

Vote Buying and the Quest for Sustainable Democracy: The Nigerian Context

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Abstract

The practice of vote buying poses a significant threat to the sustainability of democracy, particularly in contexts such as Nigeria, where it undermines the principles of free, fair, and credible elections. This study critically examines the phenomenon of vote buying, tracing its historical roots, manifestations, and implications for democratic governance. Drawing on the clientelism theory, the research explores the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional drivers that perpetuate this electoral malpractice. It highlights the transactional nature of vote buying, where financial and material inducements overshadow issue-based political engagement, thereby distorting voter preferences and eroding electoral integrity. The study reveals that vote buying fosters corruption, marginalizes competent leadership, weakens political accountability, and exacerbates electoral violence. Furthermore, it perpetuates a culture of impunity, undermining public trust in democratic institutions and processes. To address these challenges, the study recommends comprehensive poverty alleviation strategies, robust enforcement of electoral laws, and intensified voter education campaigns. It also emphasizes the need for institutional reforms to enhance the transparency and credibility of the electoral process. By addressing the root causes of vote buying, this study advocates for a more inclusive and democratic system that reflects the genuine will of the people.

Keywords: Vote Buying, Election, Democracy and Democratic Sustainability

Introduction

Election, particularly voting, constitutes a cornerstone of democratic governance, serving as the principal mechanism for selecting political officeholders. This process not only aggregates societal preferences but also facilitates the emergence of competent public officials while incentivizing politicians to act in alignment with the interests of the electorates (Persson & Tabellini, 2000). Through electoral processes, candidates communicate their proposed policies and programs to the citizenry, fostering informed decision-making. As Inokoba & Kumokor (2011) aptly observed, elections represent an indispensable feature of democratic transitions and the hallmark of representative governance, providing a platform for the electorates to voice their collective will.

With the global ascendancy of democracy as the preferred system of governance, elections have become the most widely accepted means of selecting leaders in a structured, peaceful, and orderly manner (Momoh, 2005). Chazan (2017) underscores the dual functions of elections in a

democracy: to facilitate regime change and leadership renewal or to seek popular approval for the continuation of governance, thereby ensuring constitutional and democratic continuity. During the electioneering process, candidates and their political parties are expected to engage in issues-based campaigns to persuade the electorates through reasoned arguments and policy propositions. Ideally, such campaigns should be peaceful and conducted in a manner that respects the dignity of voters.

Electorates, in turn, are anticipated to critically evaluate the competing arguments and policy proposals, ultimately selecting candidates whose platforms resonate with their aspirations. At its essence, democracy is a governance model anchored on the will of the people, with regular, free, and fair elections serving as its linchpin. These elections provide a mechanism for holding leaders accountable, thereby preserving the integrity of democratic governance. However, the essence of democracy is profoundly undermined when electoral processes are compromised through malpractices such as vote buying, voter intimidation, and electoral fraud. Since the global proliferation of democratic elections in the 1970s, the phenomenon of vote buying has become increasingly pervasive, attracting significant scholarly attention. Vicente and Wantchekon (2009) aptly noted that "vote buying happens frequently in many parts of the world," underscoring the global dimension of this electoral malpractice.

Historically, vote buying—often conceptualized as a form of clientelism—has deep roots, with evidence of its practice in diverse contexts, including the Roman Republic (Yakobson, 1995), 18th- and 19th-century Britain, and the United States (O’Leary, 2012). Contemporary studies have documented its prevalence in countries like Nicaragua (Gonzalez-Ocantos, De Jonge, Meléndez, & Nickerson, 2012) and Argentina (Brusco, Nazareno, & Stokes, 2004). Carreras and Irepoglu (2013) define vote buying as the direct exchange of material benefits by political elites to secure electoral support, encompassing both monetary payments and the provision of goods to influence voter behavior (Nichter, 2014).

In Nigeria, elections are often perceived as high-stakes, zero-sum contests characterized by a "winner-takes-all" mentality. This perception fuels an unrelenting drive among politicians to secure victory at all costs, whether through legitimate or illegitimate means (Vicente & Wantchekon, 2009). Consequently, Nigerian elections have been plagued by various irregularities, including electoral violence, ballot box snatching, vote rigging, and, most notably, vote buying. The manifestations of vote buying in Nigeria are multifaceted, ranging from the distribution of foodstuffs, sharing of T-Shirt and Caps bearing candidates’ insignias during campaigns to the outright purchase of votes on Election Day.

This practice has become so entrenched that political campaigns often prioritize material inducements over substantive engagement with voters on policy issues. Alarmingly, many voters now expect and even demand monetary or material incentives, displaying little interest in the policy platforms of candidates. This trend undermines the democratic process, as electoral outcomes increasingly reflect the financial resources of candidates rather than the quality of their ideas or the legitimacy of their mandates. The objectives of this paper are to examine the trend of vote buying in Nigeria, explore the derivatives of vote buying in Nigeria, to assess the implications of vote buying for democratic sustainability in Nigeria and propose strategies for mitigating vote buying and promoting democratic values.

The rationale behind this study is that vote buying has emerged as a persistent and troubling phenomenon in Nigeria's democratic process, threatening the credibility of elections and the sustainability of democratic governance. Despite concerted efforts by electoral bodies and civil society organizations to ensure free and fair elections, the practice of vote buying continues to undermine the principles of democracy, eroding public trust in electoral outcomes and perpetuating a cycle of bad governance. Given Nigeria's role as a leading democratic nation in Africa, addressing the challenge of vote buying is crucial not only for the country's democratic consolidation but also for its influence as a model for other emerging democracies on the continent. By analyzing these issues, the research seeks to highlight the detrimental impact of vote buying on electoral integrity, democratic governance, and citizen participation. This paper, therefore, aims to provide critical insights and solutions to an issue that lies at the heart of Nigeria's democratic future.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Clientelism Theory. The theory provides robust frameworks for understanding the phenomenon of vote buying and its implications for democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

Clientelism Theory

Clientelism, often described as a patron-client relationship, refers to the exchange of goods and services for political support, where political elites (patrons) provide material benefits to voters (clients) in return for electoral loyalty. The theory is anchored on the following assumptions:

1. **Transactional Nature:** Clientelism is inherently transactional, with material inducements such as cash, food items, or other goods serving as the currency of political exchange.
2. **Asymmetrical Power Dynamics:** The relationship between patrons (politicians) and clients (voters) is marked by inequality, as voters often depend on these material benefits due to socio-economic vulnerabilities.
3. **Erosion of Democratic Ideals:** The practice undermines democratic principles by prioritizing short-term material gains over long-term governance outcomes, thereby distorting the electorate's decision-making process.

Clientelism theory was popularized by James Scott (1972) and Richard Graham. Other scholars who have embraced the theory in their work include Susan Stokes (2005), who used it to analyze modern democracies. This theory is particularly relevant to the Nigerian context, where vote buying has become an entrenched practice, reflecting the broader socio-political culture of patronage. It is useful in explaining why vote buying persists in Nigeria, particularly in a context of widespread poverty, unemployment, and weak institutional frameworks, where voters prioritize immediate material benefits over abstract democratic ideals.

Research Methodology

The study employs a descriptive and analytical research design. The descriptive component outlines the patterns, prevalence, and dimensions of vote buying, while the analytical component critically evaluates its underlying drivers and implications for democratic governance in Nigeria. Data were gathered from secondary sources such as textbooks, journals, newspaper publications, magazines, election observation reports, historical records, etc.

The Trend of Vote Buying in Nigeria (1999–2023)

Since Nigeria's return to democratic governance in 1999, vote buying has become an entrenched feature of its electoral process. This phenomenon has evolved in complexity and scale over the years, reflecting broader socio-economic, political, and institutional dynamics. This discussion examines the trend of vote buying in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023, analyzing its manifestations, drivers, and implications for democratic governance. The transition from military rule to democracy in 1999 marked a significant milestone in Nigeria's political history. However, the early years of the Fourth Republic were characterized by weak institutions, widespread poverty, and limited political awareness, creating fertile ground for vote buying.

During the 1999 and 2003 elections, reports of vote buying were relatively limited but present, primarily in rural areas where economic vulnerabilities were more pronounced (Bratton, 2008). Politicians and political parties distributed cash, food items, and other material goods to influence voters. Before the 2006 general elections, the federal government made efforts to address various flaws in the country's electoral process, and this resulted in the re-enactment of the electoral law in 2006 by the National Assembly. The 2006 Electorate Act made provisions for limitations on campaign funds by political parties and candidates seeking elective positions in the country. These are itemized in the table below.

Table 1: Approved Campaign Fund for Various Elective Positions for the 2007 General Elections

Election Type	Maximum Expenditure (₦)
Presidential Election	₦500 million
Governorship Election	₦100 million
Senatorial Election	₦20 million
House of Representatives Election	₦10 million
State House of Assembly Election	₦5 million
Local Government Chairman Election	₦5 million
Councilor Election	₦500,000

Source: 2006 Revised Electoral Act.

Despite these efforts, the 2007 election was widely regarded as one of the most flawed elections in Nigeria's history, given the significant escalation of vote buying, as political actors sought to exploit weak electoral oversight mechanisms (Ojo, 2014).

The period between 2007 and 2015 witnessed the institutionalization of vote buying as a key electoral strategy. Despite reforms aimed at improving the credibility of elections, like the introduction of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)'s biometric voter registration system in 2011, the practice of vote buying persisted. In the 2011 elections, vote buying became more sophisticated, with politicians using intermediaries to distribute money and goods to voters in exchange for their support. Omotola (2010) notes that this period also saw increased use of security agencies and traditional leaders to facilitate vote buying, particularly in rural areas.

The 2015 elections, which marked Nigeria's first peaceful power transfers between political parties, were not immune to vote buying. However, the introduction of the Permanent Voter Card (PVC) and card readers by INEC reduced the efficacy of some traditional methods of electoral malpractice, leading to a shift toward more covert forms of vote buying (Agbu, 2016). Between 2015 and 2023, vote buying in Nigeria became increasingly sophisticated, reflecting technological advancements and the growing financial stakes of elections. The 2019 elections were marred by widespread reports of vote buying, with political parties openly distributing cash at polling units, often disguised as "transport allowances" or "thank-you gifts" (Ibrahim & Ibeanu, 2019).

The 2023 elections marked a turning point in the trend of vote buying due to the introduction of the Naira redesign policy, which sought to limit cash availability during the electoral period. While this policy disrupted traditional methods of vote buying, it also led to the emergence of alternative strategies, such as the use of electronic transfers and pre-election inducements. Analysts observed that political actors increasingly relied on digital payment platforms and promised post-election rewards to secure votes (Vanguard, 2023). The gubernatorial elections recently conducted in Edo and Ondo states were not spared on the scenario of vote buying. In Ondo State, reports indicated that political parties perfected vote-buying plans, with some earmarking amounts ranging from ₦5,000 to ₦20,000 per voter, depending on the area's perceived support levels. These transactions were usually conducted discreetly to evade detection by security agencies. For instance, voters' account details were collected for electronic transfers post-voting, minimizing the risk of apprehension (Punch, 2024).

Derivatives of Vote Buying in Nigeria

Vote buying has emerged as a pervasive challenge undermining the integrity of Nigeria's democratic processes. This phenomenon, which entails the exchange of money, goods, or services for electoral support, reflects a complex interplay of socioeconomic, political, and institutional factors. Below, we critically examine the primary causes of vote buying in Nigeria, drawing on relevant scholarly literature and empirical evidence.

1. Pervasive Poverty and Economic Inequality

Poverty remains a critical driver of vote buying in Nigeria. With over 40% of the population living below the national poverty line (World Bank, 2022), many citizens are vulnerable to financial inducements during elections. Politicians exploit this economic hardship, offering immediate financial relief in exchange for votes. Studies by Omotola (2010) and Bratton (2008)

highlight that in contexts of widespread poverty, voters often prioritize short-term material gains over the abstract benefits of good governance.

2. The Cynical view of politics by the Electorates

The political cynicism on the part of the electorates who believe that political office holders are incurably corrupt, self-seeking and incompetent and that politics is a dirty and dishonorable enterprise, that the whole political process is a fraud and a betrayal of public trust. Bratton (2008) highlights that in an environment where governance is perceived as a means of personal enrichment; voters adopt a pragmatic approach, demanding immediate compensation for their electoral support. This behavior is further exacerbated by the belief that politicians will inevitably fail to fulfill their campaign promises. This was why Omotola (2010) observes that the pervasive "national cake" mentality in Nigeria, where public resources are viewed as spoils to be shared among elites and their supporters, has normalized the expectation of monetary inducements during elections. Voters often see vote buying as a legitimate way to claim their share of the nation's wealth, especially in a context where public service delivery is inadequate.

3. Weak Political Ideology and Electoral Awareness

Lack of strong political ideology among Nigerian political parties contributes significantly to vote buying. Parties often fail to articulate clear policy platforms, making elections less about substantive issues and more about transactional exchanges (Ibrahim & Ibeanu, 2009). Furthermore, low levels of civic education and political awareness among the electorate exacerbate the problem, as many voters do not fully understand the implications of their choices on democratic governance (Adebayo & Omotola, 2007).

4. Erosion of Electoral Integrity and Weak Institutions

Nigeria's electoral system has been plagued by irregularities and a lack of transparency, which create fertile ground for vote buying. Weak enforcement of electoral laws and the complicity of security agencies and electoral officials in corrupt practices undermine efforts to curb this menace (Agbu, 2016). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has faced criticism for its inability to enforce campaign finance regulations effectively, allowing candidates to deploy vast financial resources to influence voters (Ojo, 2014).

5. Cultural and Social Norms

Cultural factors also play a role in normalizing vote buying. In many Nigerian communities, the expectation that politicians should "share the wealth" during elections is deeply ingrained. This practice, often rooted in patron-client relationships, perpetuates a cycle where voters view elections as opportunities for personal gain rather than collective decision-making (Chabal & Daloz, 1999).

6. Inadequate Punitive Measures

The lack of effective punitive measures against vote buying further emboldens perpetrators. While the Electoral Act (2022) criminalizes vote buying, enforcement remains weak, with few high-profile prosecutions. The absence of deterrent consequences creates an environment of impunity, where political actors view vote buying as a viable electoral strategy (Duruji et al., 2018).

Implications for Democratic Sustainability

It is a fact that the business of vote buying and selling is detrimental to political development and it questions the country's readiness to embrace ideal democracy. One of the cardinal effects of vote buying is the promotion of money over merit, ideology, and creativity. A level playing ground would be sacrificed for imposition and intimidation and this negatively affects government's legitimacy. Drawing from the relevant scholarly works and empirical evidence, the following are the implications of vote buying for democratic sustainability.

1. Erosion of Electoral Integrity

Vote buying undermines the integrity of the electoral process, which is a cornerstone of democracy. Elections are intended to reflect the will of the people; however, vote buying distorts this mandate by prioritizing financial inducements over genuine voter preferences. As noted by Bratton (2008), the prevalence of vote buying compromises the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, leading to a government that lacks the moral authority to govern effectively. This erosion of electoral integrity weakens the foundation of democratic governance.

2. Entrenchment of Corruption

Vote buying perpetuates a cycle of corruption, as politicians who invest heavily in securing votes often seek to recoup their expenses through corrupt practices once in office. According to Agbu (2016), this creates a governance model driven by personal enrichment rather than public service. Consequently, public resources are diverted from development initiatives, further exacerbating socio-economic inequalities and eroding citizens' confidence in democratic institutions.

3. Marginalization of Competent Leadership

The transactional nature of vote buying often marginalizes competent and visionary leaders who lack the financial resources to compete with wealthier, less qualified candidates. Ojo (2014) argues that this practice prioritizes financial capacity over merit, leading to the election of individuals who may lack the competence or commitment to address Nigeria's pressing challenges. This undermines the quality of leadership and hampers the country's democratic and developmental aspirations.

4. Weakening of Political Accountability

Vote buying disrupts the social contract between elected officials and the electorate. When voters accept financial inducements, they often forfeit their right to demand accountability from elected leaders. As Omotola (2010) observes, politicians who engage in vote buying are less likely to prioritize the needs of their constituents, as they perceive their electoral mandate as purchased rather than earned. This weakens democratic accountability and fosters a culture of impunity.

5. Promotion of Electoral Violence

The financial stakes associated with vote buying can escalate electoral violence. Competing candidates and their supporters often resort to coercion, intimidation, and violent tactics to secure or protect their investments. Studies by Adebayo and Omotola (2007) highlight the link between electoral malpractice, including vote buying, and the prevalence of violence in Nigeria's elections. This undermines the peaceful conduct of elections and deters citizen participation in the democratic process.

6. Alienation of the Electorates

Vote buying contributes to the alienation of citizens from the democratic process. When elections are perceived as transactional rather than participatory, citizens lose faith in the ability of democracy to deliver meaningful change. Ibrahim and Ibeanu (2009) note that this disillusionment can lead to voter apathy, reducing electoral participation and weakening the democratic system.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has examined the causes of vote buying and its implications on democratic sustainability in Nigeria. It was revealed from the study that vote buying has gradually become the standard of practice in Nigeria's electoral process. The Nigerian politicians believed that investing their money in politics is like investing in a business where multiple profits are expected. They believed that money answers everything, including buying their way to power. If therefore, money answers everything, there is one thing it will fail to buy, and that is credibility. The credibility of Nigeria's electoral process has been mired by vote buying which is counterproductive to democracy and good governance. Therefore, to salvage the situation and rescue Nigeria's democracy from the brim of collapse, the following recommendations are suggested as ways out of vote buying:

- i. The government should come up with an effective poverty reduction strategy. Since there was an established link between vote buying and the high rate of poverty in the country, the government should make it a point of duty to come up with effective poverty reduction Programmes. It should evolve income redistribution strategies aimed at bridging the gap between the rich and the poor. Closely related to this is the reduction of the unemployment rate. The government should formulate and implement robust economic policies that will generate employment opportunities for the teeming unemployed youths who may want to resolve to sell their votes for peanuts due to their status.

- ii. The Electoral Acts should be amended to criminalize the act of vote buying. There should be strong sanctions against the buyers and sellers of votes as well as their facilitators. Elections whose outcome is confirmed to be products of vote buying should be canceled and the beneficiaries of such elections be disallowed from participating in the subsequent elections.
- iii. There is a need for more voter education, sensitization campaigns, and awareness for citizens on the dangers of vote buying. Government, Civil Society Organisations, and Political Parties should deploy all available media outreach to sensitize the general public, especially the electorates on the evils that await them when they sell their votes, and also educate them on the benefits they stand to gain when they vote following the dictate of their conscience.
- iv. There is also the need for the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) to step up their collaborative efforts in monitoring the activities of political parties, their candidates, and their supporters before and during elections. Perpetrators of electoral fraud no matter how highly placed should be arrested and prosecuted under the relevant laws. EFCC should not wait for corrupt public office seekers to assume office and loot public resources before they can be nailed. They should pick them right from where they are buying their way into public offices. Moreover, INEC should be more involved in the conduct of party primaries to ensure that credible candidates emerge from credible processes.
- v. On the final note, INEC should ensure the secrecy of the ballots. Voting cubicles should be kept away from the public such that it will be difficult for vote buyers or their agents to see how the voters' thumbprint the ballot papers. If they were left in doubt as to where the voters cast their votes, they would be discouraged from the act of vote buying.

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