the area might not “run around” for the campaign, her future win would put her in their service.

While members of this particular community would not openly campaign for Seema, the campaign experienced no dearth of manpower. Indeed, during the two weeks leading up to polling day, Seema employed at the rate of Rs200 per day anywhere from 15 to 1000 people every day to attend rallies and to accompany her on parades around the neighborhood. The crowds (of mostly women) were “provided” by various social workers to whom Seema paid cash at the end of each day according to the number of people provided. As most of the social workers were unknown, the immediate task of Seema’s core team (comprised exclusively of her immediate family) was one of assessing the credibility of the various social workers’ claims. An invitation from a prominent social worker who was well-known to have supported the now-incumbent candidate (Fareed) in the previous election posed a telling predicament:

*Seema, her husband, his two friends – Aslam and Raju – and I head over to the home of a Tamil-speaking woman named Rookiya, who Seema tells me called her up that afternoon to request a meeting. We arrive at Rookiya one-room and some boys are there too – three of them, probably in their early 20s, maybe younger. They sit quietly on the floor nearby. Rookiya laughs easily and has a straightforward, honest way that makes me like her. She speaks confidently, convincingly, telling Seema in no uncertain terms: “I will make you win; whoever I support wins.” She runs a number of chit funds in area, so she’s widely known, and well trusted. But Aslam is skeptical: “look,” he says, “you worked for Fareed last time....” She nods, unfazed, stating simply “I’m not working for Fareed this time.” Seema nods slowly. Rookiya promises to have her boys round up as many people as Seema needs for her campaign – for rallies, for distributing fliers, for door-to-door campaigns. “People listen to me,”*

*Rookiya tells Seema, repeating: “whoever I work for, that person wins.” When we’re outside again, Aslam turns to Seema’s husband: “How do we know that [Fareed] hasn’t come to her first? Maybe she’s just calling Seema in order to pass information to Fareed.” But Seema seems inclined to trust her: Rookiya’s family is from same village as Seema’s husband, she points out; they had even spoken to one another in Tamil. “Maybe because of this link she’ll feel some closeness and work for us.” Her husband is pensive, concluding: “we can’t trust her... but we can’t let on that we don’t trust her. We have to make sure that these people feel trusted.”*

Notwithstanding the need to make “these people feel trusted,” Seema did not call Rookiya back, and Rookiya did not call again. While it is quite possible that commonalities of linguistic and regional Tamil identity had informed Rookiya’s initial effort to reach out to Seema and offer the services of her “boys,” the social worker’s closeness to Fareed made her untrustworthy.<sup>42</sup>

As Seema’s campaign swung into motion, the newly-inaugurated NCP campaign office was bombarded daily with social workers wishing to send their people on Seema’s campaign rallies and processions at the rate of Rs200 per head:

*A woman walks into Seema’s office and sits down. Seema greets her but doesn’t know who she is. Seema’s husband tells me that he think’s she’s a Congress social worker. Is she going to help you, I ask? He shrugs: “We don’t know. She says she’ll help and that she has so many people...” I ask, but how do you know how many “people” someone has? And what does it mean to “have people” anyway? He shrugs “even we don’t even know.” Hakim asks the woman: “who are your karyakartas?” She doesn’t give any names – just gestures with her hand: “down there, the butchers.” Hakim instructs her to write down a list of her karyakartas and their contact information. She bobs her head, yes yes. She continues: “Actually, I would have come earlier but I just found out about you – I just got the call.” Hakim: “From who?” She becomes a little flustered, answering “actually... I don’t know his name.” Hakim: just bring your karyakartas.*

After a social worker appeared like this to announce that he or she had so many “people” behind her, one of Seema’s men (her husband and his friends) would go to “ask around” in the neighborhood where the self-proclaimed social worker professed to have support: what work has this person done? Do people really support this person? If the survey was promising, then Seema’s team would settle on a number of the social worker’s supporters that Seema would pay for participation in rallies. Notably, since all the major campaigns were offering cash for a crowd, there is no reason to think that a woman receiving money from one or another party would have

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42 Notably, Fareed is not Tamil, but rather of a Hindi-speaking north Indian community.

any reason to be inclined to vote in any particular way. While the women of course needed to be paid for their labor (many people having taking time off from regular jobs in order to make themselves available for this work)<sup>43</sup>, the real meaning of the money inheres in the transaction between Seema (or Seema's team) and the *social worker*, rather than the *voter*.

The relationship-forging function of these cash transactions recall Marcel Mauss' classic work on gift exchange. Mauss demonstrates that the giving of gifts, while appearing to be "voluntary, disinterested and spontaneous" is in fact "obligatory and interested" (Mauss 1). Gifts, Mauss explains, compel return gifts, since the thing given is not just an object, but represents (or embodies) the donor himself. One who has received a gift (and indeed, receiving gifts is obligatory since refusing a gift is to refuse relationship – an act tantamount to war) is then obliged to make a return gift in order to reverse the relation of power that has been produced by the original gift – and so on. "It is in the nature of the gift," Mauss writes, "in the end to bring its own reward" (Mauss 43). Gift exchange, Mauss tells us, produces *enduring* social relations since one or another party is necessarily in a state of obligation; since they are not *immediately* reciprocated, but only after the passage of *time*: "By definition, a common meal, a distribution of kava, or a charm worn, cannot be repaid at once," Mauss explains; "time has to pass before a counter-prestation can be made" (Mauss 43). Gifts thus produce a relation of hierarchy that is mediated by indebtedness.<sup>44</sup> Indeed while a received gift "is in fact owned" Mauss suggests, the "ownership is of a particular kind [...] It is at the same time property and a possession, a pledge and a loan, an object sold and an object bought, a deposit, a mandate, a trust" (Mauss 22).<sup>45</sup>

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43 At Rs200 per day, a woman could earn Rs2800 in only two weeks, which is a sum equivalent to generous monthly salary for a domestic worker – a common profession among neighborhood women.

44 Weiner (1992) characterizes this as a "paradox of keeping-while-giving."

45 This discussion joins a significant literature on non-exchange uses and meanings of money. Marx, of course, tells us that money is, like any other commodity, a store of *value* measuring "the human labor expended on it" (1976, cited in Parmentier 2002: 51). Money, that is, cannot be defined – as classic money theory as well as most contemporary economic textbooks tend to – simply as a practical or convenient mediator of exchange that lubricates man's natural "propensity of the species to truck and barter." For Marx, rather, the alienated and objectified labor inhering in objects is finally *realized* as value through the mechanism of exchange. Or as Nelson (2000) puts it, the cash-lubricated circulation of commodities in Marx's formulation, "really involves an exchange of labour in the guise of an exchange of commodities." Foster (1999, 2008) has also presented a non-exchange account of money, stressing the importance of flow over exchange, as well as emphasizing the socially-embedded nature of money's valuation (Foster 2008). More recently, Graeber

That the money Seema gave to area social workers produces and inhabits gift-like relations of a Maussian kind (as opposed to mediating a purchase transaction in which the relationship between people begins and ends with the exchange of money) is evidenced in a few of the conflicts that emerged over election-time cash transactions. Seema had, on one occasion, tried to save money by inviting an influential social worker named Renu to come on a rally *alone* – without any of her people. Renu was incensed: “it will hurt my image if I do not bring my people!” In the end, Seema conceded, agreeing to employ eight of the Renu’s “people.” Renu promptly showed with 16 – all of whom were eventually paid in full. Seema shook her head helplessly as she explained to me why she had paid them all: as Renu had clearly stated, her reputation was on the line. By bringing the uninvited women, Renu had – intentionally or unintentionally – tested the strength of her budding relationship with Seema. By paying the women, in other words, Seema had publically demonstrated her commitment to Renu, thereby shoring up Renu’s authority in her neighborhood. For her part, Seema well knew that if Renu were to lose the confidence of the twenty or so families over whom her opinion ostensibly held sway, then those families would not trust Renu’s advice on voting day. Area voters would vote for Seema, after all, *not* because Seema had employed or paid them (indeed, any number of parties were willing to do that) but on Renu’s advice. Indeed, my research found that many rally participants were in fact not even voters: while some were underage, others did not hold voter-id cards – at least not in Ward 228.

The trust-building (as opposed to instrumental, exchange) function of the cash payments was further demonstrated when one of Seema’s men eventually spotted Sushma (our elusive NCP ward president) on a Samajwadi Party rally. On that particular day, Seema had employed 40 of Sushma’s women. After some handwringing over whether or not to pay Sushma’s women for that day’s work (Seema did eventually pay them), Seema explained to the women that their leader seemed to have switched parties, and instructed them to please not return the following day; there were other social workers eager to send women in their place.

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(2011) has quite-convincingly demonstrated the origins of money in exchange at all, but rather as means of representing and measuring *debt*.

## Un-purchasable loyalty

On February 15, a day before the elections, one of Seema's men overheard a conversation between an RPI party worker and a woman doing laundry in the lane outside her doorway. The exasperated woman had dismissed the party worker: "all you people have been coming to our doors to tell us how to vote. But we listen to Rookiya." On the final days before the election, 228's lanes were choked with spies. Seema's team had posted an estimated hundred boys (one for every four lanes) throughout the area, where they loitered, listened, and sent SMSs back to Seema's office with reports of which areas were safely "ours" and which ones needed some more "attention." When a message arrived that the wind was blowing in the wrong direction in a particular area, Seema would reach out to her most-trusted social workers in those areas, asking for introductions to key people (prominent social workers, heads of large families, doctors or popular business owners for instance) who might be able to turn the tide. After the report that this particular area was loyal only to Rookiya – the chit fund manager who had called us two weeks ago on the day Seema's candidacy was announced – we headed back over to try and make amends. When we arrived, Rookiya spoke angrily: "I called you the first day and told you I wanted to work for you! But you never called back, so now I'm working for Fareed." It was too late. Two weeks earlier it might have been possible to build a relationship with Rookiya. By employing Rookiya's women and making after-hours home visits to prominent residents, Seema might have boosted Rookiya's standing in her neighborhood by establishing the strength of Rookiya's connection to the party of the standing MLA. But while Rookiya's people would quite possibly *still* have listened to her if she directed them (even at the last minute) to vote for Seema, Rookiya *herself* had no reason to believe that throwing her weight behind Seema would be good for her – or for her neighborhood – in the longer run.<sup>46</sup> Seema had squandered Rookiya's offer of alliance, and Rookiya was deeply insulted by Seema's last-minute effort to win her support.<sup>47</sup>

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46 Along similar lines, influential social worker named Santosh from the already-mentioned neighboring ward 229 described to me having been offered a large sum of cash to "stay away" from the campaign of the popular incumbent corporator, Kamble. Santosh tells me he politely declined the offer.

47 As this particular exchange happened in Tamil, it was unclear whether offers of cash were made. However, judging from other meetings in which cash *was* discussed, it is quite likely that a cash transfer was at least implicit in this conversation.

Just as Seema could not convert Rookiya at the last minute, Seema herself proved unmovable by late-in-the-game offers of (cash-lubricated) loyalty. Only a few hours after we left Rookiya's house, Seema was summoned to another meeting, invited by someone whom she had not yet met. We walked into a room and were greeted by 8 serious-faced men. One of them handed Seema a business card that indicated that they were from a small, unregistered political party. One man spoke, explaining that their group has 40 or so members – meaning 200 votes (at an average of 5 votes behind each member). Seema, exhausted (both physically and financially) asked the spokesman to “speak directly. What do you want?” He responds: “50,000.” Seema shook her head. “Maybe if you had been with us for the past ten days for our rallies... but voting is tomorrow. How can we give you so much money for just one day?” “Not for work,” the man says; “we'll give you the list [of our voters].” Seema refused: “at this point that's too much to ask. I don't know where you've been these days, but you haven't been with us.” The man insisted that they hadn't been with anyone. As we turned to leave, Seema whispered to me: “they were running around with RPI; one of my men saw them.”

## Money as Sign

All of the major parties contesting the polls in 228 were reported to have distributed cash to social workers in exchange for lists of voters during the final days of the campaign.<sup>48</sup> In Seema's campaign, these payments were not made in exchange for votes *per se* but rather to produce and affirm alliances between Seema and area social workers; social workers offering lists of voters did *not* do so in conjunction with any proposed ‘compliance-enforcing’ mechanism, but rather as a symbolic effort to demonstrate the strength of his or her pull in the neighborhood to Seema, as well as to demonstrate to area residents the strength of his or her alliance with Seema. Indeed, my research found that it was the generally the *lesser-known* social workers and self-proclaimed community leaders who approached Seema wielding such lists. While it is tempting to interpret cash transfers in purchase terms, an account related to me

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48 For obvious reasons, my ethnographic research on electoral campaigning in 228 was limited to that of the party with which I was embedded. Information on campaigns of other parties therefore comes from interviews with political actors from other districts.



by a party worker named Prakash<sup>49</sup> demonstrates that such cash disbursements work much in the way that the earlier-described public display of the stack of notes to the Elae Hadis community leader worked – as productive of the trust necessary for an alliance:

The day before the election, I asked [the candidate] for money to pass to someone in my area who told me she had 31 votes. I had I had a few people like this. [the candidate] said ok, I'll have [the people handling the money] call you. Then [the money man] called me. He was angry and asked me “why did you call [the candidate]?? You should have called *me!*” I explained that I *hadn't* called the [the candidate] – [the candidate] had he called *me*. Then [the money man] said he'd give money but [the amount] wasn't enough; I said its not possible, people are giving [much more], how will I look? He said ok, I'll see, but then he didn't call back. The woman kept calling, asking me what to do. Finally I said to her “give your votes to whomever you want – I can't get you the money.” She told me she was going to give her votes to Fareed. In the end, whoever didn't know who to trust gave to their vote to Fareed, since they already knew his work.

This last phrase is telling: Prakash's inability to direct a flow of cash to the woman called into question his claims to have access to the networks of power, knowledge and authority that are so crucial for navigating everyday life in the city. Prakash knew this and thus did not even attempt to convince the woman.

If money works, as I have argued, not as the medium of purchase, but rather – gift-like – as productive of longer-term relations and alliances, then what is the significance of *cash* as the substance of such gifts? Cash distributions have a third dimension in the context of Mumbai's elections: as a sign of access to the most *crucial* kind of urban knowledge: of how to navigate the opacities, dangers, and promises of the city's little-understood but palpably real economies. As Vidhu, (the previously-mentioned Shiv Sena-affiliated party worker from a neighboring ward explained) elections are generally won by whomever has the most people on the ground “keeping an eye on things.” Vidhu is in the transportation business, and (as if to emphasize this point) during this particular meeting Vidhu and I were approached by a man on a motorbike whom Vidhu later explained had been “operating” trucks in “his area” – a piece of information that Vidhu had acquired from one of his own area “men.” The operator, seeing Vidhu, approached us and informed Vidhu of his own business in the area, arranging to meet later to work out the details. After he had left, Vidhu explained to me that the fellow probably knew he had been spotted, so he sought to

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49 This social worker had longstanding and close ties with Fareed, but had, for business reasons, pledged his support to Mastanbhai during the 2012 election.

work out an arrangement directly, before Vidhu – or the corporator – complained to the police. Indeed, since aspects of Vidhu’s work – like so much business in Mumbai – are governed by legal silences and contradictions, Vidhu’s business is crucially dependent on the maintenance of relationships with area authorities, including the area corporator. Elections are won, Vidhu explained, by whomever can demonstrate effective knowledge of what goes on in a particular area, and can use this knowledge to direct business “through” his or her own office.

Mumbaikars – particularly working-class Mumbaikars – are constantly on the lookout for reliable knowledge that might be used in navigating this perilous but crucial dimension of urban life. I have approached more times than I can count for career counseling by anxious and confused parents of adolescent children, as well as by countless young people themselves: “I don’t want to be a maid!”<sup>50</sup> one young woman pleaded with me as her college graduation date drew near; “but what work *can* I do?” When she approached the sitting corporator with this question, the woman shrugged unsympathetically and suggested the girl get married; needless to say, this piece of wisdom did not do much to impress the young woman – or her 8-voter-strong family.<sup>51</sup> Another boy, a *karyakarta* whose family income came from daily sales of water from his home’s fortunately-placed tap, entered politics because, as he put it, he wanted to learn “how the city works.” When Seema lost the election, the boy decided take a job as a rickshaw driver because, as he described, he wanted to “know other parts of the city.”<sup>52</sup>

Such accounts go some distance in explaining the significance of *cash* as the medium of wooing the electoral loyalties of both social workers and voters: cash symbolizes networks of access to the worlds of opportunity and promise inhering in city’s mysterious economies. Indeed, the contemporary city of Mumbai runs largely on cash – both rumored and real. While the landslide victory of the incumbent candidate Fareed<sup>53</sup> was credited by person after person to the reach and strength of Fareed’s networks – with local businessmen, municipal bureaucracy, the police, as well as rival party leadership – discussions of the strength of the campaign almost-invariably involved reverent references to Fareed’s *own* business and personal wealth.

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50 “Bai nahi banne ka!”

51 After a short stint washing clothes in a middle-class home, the woman took a job as a bank receptionist while working nights as a freelance life-insurance salesperson.

52 This account recalls Hansen and Verkaaik’s (2009) discussion of the “urban specialist.”

53 Or rather Fareed’s aged mother; 228 was reserved as a ‘ladies ward’ during the 2012 elections.



While few people could account for the precise *origins* of Fareed's wealth or with what kind of business he might be involved, that he was rich was evidenced and signified both in the grand, three story palazzo that he has built at the heart working class neighborhood,<sup>54</sup> as well as in Fareed's liberality with cash: cash for marriages and dowries, cash for school fees, cash for medical bills, cash for home repairs – "he is always very charitable," one area resident explained, "that's how he made a name for himself."

Fareed's financial reputation has lent his authority an almost-transcendental quality. "God has been so good to me!" Fareed is rumored to have proclaimed during his 2007 bid for office, when he purportedly carpeted the neighborhood in cash. To explain this relationship between authority and munificence we might turn again to Mauss' theorization of exchange in the Trobriand Islands:

[a chief] can keep his authority in his tribe, village and family, and maintain his position with the chiefs inside and outside his nation, only if he can prove that he is favorably regarded by the spirits, that he possesses fortune and that he is possessed by it. The only way to demonstrate his fortune is by expending it to the humiliation of others, by putting them 'in the shadow of his name' (Mauss 1966: 37-38).

Notably, Fareed's financial acumen was popularly ascribed to his trans-local socio-political networks in much the same way as Mauss describes personal fortune – as evidence that he stood in the good graces of the city's inscrutable higher powers: various party leaders, the municipal bureaucracy, the state police and urban economies. It is these networks that are held to have underpinned his business successes – successes evidenced by his abundant wealth.

That cash is a (visible/material) sign of other kinds of (invisible/immaterial) resources is not very surprising, of course, since the practical need for a less-cumbersome stand-in gave rise to paper currency in the first place. Yet the power of election-season cash in Mumbai is, notably, not contained by the exchange-value printed on the bills; this money, in other words, does not work as Bohannan (1959) described, to facilitate exchange of dissimilar goods by "standardiz[ing] "exchangeability value of every item to a common sale." Social theorists who have sought to complicate classical money theory might here provide some useful tools of analysis. Bloch and Parry (1986), for instance, have argued that, in and of itself, money does not necessarily

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54 Notably, Fareed no longer actually *resides* in this neighborhood; he built the house around the time that he relocated to Navi Mumbai, suggesting importance of the house as a spectacle of wealth.

transform social relations the way that Simmel has argued; such a line of reasoning, they suggest, is more an indication of the western fetishism of money than of money's own properties – a fetishism that they charge has “been taken over somewhat uncritically by the anthropologist” (1986: 12). Rather than presuming that money causes and signifies a regime of “free convertibility” that “ushers in a world of moral confusion,” Bloch and Parry suggest that money can not only can money “mean different things in different cultures but that money “may mean different things within the same culture” (1986: 22). Bloch and Parry suggest that we might instead think of money similarly, as inhabiting “two related but separate transactional orders:” “on the one hand,” they write, “transactions concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order; on the other, a sphere of short-term transactions concerned with the arena of individual competition” (1986: 24). Indeed, the first two uses of money outlined in the narratives above – firstly as wage-like compensation paid to rally participants, and secondly as Maussian gift-like exchanges – might usefully be thought of as inhabiting the kinds of short- and long- term ‘transactional orders’ that Bloch and Parry outline. As the ethnographies show, the very same money can simultaneously inhabits these two ‘orders,’ with money flowing from Seema to social workers working – gift-like – to produce and re-produce longer-term socio-political networks (if not quite a “cosmic order”), while a portion of that very same money often is transferred to rally participants as transactional, wage-like payments.

Yet the third task to which election-time cash is put – as *sign* – invites us to consider not only the *temporality* of money exchange, but also money's multiple *meanings*. Parmentier's (2002) ethnography of “systemic” and “transactional” modalities of exchange in Micronesia here provides a conceptual framework. Parmentier identifies the interconnection between the way in which money works to “demarcate, mediate, and emblemize social status and relations” and the “work” that money does in producing and coordinating networks of exchange. In Palau, Parmentier tells us, it is the necessary co-existence of *both* these dimensions of money – on the one hand, “the tendency to put money into play, to let it travel along important transactional paths” and on the other hand having “amassed” large sums of wealth for display. At stake here is not simply a demonstration – through conspicuous displays of wealth – a past history of successful transactional relations, but to signal – through the *transactional* mechanism itself. While engaging in acts of exchange works to demonstrate that one is a transactional partner worth engaging, by contrast, “a man thought to have financial resources who does not commit them when required,” Parmentier explains, “not only gains a reputation as being stingy, but the money he does hold

will be devalued since others will not be eager to be financially involved with him.” Money, in this sense, works simultaneously as a sign of the “sedimented embodiment of accomplished power” (Parmentier 2002: 65) as well as the “transactional mechanism for its attainment.”

The relationship between the second and third dimensions of election-time money exchange in Mumbai might be usefully be explained in similar terms: while cash payment to social workers works transactionally, it also signals “accomplished power.”<sup>55</sup> This formulation also helps to account for the apparent paradox that while Fareed’s electoral success was frequently attributed to the candidate’s wealth, the campaign itself actually spent relatively little. A social worker who had campaigned for Fareed’s in the previous election (during which Fareed is rumored to have been quite liberal with cash) thus explained that *this* time around it was not necessary to actually *distribute* cash: “Fareed is the master of hype – even he just gives a hundred rupee note, people run around saying ‘Fareed is distributing so much money!’” For Fareed, rumors of cash distributed are as good as distributions of cash itself, the work of the cash being less that of actual exchange, than of shoring up reputation. By the same token, for an unknown candidate such as Seema, *establishing* a reputation for being in command of transactional networks of power and authority demanded – as Prakash’s disappointed account suggests – that she ‘put her money where her mouth is’ by producing hard cash itself.

The exchange of cash – both the giving and receiving – might therefore be characterized as simultaneously a *performance* and a *wager*. As Prakash explained:

Giving money is a gamble because everyone flips. During a corporator election everyone<sup>56</sup> flips at least once. Sometimes people take money from one candidate and then distribute it in the name of another. But you have to try – if you spend money then maybe people will vote for you.

For Seema, the “gamble” involved assessing the claims various of social workers professing to command so many votes, and then to put her money on the right ones. For the social workers, the game is no less risky, the decision of which candidate to support having far-reaching consequences that last long after election day. Thus, the campaign loyalties of karyakartas remained quite fluid, even up to election day; during an NCP rally three days before polling, I overheard one karyakarta laugh as he

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55 This echoes Guyer’s (2004) point that “number and kind” are both “scales, among others.” See also Munn (1986).

56 “Everyone” here refers to social workers.

‘chastised’ his friend (who was at that particular moment wearing three NCP hats and a scarf): “just work for one party, okay?” to which the boy responded: “party warty kuch nahi hai!” (I have no party!). The weeks of campaigning – of sending supporters on rallies and presenting party lists in exchange for cash – must, in this context, be understood as both relationship-building facilitated by gift-like exchanges of cash, as well as performances of access to networks of knowledge, authority *evidenced* by the cash itself. In Prakash’s case, his inability to direct cash from Seema’s campaign to the woman with the 31 votes led the woman to doubt that Prakash – and perhaps Seema herself – had sufficient access. Moreover, Prakash explained, this inability called Seema’s “winnability” *itself* into question; if she was unable to produce the cash in this case, how many other social workers might she have also disappointed? It is quite likely that after this incident, Seema lost not only the woman’s 31 votes, but those of Prakash too; as he himself put it, “everyone flips at least once.” Social workers, residents, and higher-level party officials invariably told me that Seema lost the election because area social workers – both Congress and NCP – had ultimately turned against her. Seema’s 2012 loss thus mirrors her 2007 victory in Ward 230, where – according to both Seema as well as area social workers – the seat was gifted to her by defecting social workers formally affiliated with a rival party; “last time, *we* made her win” one young man put it, “but this time, over there, all the karyakartas supported Fareed.” Indeed, for a social worker like Prakash, who would live and do business in the neighborhood no matter *who* won, betting on the right candidate is of crucial importance. Notably, at issue here is not so much the risk of revenge by the victor against areas from which he did not win support,<sup>57</sup> but rather the risk of putting someone incompetent at the helm of the ward.

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57 Indeed, the aftermath of the election – not only in 228 but across Mumbai – was notable for the absence of any retribution against neighborhoods that booth-wise polling data showed to have voted the wrong way. Retribution, it must be emphasized, is not unheard of. When a standing corporator in a neighboring ward lost his bid for Legislative Assembly ticket in 2010, he used his longstanding connections and current position to mobilize area authorities (the police the municipal water department) in a drive to cut the neighborhood’s legally-vague water connections. When area social workers approached the corporator to ask him to stay the hand of the state, he reportedly replied: “why don’t you go and ask your new MLA for help? You elected him!”

## Conclusion

Where does this discussion leave us vis-à-vis the questions with which this paper began – of vote banking and buying, and of the oppressive nature or emancipatory potential inherent in election-season flows of cash? The accounts that I have presented suggest a few conclusions: first, cash gifts cannot be described in the language of purchase; as one social worker so-aptly put it: “you can’t *buy* a vote”. Indeed, whether the flow stops at the hands of a social worker or is distributed to his or her voters,<sup>58</sup> none of the three dimensions of election-time uses of cash suggest anything resembling a purchase-like exchange of cash for votes: firstly, money is generally distributed to area residents as compensation for long hours spent in campaign rallies and meetings; it is then up to each social worker to figure out how to convince his or her “people” to participate in a rally. Since participation generally means having to forego other paid work, cash payments are often a necessary part of this convincing effort. Secondly, cash works to produce and shore up relations of trust, facilitate flows of information and reduce the incentives for a social worker will “flip.” The money reduces risk of social-worker defection by demonstrating the commitment of the candidate (and the party) to a social worker’s reputation and credibility in the neighborhood – an invitation to a longer-term business relationship between the social worker and the candidate/party. In this sense, gifted *money* works no differently from any other gifted good; it does not initiate an exchange relation that ends with the act of voting.<sup>59</sup> Rather, I have argued, supporting a particular candidate – both by voting as well as by encouraging others to vote – works like a bet, the returns of which may or may not pay off in a the “work” carried out during the term in office. Thirdly, and relatedly, cash is a sign and instantiation of the networks of power, knowledge, authority, and wealth that are crucially necessary for navigating the opacities of the city economy in pursuit of any kind of work or business. This symbolic power of cash means that money works not just in the hopes of inducing reciprocity, but that

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58 Whether or how much cash is distributed to voters, as already mentioned, sits largely the discretion of the social worker; the candidate giving the money does so as a two-part gamble – first that the social worker has influence to the extent (s)he professes, and second that (s)he will use that influence to the candidate’s benefit.

59 While the gift-like relationship-producing dimension of election-time money belies the *temporal* dimension of the vote-buying argument, we are still left with the issue that such gifts are *particularistic* rather than *programmatic* (see footnote 17). I take up this point elsewhere (Björkman 2012)

giving cash is a “gamble” – a bet placed by a candidate on social workers whom he hopes, through the gift/bet, to convince the recipient of the candidate’s inevitable win.

These arguments of course raise important questions about the status of ‘issues’ in contemporary electoral politics; what significance did ideas, ideologies, or policy programs play in distinguishing the various candidates and producing votes? That is, if the election was decided by social workers responding to cash-activated networks and signals, does this suggest that party platforms and ideologies and as well as policy ideas were irrelevant? By way of conclusion, I would suggest two ways that this research suggest we might think about this apparent paradox: first, policy-related issues frequently found a place in the tightly-packed schedule of after-hours “mouse meetings,” during which area social workers assembled groups of voters in private homes to engage Seema in conversation about local concerns.<sup>60</sup> Yet while the topic of conversation was invariably *issues* – shortage of water, high costs of health care, poor quality of local public schooling – Seema responded not by making *promises*, but rather by attempting to convince her audience that she was possessed of the *capacity* to do work – *any* work – by emphasizing her personal qualities. “Everyone makes promises...” Seema would repeat, “but if you give me a chance then I will *show* you what I can do.” The candidate invariably stressed, for instance, that she speaks and reads not only English and Hindi, but is also fluent in Marathi – the language of local and regional government.<sup>61</sup> In addition, Seema sought to demonstrate her knowledge of the inner workings of the Corporation by describing – often in abundant detail – the precise process by flows of resources could be mobilized, as well the various *kinds* of resources that she personally knew how to get: an English medium public school, a maternity hospital, an ambulance. Notably, Seema spoke less about the *merits* of such things, than about the fact that she *knew how to get them*. In other words, Seema discussed issues and ideas as a means by which to demonstrate personal qualities, knowledge, resources and skills.

And indeed, follow-up conversations with voters suggested that Seema’s most-compelling quality lay in her perceived capacity to move the state apparatus – through her facility with language, her personal connection to the MLA, her knowledge of the ins and outs of the Corporation. At issue in Seema’s case was not so much a doubt about

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60 A tight schedule of ‘mouse meetings’ – so named because the stealthy gatherings took place only under the cover of darkness – regularly kept Seema out long after midnight.

61 Command of the language of public administration, needless to say, is an invaluable tool for gathering information necessary for accessing government resources. None of the other candidates contesting in 228 could boast fluency in Marathi.



her capabilities, but rather the unknowable gap between *vada* and *irrada* – between promise and intention. While there seemed to little doubt about what Seema *could* do, how could they trust that she *would* do their work? What assurance was there that Seema would not use the seat only for personal gain – or worse, for extortion (as Hasina had done two terms ago)? In the rumor-infused environment, even areas where I had witnessed quite-palpable voter enthusiasm for Seema’s candidature thus ultimately placed their chips on Fareed.<sup>62</sup>

In light of these accounts (and secondly), what are we to make of the often-virulent, sometimes-violent ethno-nationalist discourse (and practice) that continues to infuse the political landscape in contemporary Mumbai? Notably, the 2012 Municipal Corporation election ultimately saw the Shiv Sena party once again ride to power on a campaign fueled by a now-familiar platform of anti-migrant, exclusionary politics that shows no sign of waning.<sup>63</sup> How might we reconcile this seeming contradiction between the apparent absence of ideas and ideologies at the micro-political level, and ethno-nationalist register of broader, media-fueled city-level discourse? In light of these dynamics, what are we to make of inflammatory political rhetoric and party-backed bouts of ethnic violence in Mumbai? This research suggests – with guarded optimism (and a call for further research) – that perhaps the inflammatory rhetoric might not be taken (at least not entirely) at face value.

In accounting for the Shiv Sena’s remarkably strong showing, *karyakartas* (both Shiv Sena and otherwise) explained the party’s electoral prowess *not* in terms of the salience of its ideology, but rather in the coherence of its leadership: while Congress and NCP campaigns were sabotaged from inside (as already discussed) by social worker infighting – particularly after so many sitting corporators were unseated by the 50% reservations for women – the Shiv Sena leadership kept a tight reign on such dynamics. For instance, in one case, a long-time, quite-popular corporator named Shinde – who was first ousted from his ward by a caste reservation and then denied a Shiv Sena ticket in an adjacent area – floated rumors that he had instructed his *karyakartas* to support a rival party candidate and that he himself would contest the

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62 Electoral data is available at the level of each of the 40 polling booths in ward 228. With approximately 1,000 voters assigned to each booth, candidates (and researchers) are able to assess with some precision the extent of support from various sections of the neighborhood.

63 The bitter rivalry between Shiv Sena president Udhav Thackeray and his first cousin Raj – whose ascendant MNS party seeks to occupy the same identity-based political terrain – has in recent years produced to a climate of anti-migrant rhetorical one-upmanship in Mumbai.

elections elsewhere on an NCP ticket. One of Shinde's karyakartas – a businessman and party worker who had worked in Shinde's area over two decades – explained that he himself had no loyalty to the Shiv Sena as party<sup>64</sup> but rather to Shinde himself; if Shinde ran on an NCP ticket then the karyakarta would offer his support wholeheartedly. The Shiv Sena leadership quickly responded to this situation by offering Shinde a powerful, unelected position in the party as well as a promise that he could have his ward back in 2012. Needless to say, Shinde's karyakartas enthusiastically backed the replacement Shiv Sena candidate, who won the ward by a comfortable margin.

The Shiv Sena's electoral strength, this research thus suggests, might lay as much in the party's perceived *capacity to act* – evidenced by the recurrent bouts of legally-exceptional action for which the party is famous – as much as in the particular *content* of party ideology. This point recalls Schmitt's (2006) classic discussion of sovereignty – which he defines in a Hobbesian sense as the authority to make decisions and to act without being constrained by positive law, or by any normative principles underpinning law. “The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced,” Schmitt tells us, “is that between friend and enemy” (Schmitt, 2006: 26). Political action thus exists for Schmitt in identifying and *acting upon* this political distinction. While a thorough discussion on this proposition is certainly outside the scope of the current analysis, I would simply suggest that in light of the paradox outlined above, the Shiv Sena's brand of identity politics might be theorized simply as a vehicle for political action – a particular narrative through which the party leadership articulates its sovereignty through law-breaking violence. Indeed, the ethnographies and arguments presented in this account call into question the terms on which the debates about contemporary forms of politics in India have taken place. Instead of asking whether the relations between candidates and voters horizontal or vertical, programmatic or particularistic, longer or shorter sighted, based on identity or ideas, the accounts presented here suggest a field of contestation that exceeds these categories. Elections in contemporary Mumbai, rather, are shown to inhabit a deeply-political landscape in which the city's most pressing challenges facing city residents – of urban land, access to housing, infrastructural investment, and urban economy – are fought out, performed, and gambled upon.

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64 This man, notably, does not even vote in Mumbai, but rather in his home state in north India.

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