

MONETIZING DEMOCRACY: THE ENTRENCHMENT OF VOTE BUYING AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC

ABALOGU, DIVINE MADUKA PhD
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION AND HUMAN RELATION
NNAMDI AZIKIWE UNIVERSITY, AWKA
dm.abalogu@unizik.edu.ng
+2348066672095

Abstract

This study examines how the increasing use of money in Nigerian politics has weakened democracy, with a focus on the problem of vote buying in the Fourth Republic. Vote buying refers to the exchange of money, food, or gifts for votes during elections, and it has become a serious threat to free and fair elections in Nigeria. The study relies on reports from election observers, newspaper publications, and scholarly articles to understand how and why vote buying has become widespread. The research shows that poverty, hunger, unemployment, and low political awareness are major reasons why many citizens accept money or gifts during elections. Politicians exploit people's economic hardships to buy votes instead of winning through good ideas and credible plans. Weak law enforcement, lack of punishment for offenders, and mistrust in electoral institutions have also allowed the practice to persist. As a result, elections often fail to reflect the true will of the people and instead reveal the influence of money and political manipulation. Further findings show that vote buying has damaged Nigeria's political system by promoting corrupt leaders, weakening democratic values, and reducing citizens' confidence in the electoral process. It discourages honest participation, undermines accountability, and turns politics into a business venture rather than a platform for public service. To address the problem, the study recommends stronger enforcement of electoral laws, public education on the dangers of vote buying, and economic empowerment programmes to reduce poverty and dependence. It also calls for transparent campaign financing and greater civic responsibility among citizens.

Keywords: Vote Buying, Democracy, Elections, Corruption, Nigeria, Fourth Republic.

Introduction

Elections are meant to provide citizens with the opportunity to choose their leaders freely and fairly, yet this ideal has been significantly compromised in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. Since 1999, the political landscape has increasingly been shaped by the dynamics of "money politics," particularly the practice of vote buying, where candidates or their agents offer voters cash, gifts or other inducements in exchange for ballots. Babatunde, Iwu and Osuji (2019) argue that, "money-politics and vote buying are the major factors that stimulate bad governance, controversies, social conflicts ... and all forms of threats to human lives, properties and national security" in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. (p. 1)

This commodification of votes undermines the principle of electoral integrity. In a truly democratic environment, voters base their decisions on policies, leadership quality, and accountability. But when financial inducements become the determining factor, the actual will of the people is corrupted. Shehu, Araba and Abdulrahman (2025) note that vote buying "distorts voter preferences and erodes electoral integrity" (p. 364), turning the ballot into a transaction rather than an expression of democratic choice. This undermines not only elections but also the legitimacy of the resulting governance.

There are several interlocking factors driving the entrenchment of vote buying in Nigeria. One is pervasive socioeconomic hardship: widespread unemployment, poverty, and inequality make voters more vulnerable to inducements. For example, research argues that economic inequality increases susceptibility to vote buying and lower turnout among the poor (Ogah, 2024). Another factor is institutional weakness the inconsistent enforcement of electoral laws, gaps in campaign finance regulation, and inadequate sanctions create a permissive environment for vote trading. A third dimension is the role of political brokers, party agents, and clientelist networks that organize and facilitate vote buying. Studies show that vote trading has become so normalized that it is seen as an "article of trade" in the Nigerian electoral marketplace (Adebowale and Omodunbi, 2024).

The consequences of this monetisation of democracy are profound. First, vote buying weakens the accountability of elected officials: when votes are bought, leaders feel indebted to benefactors rather than the electorate, and governance becomes more about patronage than public service. Second, it fosters corruption and poor governance because those who win through inducements may lack the competence or mandate to govern effectively. Third, the public trust in democratic institutions erodes: when elections are perceived as paid transactions, citizens

become cynical about participation and may disengage altogether. This creates a vicious cycle wherein weakened democracy produces poorer governance, which subsequently increases voter vulnerability.

This paper seeks to examine the monetisation of democracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic with a specific focus on vote buying: how it has become entrenched, how it operates in practice, and what its implications are for electoral integrity and democratic governance. The introduction above sets the scene that vote buying is not only widespread but it is structurally embedded, driven by poverty, institutional weakness, and clientelist politics. The forthcoming sections will unpack the historical evolution of the practice, analyse its mechanisms, and explore potential reforms that could restore the integrity of Nigeria's electoral democracy.

Conceptual Clarifications

Meaning and Nature of Democracy

The concept of democracy is one of the most discussed and practiced forms of governance across the world, yet it remains one of the most contested. The term originates from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule or power), meaning "rule by the people." In its most basic sense, democracy refers to a system of government in which the people have the authority to choose their leaders and influence governance decisions through free and fair elections (IOSR Journals, 2020). Dahl (1971) described democracy as a system that guarantees both contestation and participation, meaning citizens must have the right to compete for leadership and to freely select their representatives. His notion of "polyarchy" focuses on institutions that promote inclusiveness, competition, and citizen rights, which include freedom of expression, association, access to information, and regular, credible elections. Similarly, Schmitter and Karl (1991) observed that democracy is a process through which rulers are held accountable for their actions by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives. However, democracy extends beyond elections; it includes social justice, human rights, and accountability. According to Ezeabasili (2025), democracy must reflect the values of freedom, equality, and justice, ensuring that leadership responds to the needs and aspirations of the people. In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, democratic structures such as periodic elections and multiparty competition exist, but the substance of democracy is often weakened by corruption, manipulation, and money politics (Mohammed, Peter, and Onimisi, 2023). Thus, democracy in Nigeria appears more procedural than substantive, emphasizing form over content. In essence, democracy thrives when citizens actively participate in decision-making and when leaders are chosen through transparent processes that respect the people's will. Its strength lies not only in institutions but also in the political culture of integrity, accountability, and civic responsibility.

Concept of Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity refers to the degree to which elections meet international democratic standards of inclusiveness, transparency, fairness, and credibility. Birch (2011) defined electoral integrity as the extent to which electoral processes are conducted according to democratic principles, including universal suffrage, political equality, and respect for citizens' rights. It involves every stage of the electoral cycle from the formulation of laws to the announcement of results and demands impartial administration, transparency, and professionalism (Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security [GCEDS], 2012).

According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), credible elections must reflect the genuine will of the people, be administered without bias, and be protected from coercion or corruption (GCEDS, 2012). When any of these principles are compromised for instance, through vote buying, intimidation, or manipulation electoral integrity suffers. Ezeabasili (2025) noted that Nigeria's elections often fall short of integrity standards due to systemic problems such as bribery, violence, ballot manipulation, and the undue influence of money. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has introduced reforms such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the Electoral Act 2022 to promote transparency, but challenges persist. Vote buying, in particular, remains a critical threat to credible elections because it undermines the autonomy of voters and turns democratic choice into a market transaction. Therefore, electoral integrity is not only about conducting elections but also about ensuring that the process is free from corruption, that the outcomes are legitimate, and that citizens' faith in the system is strengthened.

Meaning of Vote Buying and Forms

Vote buying can be defined as the exchange of money, goods, or favors for electoral support. It is one of the most common manifestations of electoral malpractice in developing democracies, including Nigeria. Shehu, Araba, and Abdulrahman (2025) described vote buying as the "offering or giving of material inducement to influence voter choice and participation." This practice takes many forms from direct cash handouts to the distribution of food items, clothing, and even promises of future rewards such as employment or contracts. In Nigeria, vote buying typically occurs both openly and covertly. During campaigns, politicians may distribute items such as rice, wrappers, and salt to potential voters. On election days, party agents may position themselves near polling stations

to hand out cash to voters after confirming their allegiance (Adebowale and Omodunbi, 2024). Another emerging form is digital vote buying, where inducements are transferred electronically to voters' accounts or through mobile money operators to avoid detection (Mohammed et al., 2023).

Vote buying can also include turnout buying encouraging individuals to vote or abstain depending on political calculations (Ezeabasili, 2025). Furthermore, a network of intermediaries, often called "vote brokers," acts as the link between candidates and voters. These brokers ensure that the inducement reaches the voter and that the voter keeps the agreement. Vote buying has far-reaching implications for democracy. It weakens accountability because politicians who buy votes often feel obligated to their financiers or clients rather than to citizens. It also normalizes corruption and erodes voter confidence in the electoral process. According to Shehu et al. (2025), vote buying turns elections into a commercial transaction where the "highest bidder" wins, reducing democracy to an auction rather than a contest of ideas.

The Idea of Monetized Politics in Nigeria

Monetized politics refers to a political culture where financial power, rather than ideology, competence, or public service, determines electoral outcomes. In such systems, money influences who runs for office, which emerges as a candidate, and ultimately who wins elections (Adebowale and Omodunbi, 2024). Politics becomes a business venture, where investments are made during campaigns and "profits" are expected after elections through access to public funds and contracts. In Nigeria, the monetization of politics has become a defining feature of the Fourth Republic. According to Mohammed et al. (2023), the excessive role of money in politics has created a system where political participation is restricted to the wealthy and powerful. Poorer aspirants struggle to compete because nomination forms, campaign logistics, and vote mobilization require large financial resources. As a result, leadership positions often go to the highest spender rather than the most competent candidate. This monetization also sustains a cycle of political clientelism a system in which politicians distribute resources to secure loyalty, while citizens depend on such favors for survival (Shehu et al., 2025). The effect is a weakening of civic values, as elections become less about service and more about personal gain. Over time, this undermines governance, accountability, and public trust in democracy.

The consequences are far-reaching. Monetized politics perpetuates corruption, limits youth and women's participation, and encourages the recycling of elites who can afford the high cost of politics. As Adebowale and Omodunbi (2024) aptly noted, Nigeria's democracy has been reduced to "an article of trade," where the political process is commodified and the public interest is secondary. In sum, monetized politics, combined with vote buying, and has transformed Nigeria's democracy into a transactional enterprise. Until systemic reforms, voter education, and economic empowerment are prioritized, the integrity of Nigeria's democracy will remain fragile.

Theoretical Framework

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) is one of the most influential theories in political science and economics that helps for understanding human decision-making. The theory was formally developed in the mid-20th century by economists and political theorists who sought to explain human behaviour through the logic of self-interest and cost benefit analysis. Adam Smith (1776) believed that individuals act in ways that maximize their personal welfare within a free market (Scott, 2000). However, Rational Choice Theory as a formal political theory was shaped in the 1950s by Anthony Downs (1957) in his landmark book *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. In essence, Rational Choice Theory assumes that individuals make decisions based on logic, available information, and expected outcomes. It suggests that human beings are not purely emotional actors but weigh the consequences of their actions before making choices (Scott, 2000).

In the context of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, Rational Choice Theory provides an insightful explanation for the widespread practice of vote buying and the monetization of politics. Both voters and politicians behave in ways that, from their individual perspectives, appear rational even though they collectively undermine democracy and electoral integrity. From the voter's perspective, Nigeria's high poverty rate, unemployment, and economic insecurity make monetary inducements during elections seem like immediate relief. Accepting a cash payment of ₦2,000–₦5,000 or food items in exchange for a vote appears logical when compared to the uncertain promise of good governance that may never materialize (Ezeabasili, 2025). In this situation, the short-term gain outweighs the long-term democratic cost. This is consistent with Downs' (1957) proposition that citizens are rational actors who participate in politics only when benefits exceed the costs. Similarly, from the politician's perspective, investing money to buy votes is also rational. Elections in Nigeria are competitive and expensive, and victory provides access to power, prestige, and public funds. Therefore, politicians see spending on inducements as a strategic "investment" with expected returns once in office (Mohammed, Peter, and Onimisi, 2023). In a weak institutional environment where the chances of being punished for electoral bribery are minimal, the expected

benefits of winning far outweigh the risks. Rational Choice Theory thus helps explain why political actors repeatedly engage in vote buying despite its illegality because it pays off.

Moreover, the theory clarifies the role of intermediaries or brokers in Nigeria's electoral market. These are individuals who link candidates to voters, ensuring that the transaction is completed and loyalty is guaranteed. As Coleman (1990) described, social systems often rely on networks of rational actors who cooperate to achieve individual goals. In this context, party agents and community leaders serve as rational facilitators who reduce uncertainty between buyers (politicians) and sellers (voters).

However, while Rational Choice Theory explains why individuals engage in vote buying, it also reveals a paradox: what is rational for individuals may be irrational for society. When millions of Nigerians accept small inducements, the collective result is the election of leaders who may lack competence or integrity. This weakens governance, increases corruption, and reduces citizens' trust in democracy. Adebowale and Omodunbi (2024) argue that the dominance of money in Nigerian elections has "turned democracy into an article of trade," where votes are bought and sold like commodities. Thus, while each participant's choice is rational individually, the overall outcome damages electoral integrity and national development.

Rational Choice Theory also helps explain the endurance of monetized politics. Since democracy in Nigeria offers limited ideological differentiation among parties, and most citizens lack faith in the electoral system, financial inducement becomes the most predictable motivator. Birch (2011) observed that in settings where institutions are weak and inequality is high, rational actors substitute money for trust, turning elections into financial exchanges. The logic is straightforward: when ideology and policy have little meaning, cash becomes the dominant political language.

Furthermore, as Herbert Simon (1957) later refined, individuals operate under "bounded rationality." This means decisions are made within limits of information, experience, and environment. In Nigeria's case, widespread poverty, poor political education, and lack of credible enforcement shape the voter's perception of what is rational. Selling one's vote, though morally questionable, becomes a survival strategy in a corrupt system. Thus, Rational Choice Theory helps scholars and policymakers understand vote buying not merely as moral decay but as a predictable outcome of socio-economic conditions and weak governance structures.

Historical Overview of Elections and Vote Buying in Nigeria's Fourth Republic Evolution of Vote Buying from 1999 to Date

Nigeria's Fourth Republic began in May 1999, marking the end of long years of military rule. Many Nigerians believed that democracy would bring transparency, accountability, and people-driven governance. Unfortunately, as elections became more competitive, political actors began to use money as a tool to influence voters' choices. Over time, vote buying evolved from a hidden act to an open and organised practice across the country (Vande, 2020).

During the 1999 and 2003 general elections, the exchange of money for votes was not as direct as it is today. Politicians often used indirect incentives such as gifts, food items, or community development projects to gain voter loyalty. These were presented as acts of generosity but were mainly targeted at securing political support (Agbaje & Adejumbi, 2006). The act of giving community incentives soon became normalised, blurring the line between campaign spending and corruption.

By the 2007 elections, the use of money had become more direct and widespread. The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM) documented cases of politicians distributing cash to voters around polling stations (EU-EOM, 2007). Vote buying was no longer limited to pre-election campaigns; it became part of election-day activities. Political parties established networks of agents who offered money to voters in exchange for proof of their ballot choices. This period marked the formal beginning of the "vote market" culture in Nigeria. In the 2011 elections, the pattern deepened. Political actors began using new methods, including distributing household items and paying voters through middlemen or community leaders. According to Vande (2020), the growth of poverty and unemployment made Nigerians more vulnerable to selling their votes. The vote, which symbolises civic power, was reduced to a survival tool exchanged for temporary gain.

By the 2015 elections, vote buying had become a national concern. Chukwurah (2019) observed that the trend was no longer limited to local elections; it had become entrenched in national contests. Political parties and candidates viewed vote buying as a necessary investment to win. Despite progress in voter education and electoral reforms, financial inducements became part of campaign strategy. In some areas, party agents distributed between ₦2,000 and ₦10,000 per voter, while others offered food or clothing in exchange for votes.

Between 2019 and 2023, the practice became more sophisticated. Politicians shifted from open cash distribution to electronic transfers, vouchers, and indirect incentives such as transport fares or food packages. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) found that vote buying had become “strategic, structured, and decentralised,” with agents operating in small networks to avoid detection. Poverty, inequality, and poor law enforcement continued to drive this behaviour, making it an accepted part of the political process.

Case Examples from Major Elections (2015, 2019, and 2023)

The 2015 General Elections

The 2015 elections marked a historic change, as power transferred from the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) to the All Progressives Congress (APC) for the first time. However, despite this democratic milestone, reports of vote buying were widespread. According to Chukwurah (2019), political parties distributed cash, food, and souvenirs to influence voter behaviour. In some states, community leaders were paid to mobilise support for candidates. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and observer groups condemned the practice, but weak enforcement meant few offenders were punished. Vote buying had now become a major element of electoral competition.

The 2019 General Elections

The 2019 elections saw an even greater spread of vote buying, described by many scholars as “the commercialisation of democracy.” Chukwurah (2019) explained that the practice was more organised than ever before, with political agents monitoring voting processes to ensure voters complied with agreed terms before payment. Observers such as the CDD (2019) reported that in many polling units, voters were openly offered money or gifts. In some locations, parties competed to pay higher amounts to attract support. This “bidding war” turned elections into a market transaction. The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room also confirmed cases where payments were made through mobile transfers to avoid detection. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) later admitted that weak monitoring and slow prosecution encouraged offenders to continue. Consequently, vote buying became a normalised strategy that shaped political outcomes.

The 2023 General Elections

Despite the passage of the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced measures to prevent electoral fraud, the 2023 elections still witnessed significant vote buying. The CDD West Africa (2023) reported that political parties used more creative and hidden methods. Instead of sharing cash at polling stations, many transferred money through agents or gave out food, clothing, and phone cards before election day. In some areas, voters received “logistics support” such as transport money and meal packs after accreditation. Even with the use of Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) technology, observers noted that monetary inducements remained widespread, especially in rural communities (Ezeabasili, 2025). The CDD (2023) concluded that while electoral technology reduced ballot-stuffing, it did not address the deeper economic roots of vote buying. Poverty, inequality, and the absence of strict punishment made it difficult to control the practice.

Causes of Vote Buying in Nigeria

Vote buying has become a central feature of Nigeria’s electoral politics, particularly in the Fourth Republic (1999–present). Scholars and election observers agree that it is driven by a complex interplay of economic, social, institutional, and cultural factors. Understanding these causes is crucial to designing strategies to strengthen electoral integrity.

Poverty and Economic Hardship

Poverty remains one of the most significant drivers of vote buying. In Nigeria, a substantial portion of the population lives below the poverty line, struggling to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. In this context, immediate material incentives offered by politicians’ cash, food items, or other gifts become very attractive. Efebeh (2023) emphasizes that “vote selling becomes a rational choice when citizens are faced with severe economic deprivation”. Hoffmann and Patel (2022) conducted field surveys across several Nigerian states and found that areas with high poverty rates corresponded with higher levels of vote selling. Many voters in rural and low-income urban communities expect politicians to offer direct material rewards in exchange for political support. As such, poverty transforms elections into transactional interactions, where the ballot is effectively commodified.

Unemployment and Inequality

Closely related to poverty is the high rate of unemployment and persistent inequality. Unemployed citizens, especially young people, often perceive elections as opportunities to earn money rather than to exercise civic responsibility. Ajayi (2025) argues that the combination of youth unemployment and lack of social protection drives many to sell their votes to survive economically. Income inequality exacerbates the problem. Wealthy

candidates can offer large inducements, while poorer candidates cannot compete, giving financial power a decisive role in elections. Onapajo, Francis, and Okeke-Uzodike (2015) note that Nigeria's oil-driven economy and patronage politics intensify inequality, making vote buying a rational strategy for both candidates and voters.

Weak Electoral Institutions

Electoral institutions in Nigeria are often under-resourced, poorly staffed, and sometimes compromised. Weak oversight allows monetary inducements to flourish with little risk. Danjibo (2007) observes that INEC's regulatory capacity has been historically constrained, which makes monitoring vote buying on election day extremely difficult. Furthermore, political financing rules are inadequately enforced. This lack of transparency allows candidates to use unaccounted cash to influence voters, making vote buying a low-risk and high-reward strategy. In the absence of strong institutional checks, vote buying has become embedded in electoral practices, especially at the local level.

Ineffective Law Enforcement and Corruption

Even where laws exist to curb vote buying, enforcement is often weak due to corruption. Security agencies, electoral officers, and local authorities may collude with candidates or agents to facilitate inducements. Jimoh (2021) highlights that "electoral malpractices, including vote buying, persist because sanctions are rarely applied, and impunity has become the norm. Moreover, systemic corruption in public offices normalizes transactional politics. Politicians often use public resources or state patronage networks to fund vote buying, creating a vicious cycle that undermines democratic governance. Voters, aware that authorities may not intervene, become willing participants in the exchange.

Voter Apathy and Ignorance

Voter apathy and limited civic education also contribute to vote selling. Many citizens feel disconnected from political processes or believe that their votes do not matter. Ajayi (2025) argues that ignorance of electoral rights and democratic responsibilities makes citizens vulnerable to inducements. In addition, some voters are unaware of long-term consequences of their choice to sell votes. For them, elections are short-term opportunities to access cash or material benefits rather than instruments for policy change or good governance.

Influence of Godfatherism and Political Culture

Finally, Nigeria's political culture, including the practice of godfatherism and clientelism, reinforces vote buying. Political "godfathers" use their influence and resources to direct communities, often rewarding loyalty with gifts or cash. Bello (2024) notes that vote buying in Nigeria is embedded in patron-client networks where material inducements are exchanged for political loyalty. This system legitimises the practice culturally, making it an expected part of electoral politics. Citizens often perceive accepting inducements not as unethical but as fulfilling the norms of patronage politics.

Methods and Mechanisms of Vote Buying in Nigeria

Vote buying in Nigeria has become a sophisticated and multi-layered practice, evolving beyond simple cash exchanges. Researchers have identified several mechanisms through which votes are purchased or influenced, ranging from direct monetary payments to networks of intermediaries. Understanding these methods is crucial to addressing the problem and safeguarding electoral integrity.

Direct Cash Payments at Polling Units

The most immediate and visible method of vote buying is the direct exchange of cash for votes at polling units. Observers of Nigeria's elections have consistently documented instances where voters are offered money at or near polling stations in exchange for proof of voting for a particular candidate (Efebeh, 2023). These payments are often coordinated by party agents or local intermediaries and can range from small amounts to significant sums depending on the stakes of the election. Direct cash payments have been reported in both local and national elections. For example, during the 2015 and 2019 general elections, voters in certain states openly received cash in exchange for their votes, often with the understanding that party agents would verify compliance through photographs or coded tokens (Chukwurah, 2019). Such transactions exemplify the transactional nature of Nigeria's electoral politics, where immediate financial reward often outweighs considerations of policy or long-term governance.

Distribution of Food, Gifts, and Materials

Vote buying is not limited to cash; it frequently involves the distribution of goods and materials. Items such as rice, oil, clothing, electronics, and mobile phones are commonly handed out to voters during campaigns. Hoffmann and Patel (2022) describe this as a non-cash inducement strategy, which targets households and community groups, creating loyalty to particular candidates or parties. These gifts often occur in public rallies,

community meetings, or directly at homes, and they exploit voters' material needs. For rural populations and urban poor, receiving food items or household goods can be as persuasive as cash, especially in regions with high poverty levels. In some cases, candidates distribute construction materials or support infrastructure projects in specific communities shortly before elections, creating a subtle yet effective inducement mechanism (Ajayi, 2025).

Use of Digital and Proxy Transfers

With technological advancements, digital methods have emerged as new mechanisms of vote buying. Candidates increasingly use mobile money transfers, e-wallets, and banking systems to pay voters, reducing the risk of detection by election monitors. According to the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023), some political operatives provide vouchers or airtime top-ups to voters, which can be redeemed after confirmation of their voting behaviour. Proxy transfers are another method. In these cases, intermediaries often local leaders or youth groups receive bulk payments and distribute them to intended voters, sometimes based on prior agreements or loyalty networks. This approach allows political actors to distance themselves from direct payments, minimising legal risk while maintaining control over the inducement process. Digital and proxy systems illustrate the increasing sophistication of vote buying in the 2023 general elections, demonstrating adaptation to both technological and regulatory challenges.

Role of Party Agents and Vote-Trading Networks

Vote buying in Nigeria is rarely an individual effort; it relies heavily on networks of party agents and local brokers. These actors mobilise voters, verify compliance, and manage distribution of cash or goods. Chukwurah (2019) explains that party agents often maintain detailed lists of voters, tracking who has been "paid" and who still requires inducements. Vote-trading networks extend beyond polling units. Local political "godfathers" and influential community leaders play a central role in coordinating transactions, ensuring that candidates' resources are efficiently converted into votes. This networked system creates a hierarchy of accountability that strengthens the practice of vote buying while making detection more difficult (Bello, 2024). It also institutionalises the practice culturally, embedding the expectation of material reward within political communities.

Implications of Vote-Buying on Electoral Integrity and Democracy

Vote-buying, the practice of exchanging monetary or material incentives for electoral support, remains a persistent challenge in many emerging democracies, including Nigeria. Its effects on democratic processes undermine not only elections themselves but also governance and public trust.

Erosion of Voters' Freedom of Choice

Vote-buying fundamentally compromises the autonomy of voters. When citizens are presented with financial incentives, their electoral decisions are influenced by immediate gains rather than careful evaluation of candidates' policies or capabilities. Guerra and Justesen (2022) highlight that vote-buying diminishes confidence in the secrecy of ballots, which reduces the willingness of voters to act according to their genuine preferences. This creates a coercive dynamic where choice is indirectly constrained by material inducements. Joseph and Vashchanka (2022) further argue that such practices distort the electorate's ability to act independently, as voters may feel obligated to align with the interests of those who provide financial incentives. In the Nigerian context, reports indicate that many citizens feel pressured to sell their votes due to economic hardship, demonstrating how poverty and clientelism intersect to limit electoral freedom.

Emergence of Corrupt and Incompetent Leaders

The transactional nature of vote-buying favours candidates with financial resources over those with experience, competence, or integrity. Muhtadi (2019) observes that clientelist electoral strategies prioritise candidates capable of mobilising voters through monetary inducements rather than those committed to good governance. Guerra and Justesen (2022) note that voters often perceive candidates who rely on vote-buying as less competent and more corrupt. This trend fosters a cycle where elected officials are more interested in recouping campaign expenditures than in fulfilling policy promises, resulting in governance structures that prioritise patronage over merit-based leadership. In Nigeria, this phenomenon is especially evident in constituencies where electoral competition hinges on distributing goods rather than promoting development programs, which perpetuates the election of leaders who may lack both expertise and ethical standards.

Decline in Public Trust and Legitimacy

When elections are perceived as transactional rather than reflective of citizen choice, public confidence in democratic institutions diminishes. Ezeabasili (2025) demonstrates that vote-buying during Nigeria's 2019 and 2023 elections significantly undermined electoral integrity and contributed to a widespread perception that elected officials did not legitimately represent voters' interests. Joseph and Vashchanka (2022) reinforce that clientelist

practices weaken the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, as the electorate begins to doubt whether votes genuinely reflect collective will. The resulting distrust has long-term consequences: citizens may disengage from political processes, abstain from voting, or accept corruption as an inevitable aspect of governance, further eroding the foundations of democracy.

Undermining Democratic Accountability

Vote-buying weakens the accountability link between citizens and their representatives. When elected officials gain power through financial inducements rather than policy support, they feel less obligated to deliver public goods or respond to citizen concerns. Guerra and Justesen (2022) show that clientelist strategies reduce citizens' demand for accountability and lower the pressure on politicians to perform effectively. Uwa and Iloh (2022) illustrate that in Nigeria, politicians who rely on clientelism often neglect long-term development priorities in favor of maintaining networks of loyalty among supporters. This erosion of accountability compromises the very mechanisms through which democracy ensures responsive governance and citizen participation.

Distortion of Governance Priorities

Vote-buying diverts political attention and resources from long-term development to short-term electoral gains. Muhtadi (2019) observes that clientelist exchanges incentivize leaders to allocate public resources toward patronage, electoral inducements, or personal enrichment rather than infrastructure, education, or healthcare. Shehu, Araba, and Abdulrahman (2025) highlight that in Nigeria, vote-buying entrenches clientelism, skewing policy decisions toward satisfying immediate electoral needs rather than implementing sustainable developmental programs. This focus on transactional politics undermines public service delivery and perpetuates cycles of underdevelopment, inequality, and poor governance.

Socio-Economic and Political Consequences

Vote-buying reinforces socio-economic inequalities. Wealthier candidates dominate elections, sidelining those without access to financial resources, thereby limiting political competition and diversity of representation (Guerra and Justesen, 2022). It also fosters a culture of cynicism among voters, who may perceive politics as inherently corrupt and transactional, diminishing civic engagement and reinforcing the notion that public office is primarily a vehicle for personal enrichment (Ezeabasili, 2025). In the long term, such practices weaken democratic institutions and erode societal norms of fairness and equity.

Efforts to Curb Vote Buying in Nigeria

Vote buying remains a major challenge to Nigeria's democratic process. Over the years, various institutions, agencies, and civil society actors have implemented measures to reduce its prevalence, strengthen electoral integrity, and ensure free and fair elections. These efforts operate through legal, institutional, educational, and media-based channels.

Role of INEC and Electoral Reforms

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is the primary institution responsible for conducting elections and enforcing electoral rules in Nigeria. INEC has implemented reforms aimed at reducing electoral malpractice, including vote buying. Some of these measures include the use of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), smart card readers, and biometric verification at polling units. According to Adebani and Obadare (2016), the introduction of technology in elections seeks to "limit direct manipulation of votes and curb practices like inducement and ballot stuffing" (tandfonline.com). INEC has also collaborated with political parties to enforce **codes of conduct** that discourage inducements. These reforms, coupled with monitoring by election observers, aim to increase transparency and reduce the opportunities for vote buying.

Anti-Corruption Agencies and Legal Measures

Nigeria has several anti-corruption institutions that complement electoral reforms. The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and the Code of Conduct Bureau (CCB) play key roles in investigating and prosecuting financial crimes, including those related to vote buying. Jimoh (2021) highlights that effective prosecution of political actors who engage in vote buying sends a deterrent message and strengthens democratic accountability. Legal frameworks such as the Electoral Act 2022 criminalise vote buying and selling, prescribing penalties for both voters and candidates. Enforcement remains a challenge, but the combination of legislation and anti-corruption agencies demonstrates a state-level effort to curtail inducements.

Civil Society and Media Campaigns

Civil society organisations (CSOs) and the media have been instrumental in raising awareness and discouraging vote buying. Organisations like the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC), Transition Monitoring Group

(TMG), and Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) conduct voter sensitisation campaigns, public debates, and monitoring of elections. They emphasise that “citizens must resist monetary inducements to ensure credible elections” (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2023). Media campaigns, both traditional and social, highlight the long-term consequences of vote buying, including corruption, poor governance, and underdevelopment. Public service announcements and investigative journalism play a role in exposing vote buying networks and educating voters about their rights.

Voter Education and Civic Engagement

Voter education initiatives aim to empower citizens to make informed electoral choices. Civic education programmes focus on political literacy, rights and responsibilities of voters, and the impact of vote buying on democracy. Hoffmann and Patel (2022) note that informed citizens are less susceptible to inducements, and communities that are engaged in civic activities report lower rates of vote selling. Engagement also includes community discussions, workshops, and school-based programmes that emphasise the long-term benefits of participating in democratic processes without succumbing to short-term financial temptations.

Conclusion

Vote buying has become a pervasive feature of Nigeria’s electoral process, especially in the Fourth Republic (1999–present). The practice undermines democratic principles by eroding voters’ freedom of choice, fostering the election of corrupt and incompetent leaders, reducing public trust in governance, weakening accountability, and distorting national priorities. A historical overview shows that vote buying has evolved from simple cash payments in early elections to more sophisticated mechanisms, including material gifts, digital transfers, and complex vote-trading networks coordinated by party agents and local “godfathers.” Poverty, unemployment, inequality, weak institutions, ineffective law enforcement, voter apathy, and an entrenched political culture are among the main factors perpetuating this phenomenon. Although efforts by INEC, anti-corruption agencies, civil society organisations, media campaigns, and voter-education programmes have shown promise, significant challenges remain in eradicating vote buying due to socio-economic pressures, institutional limitations, and the cultural acceptance of patronage politics. Consequently, vote buying continues to compromise electoral integrity and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Recommendations

- a.** INEC should continue to enhance technological measures such as biometric verification and smart card readers and increase on-ground monitoring during elections. Clear enforcement of sanctions for violations will deter political actors from engaging in inducements.
- b.** Anti-corruption agencies, including the EFCC and ICPC, should actively investigate and prosecute instances of vote buying. Legal frameworks such as the Electoral Act should be strictly applied to both candidates and voters to strengthen accountability.
- c.** Comprehensive civic-education campaigns should target both rural and urban communities, emphasising the long-term consequences of vote selling on governance and national development. Schools, media, and community organisations can play a central role in shaping political consciousness.
- d.** Media organisations should sustain advocacy against vote buying through investigative reporting, public debates, and awareness campaigns. Highlighting corrupt practices and promoting electoral integrity can shift public norms away from transactional politics.
- e.** Poverty-alleviation initiatives, job-creation efforts, and social-protection programmes can reduce the economic vulnerability that drives

References

- Adebanwi, W., & Obadare, E. (2016). *When corruption fights back: Democracy and prebendal politics in Nigeria*. *African Affairs*, 115(459), 1-24. Retrieved from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02589001.2016.1234576>
- Adebowale, I. A., & Omodunbi, O. (2024). *Vote trading and elections in Nigeria: Democracy as an article of trade*. *University of Jos Journal of Political Science*, 1(2), 145–157. Retrieved from <https://journals.unijos.edu.ng/index.php/ujjps/article/view/269>
- Ajayi, O. C. (2025). *Vote Buying and Electoral Practice in Nigeria: The Experience from 2023 General Elections*. *Journal of Political Science and Leadership Research*, 11(1), 13-28. Retrieved from <https://www.iiardjournals.org/get/JPSLR/VOL.%2011%20NO.%201%202025/Vote%20Buying%20and%20Electoral%2013-28.pdf>
- Babatunde, H. O., Iwu, H. N., & Osuji, A. O. (2019). Money politics and vote buying in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic: Implications for national security. *Socialscientia: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(2). Retrieved from <https://journals.aphriapub.com/index.php/SS/article/view/1015>
- Becker, G. S. (1976). *The economic approach to human behavior*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Bello, S. A. (2024). *The politics of poverty and economic development in Nigeria*. Futurity Social Journal. Retrieved on 11th November, 2025, from <https://futurity-social.com/index.php/journal/article/download/86/53/513>
- Birch, S. (2011). *Electoral malpractice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/book/27200>
- Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD). (2023). *Increased violence and vote buying recorded in Nigeria's elections: Interim statement*. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://www.cddwestafrica.org/uploads/reports/file/Interim-statement---FINAL.pdf>
- Chukwurah, D. C. J. P. (2019). *The effect of vote buying and the 2019 general elections in Nigeria*. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://www.acjoi.org/index.php/NJSS/article/download/1363/1348>
- Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Dahl, R. A. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Danjibo, N. D. (2007). *Vote buying in Nigeria: An assessment of the 2007 general elections*. Journal of African Elections, 6(2). Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://www.eisa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/2007-journal-of-african-elections-v6n2-vote-buying-nigeria-assessment-2007-general-elections-eisa.pdf>
- Downs, A. (1957). *An economic theory of democracy*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Efebeh, V. E. (2023). *The menace of vote buying and selling in Nigeria*. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/51f9/5c200bcd2f23db07b7cc291c2cb614898cb5.pdf>
- Ezeabasili, I. E. (2025). Vote buying and the integrity of 2019 and 2023 general elections in Nigeria. *European Journal of Science, Innovation and Technology*, 5(1), 97–102. Retrieved from <https://www.ejsit-journal.com/index.php/ejsit/article/view/605>
- Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security. (2012). *Deepening democracy: A strategy for improving the integrity of elections worldwide*. Stockholm: International IDEA. Retrieved from 11th November, 2025, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/deepening-democracy.pdf>
- Guerra, A., & Justesen, M. K. (2022). *Vote Buying and Redistribution*. Public Choice, 193, 315–344. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11127-022-00999-x>
- Hoffmann, A., & Patel, L. (2022). *Vote-selling behaviour and democratic dissatisfaction in Nigeria*. Chatham House. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-07/2022-07-28-vote-selling-nigeria-hoffmann-patel.pdf>
- IOSR Journals. (2020). Meaning and concept of democracy. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 25(9), 23–30. Retrieved from <https://www.iosrjournals.org/iosr-jhss/papers/Vol.25-Issue9/Series-6/D2509062330.pdf>
- Jimoh, A. Z. (2021). *Vote Buying and its Implication on Democratic Governance in Nigeria: A Study of Ondo State 2020 Governorship Election*. National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies/University of Benin. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://ir.nilds.gov.ng/bitstream/handle/123456789/1008/JIMOH.pdf?sequence=1>
- Joseph, O., & Vashchanka, V. (2022). *Vote Buying*. International IDEA Electoral Processes Primer 2. Stockholm: International IDEA. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/vote-buying>
- Mohammed, U. B., Peter, A. M., & Onimisi, T. (2023). Money politics and the challenges of electoral integrity in Nigeria: A case study of the 2019 general election in Gombe State. *Zamfara Journal of Politics and Development*, 4(1), 33–48. Retrieved from <https://zjpd.com.ng/index.php/zjpd/article/view/182>
- Muhtadi, B. (2019). *Vote Buying in Indonesia: The Mechanics of Electoral Bribery*. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-13-6779-3>
- Ogah, O. (2024). Democracy and regional economic inequality in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/articles/democracy-and-regional-economic-inequality-in-nigerias-fourth-republic/>
- Onapajo, H., Francis, O., & Okeke-Uzodike, U. (2015). *Oil corrupts elections: The political economy of vote buying*. *African Studies Quarterly*, 15(2). Retrieved from <https://asq.africa.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/168/Volume-15-Issue-2-Onapajo-Francis-and-Okeke-Uzodike.pdf>
- Poverty and the Prevalence of Vote Buying in Nigeria. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/354527320_Poverty_and_the_Prevalence_of_Vote_Buying_In_Nigeria
- Schmitter, P. C., & Karl, T. L. (1991). What democracy is...and is not. *Journal of Democracy*, 2(3), 75–88. doi:10.1353/jod.1991.0033

- Scott, J. (2000). *Rational choice theory*. In G. Browning, A. Halcli, & F. Webster (Eds.), *Understanding contemporary society: Theories of the present* (pp. 126–138). London: Sage. Retrieved from <https://uk.sagepub.com/en-gb/eur/understanding-contemporary-society/book211413>
- Shehu, L. O., Araba, A. A. & Abdulrahman, I. (2025). Vote buying and the quest for sustainable democracy: The Nigerian context. *Kashere Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 3(2), 363–372. Retrieved from <https://journals.fukashere.edu.ng/index.php/kjpir/article/view/509>
- Simon, H. A. (1957). *Models of man: Social and rational*. New York, NY: Wiley.
- Uwa, O. G., & Iloh, E. C. (2022). *Vote-buying, Voting Behaviour and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria*. *International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Studies*, 4(1), 1-11. Retrieved from <https://www.socialstudiesjournal.com/archives/2022.v4.i1.A.32/vote-buying-voting-behavior-and-democratic-consolidation-in-nigeria>
- Vote Buying and the Quest for Sustainable Democracy. Retrieved 11th November, 2025, from <https://journals.fukashere.edu.ng/index.php/kjpir/article/download/509/422/1771>