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Vote-Buying: Framing the Causes and Consequences of Electoral Inducement in Selected Nigerian Digital Newspapers (2025-2026)

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Abstract

The monetization of electoral processes weakens democracy and institutional integrity. In Nigeria, vote-buying poses a significant threat to democratic integrity and institutional governance. This situation contradicts the civic ethos of accountability and free and fair elections. The objective of this study is to investigate how selected Nigerian digital newspapers frame the causes and consequences of electoral inducement in the country. The study utilized a qualitative research design. The data comprise newspaper articles published in *The Punch* and *Daily Trust* between 2025 and 2026. The articles were gathered using purposive sampling and subjected to thematic content analysis guided by rational choice and framing theories. The findings reveal that the selected newspapers attribute vote-buying to systemic poverty, calculative incentives, institutional shortfalls, and legal and enforcement gaps. The findings also linked vote-buying to negative effects on governance, democracy, and socio-economic development, including democratic integrity, leadership competence, economic opportunities, and public trust. From the findings, it is inferred that once poverty becomes prevalent and electoral laws are not enforced, it becomes easier for politicians to buy votes from the poor population. This study contributes to political communication by providing insights into the media framing of vote-buying in the Nigerian context.

Keywords: Electoral acts; democracy; media reports; politics, vote-buying

Introduction

Electoral integrity is a foundation of democratic legitimacy, yet across many polities, vote-buying and other forms of transactional politics persist as recurring threats to free and fair contests. Vote-buying is the exchange of material inducements, cash, or gifts by political actors for electoral support or voter compliance. Scholars have long noted that vote-buying distorts representation by converting political support into transactions. This situation weakens citizens' ability to hold officeholders accountable and skews policy priorities toward short-term patronage (Van Parys, 2026; Bauhr & Charron, 2025). Studies show that vote-buying interacts with institutional design, party competition, and local governance structures to produce varying outcomes for turnout, trust, and democratic performance (Camatarri et al., 2026; Van Parys, 2026). At the same time, research emphasizes that poverty, clientelist networks, weak enforcement, and aggressive campaign inducements are the major causes of vote-buying. Thus, understanding the phenomenon of vote-buying requires attention to context, actors, and media representations (Paalo et al., 2026; Takyi & Kyere, 2026).

Mass media, and increasingly digital news platforms, play a crucial role in how vote-buying is perceived, debated, and contested. Media framing shapes which aspects of a problem receive attention; for example,

whether reporting highlights economic desperation, legal violations, or institutional failure, and thus influences policy responses and understanding (Van Parys, 2026). Empirical studies in different settings point to the media's ability to set agendas and shape negative or corrective narratives. When election commissions, civil society, or scholars are foregrounded, discourse tends toward institutional remedies. However, when poverty and culture dominate, solutions are framed as socio-economic or moral (Sangchan, 2026; Jumardin et al., 2026). Moreover, recent studies suggest that the rise of digital news has altered visibility and framing. The situation enables the rapid dissemination of allegations and counter-narratives that can amplify perceptions of systemic crisis or, conversely, normalize transactional practices (Camatarri et al., 2026; Van Parys, 2026).

Furthermore, there is a significant variation in how the consequences of vote-buying are conceptualized and measured. Some studies emphasize immediate electoral outcomes, such as changes in turnout, vote shares, or electoral volatility. Other studies foreground longer-term governance effects, such as eroded public trust, weakened public provision, and the normalization of godfatherism that subverts institutional rule (Bauhr & Charron, 2025; Oni et al., 2025; Paalo et al., 2026). Studies from various regions highlight that legal frameworks and enforcement capacity matter. Jurisdictions with clear prohibitions and more proactive electoral commissions show different patterns of inducement and accountability than those with ambiguous rules (Ohman, 2026; Sangchan, 2026). Simultaneously, localized studies highlight socio-economic drivers, such as migration, remittances, and uneven development, that can increase voters' susceptibility to monetary inducements, which complicates one-size-fits-all policy solutions (Camatarri et al., 2026; Paalo et al., 2026).

In Nigeria, the phenomenon of vote-buying has received substantial attention from scholars, policymakers, and the media, particularly since the 2023 general elections, which generated research outputs on electoral integrity and voter behaviour (Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025; Adeleke et al., 2024). Local studies reveal complex interactions among economic strain, cultural practices, political competition, and institutional weakness that facilitate inducement practices and shape electoral outcomes (Dikimono & Naphtali, 2025; Abdullahi & Magaji, 2026). In particular, research on public perceptions and turnout further indicates that voters' attitudes toward vote-buying vary by context and may influence both immediate electoral choices and longer-term civic norms (Siyanbola & Adedeji, 2025; Omu-Ngebo et al., 2024). Despite this growing body of work, a focused analysis of how Nigerian digital newspapers frame the causes and consequences of vote-buying, particularly between 2025 and 2026, remains limited. Existing studies focused on prevalence, public perception, and legal-institutional aspects (Nwachukwu, 2026; Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025; Onyinye, 2024). The current study investigates how selected Nigerian digital newspapers, *Punch* and *Daily Trust*, frame the causes and consequences of electoral inducement in the country. The study aimed to address the following research questions.

1. How do selected Nigerian digital newspapers frame the causes of vote-buying between 2025 and 2026?
2. How do the selected newspapers frame the consequences of vote-buying on democratic credibility and institutional governance within this period?

Literature

Conceptualizing Vote-Buying in Electoral Systems

Vote-buying poses a persistent threat to electoral integrity across many political systems. It shapes who votes and what politicians deliver. It manifests in different forms, including direct cash payments and in-kind inducements tied to patronage networks. Vote-buying produces consequences that extend beyond individual contests to institutional trust and governance. Several existing studies have examined the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of vote-buying across settings, using a variety of methods and theoretical angles. For example, Bauhr and Charron (2025) aimed to estimate democratic consequences, turnout, and trust in the Polish 2023 election. They employed comparative quantitative methods using observational election data and survey measures. The findings revealed that regions with stronger indicators of clientelism experienced altered turnout patterns and lower institutional trust. This outcome suggests that vote-buying's effects can reach beyond immediate vote transfers to affect broader political attitudes. Similarly, Amoussou (2021) examined vote-buying as an election-rigging strategy across African countries using a linguistically oriented discourse analysis. The study's objective was to understand rhetorical constructions of inducement. The findings showed that discursive frames shape both detection and social acceptance of inducement.

Some studies have focused on legal frameworks and institutional capacities to prevent and punish vote-buying (Ohman, 2026; Abu Issa et al., 2025; Sangchan, 2026). For instance, Ohman (2026) sought to map legal provisions and practices across African states by conducting comparative legal analysis and case summaries. The study found that although many countries have explicit prohibitions against vote-buying, enforcement remains uneven due to institutional weakness and political incentives. This outcome suggests that legal clarity alone is insufficient; enforcement capacity and political will matter. Moreover, Abu Issa et al. (2025) conducted a doctrinal legal analysis of Jordan's 2022 legislation to assess whether statutory provisions effectively deter inducement. The study found gaps in sanctions and procedural hurdles that limit effective enforcement. This outcome indicates that combining statutory reform and procedural and capacity upgrades is necessary. Additionally, Sangchan (2026) examined the role of an election commission in resolving vote-buying problems in a Thai district using qualitative case methods and interviews. The findings showed that proactive commission interventions, community outreach, and visible sanctioning reduced observable inducement in the local cycle. This outcome suggests that well-resourced and active election management bodies can reduce inducement in specific contexts, though single-district evidence limits generalization.

Moreover, several studies have evaluated enforcement actors and anti–money-politics strategies within party, police, and administrative systems (Sukarman et al., 2026; Gusniar et al., 2026; Fitrianingsih et al., 2026). Kambo et al. (2026) examined police strategies for monitoring money politics during Indonesia's 2024 legislative elections using an implementation study design with field observations and stakeholder interviews. Their findings revealed that targeted monitoring and rapid-response units helped detect and deter money politics in some precincts but were constrained by limited resources and politicisation. These findings suggest that security-sector involvement can aid deterrence but must be insulated from partisan pressures and resourced sustainably. Similarly, Gusniar et al. (2026) utilized surveys and focus groups to evaluate strategies for preventing vote-buying and enforcing village apparatus in Indonesia's 2024 elections. They found that formal neutrality rules reduced overt inducement, where local officials complied, while informal channels persisted where compliance was weak. These findings imply that administrative rules require complementary oversight and community enforcement. In addition, Fitrianingsih et al. (2026) assessed the effectiveness of regulations on campaign logistics distribution using policy evaluation methods and quasi-experimental comparisons. They found modest reductions in visible logistics-based inducements but evidence of displacement to covert channels. This indicates that regulatory designs must anticipate behavioral adaptation and be paired with monitoring mechanisms.

In addition, studies have investigated socio-economic drivers, remittances, normalization of illegal practices, and voter-level susceptibility across contexts (Paalo et al., 2026; Camatarri et al., 2026; Djuyandi et al., 2025; Undang, 2025). Paalo et al. (2026) aimed to unpack how economic strain shapes vote-buying practices in Ghana using surveys and interviews. The study found that worsening economic conditions increased the salience of material incentives and shifted many voters' calculations toward transactional choices. This suggests that socio-economic remediation can reduce inducement by altering immediate cost–benefit trade-offs. Camatarri et al. (2026) investigated the impact of remittances on vote-buying in Morocco using quantitative analysis of financial flows and electoral outcomes. They found that remittances can both reduce and reconfigure inducement patterns depending on local economic structures. This outcome implies that migration-linked financial flows interact with local political economies in complex ways. Djuyandi et al. (2025) employed survey experiments and qualitative interviews to explore public perceptions in West Bandung. The study aimed to link the normalization of illegal practices to democratic consequences. The findings showed that perceived normalcy increased tolerance for inducement and weakened civic sanctions. This finding suggests that shifting social norms plays a central role in whether legal and institutional measures succeed. Undang (2025) used theoretical and case analyses to argue that when democratic costs are high and parties deploy inducements to meet voter demands, clientelism can become entrenched despite formal democratic structures.

Similarly, comparative and behavioural studies considered turnout, trust, and youth vulnerability (Bauhr & Charron, 2025; Takyi & Kyere). For example, Bauhr and Charron (2025) used comparative quantitative methods to estimate the effects of clientelism on turnout and institutional trust in Poland's 2023 election. They found that clientelism correlates with altered turnout and diminished trust, highlighting democratic consequences beyond isolated transactions. Takyi and Kyere applied the Theory of Planned Behavior to study vote-buying susceptibility among first-time voters in Ghana using survey-based behavioural analysis.

They identified attitudes, perceived norms, and perceived behavioural control as significant predictors of accepting inducements. This outcome implies that interventions aimed at normative beliefs and perceived agency among young voters may reduce susceptibility.

Nevertheless, methodological and context variations complicate the direct transfer of findings across settings. Van Parys (2026) highlighted measurement and agenda-setting challenges that can confound causal inference about money in politics. The author notes that without careful modelling, results may misattribute effects. This argument highlights the need for strong designs and triangulation of evidence. Still, studies such as Sangchan (2026), Sukarman et al. (2026), and Gusniar et al. (2026) provide empirical evidence that institutional measures and enforcement actions can reduce inducement incidents locally; however, effectiveness depends on resources, independence, and local compliance. These outcomes collectively imply that effective anti-inducement strategies require a combination of legal clarity, credible enforcement, socio-economic interventions, and attention to norms and communication channels.

In Nigeria, studies since the 2023 elections have produced multiple empirical findings on vote-buying's prevalence, perception, turnout effect, and governance implications (Adeleke et al., 2024; Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025; Dikimono & Naphtali, 2025; Siyanbola & Adedeji, 2025; Abdullahi & Magaji, 2026; Nwachukwu, 2026; Omu-Ngebo et al., 2024; Onyinye, 2024; Anunike et al., 2024). For example, Adeleke et al. (2024) employed survey and electoral data analysis to measure dimensions of vote-buying and voter turnout in Nigeria's 2023 elections. Their findings showed that inducement correlated with regional and socio-economic turnout variations. The study evaluated these results as indicating both mobilizing and demobilizing effects depending on context. Similarly, Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) used institutional and documentary review to analyse electoral integrity and election management in the 2023 general election. The findings showed that management gaps and enforcement shortfalls undermined anti-inducement efforts. This points to persistent institutional weaknesses. Dikimono and Naphtali (2025) conducted a case study of the 2023 elections in Adamawa State using interviews and document analysis. Their findings revealed localized erosion of democratization where inducement was pervasive, suggesting that clientelism can weaken democratic consolidation at subnational levels.

Additionally, Siyanbola and Adedeji (2025) used a survey method to assess public perceptions of the 2022 Osun governorship election. The study found a mix of moral disapproval and pragmatic acceptance among voters. This indicates uncertain regulatory attitudes within electorates. Abdullahi and Magaji (2026) applied electoral data and field surveys in Zaria Local Government Area to examine vote-buying and turnout in the 2023 gubernatorial contest. They reported contextual turnout patterns linked to inducement and argued that local economic and political structures mediate effects. Likewise, Nwachukwu (2026) found that governance deficits were tied to inducement in Imo State. Omu-Ngebo et al. (2024) used content analysis and surveys to show that political radio programming influenced attitudes toward inducement in the South-East. Onyinye (2024) argues for value reorientation as a long-term corrective to acceptance of vote-buying in Awka. Moreover, Anunike et al. (2024) used interviews to assess the influence of interpersonal communication on vote-buying in Anambra South. The findings revealed that local networks and interpersonal channels facilitate inducement practices. Despite this body of research, there is a limited systematic analysis of how Nigerian digital newspapers frame the causes and consequences of vote-buying, particularly during 2025–2026 when the 2027 general elections approach. The current study will address this gap by analysing the framing of the causes and consequences of vote-buying in selected Nigerian digital newspapers that are widely read by the Nigerian population between 2025 and 2026. This period is enough to draw a reasonable conclusion. Media framing becomes the right analytic lens for the study because the media is responsible for making some societal ills explicit with a view to addressing them.

Theoretical Underpinning

This study adopts Rational Choice Theory and Framing Theory to investigate how Nigerian digital newspapers (2025–2026) present the causes and consequences of vote-buying. Rational Choice Theory presumes that individuals are purposive actors who weigh costs and benefits and choose actions that maximize their personal utility (Scott, 2000; Green, 2002). Under this assumption, voters who accept inducements do so after an assessment, conscious or bounded, of the material advantages of immediate gains versus the long-term public goods lost when clientelist exchange replaces programmatic politics (Boudon, 2009). Political actors (candidates, brokers, party agents) likewise make calculated decisions about deploying money as an instrument to influence electoral outcomes when the expected return (votes secured, offices captured) exceeds the costs (legal sanctions, reputational damage, resource expenditure)

(Archer & Tritter, 2000). This study, therefore, uses Rational Choice Theory to frame vote-buying as strategic behavior across actors: media coverage that highlights economic drivers, payoff calculations, or incentive structures can be interpreted through the lens of utility-maximising decisions. The theory was chosen for its analytical clarity in linking micro-level motivations to macro-level patterns of inducement. It helps explain variation in inducement intensity across contexts by describing how differing constraints (poverty, enforcement probability, political competition) alter the expected utility calculations of both voters and patrons (Green, 2002; Boudon, 2009).

Framing Theory, conversely, assumes that media and communicative actors do not merely report events but select, emphasize, and organize information in ways that shape how audiences perceive issues (Goffman, 1974; Chong & Druckman, 2007). It posits that frames, including problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations, structure interpretation and can influence opinion, agenda salience, and policy preference (De Vreese, 2005; D'angelo, 2019). Applied to vote-buying, Framing Theory suggests that the particular angles digital newspapers choose (e.g., crime/legal violation, economic desperation, cultural practice, institutional failure, reform imperative) will shape public understanding of causes and acceptable remedies. For instance, when outlets foreground enforcement failures and legal remedies, audiences may view enforcement reforms as primary solutions. When coverage stresses poverty or remittances, economic interventions may appear more appropriate. Framing Theory was chosen because the study focuses explicitly on media representations. It provides a framework for identifying thematic frames, assessing their likely interpretive effects, and explaining how media framing may amplify or attenuate certain causal and consequence narratives (Chong & Druckman, 2007; De Vreese, 2005).

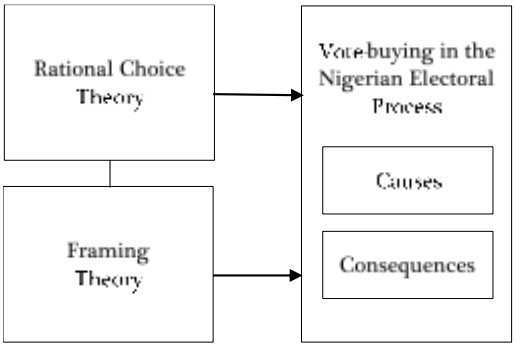


Figure 1. *Theoretical framework*

As shown in Figure 1, this study's theoretical framework integrates two theories to provide a comprehensive analysis of vote-buying in the Nigerian electoral process. Rational Choice Theory helps explain the causes and consequences of vote-buying. It conceptualizes both political actors and vulnerable electorates as rational agents performing cost-benefit calculations. On the other hand, Framing Theory helps explain how the selected newspapers frame the causes and consequences of vote-buying on democratic credibility and institutional governance. In particular, the two theories help investigate the causes and consequences of vote-buying practices. Together, these theories support analysis of both why inducement occurs and how newspapers shape public sense-making around its causes and consequences (Goffman, 1974; Scott, 2000.

Methodology

Design

This study employed qualitative content analysis to investigate how Nigerian digital newspapers frame the causes and consequences of vote-buying between 2025 and 2026 (Krippendorff, 2018; Harwood & Garry, 2003). According to Krippendorff (2018), content analysis is a systematic research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use. It focuses on the manifest and latent content of media messages. This approach is relevant as it allows the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and framing strategies in news articles. The researchers selected the newspapers and articles using purposive sampling. Specifically, *Daily Trust* (based in the northern part of Nigeria) and *Punch* (from the southern part) were selected to represent geopolitical diversity in media coverage. Both newspapers have national reach with substantial digital readership (Robinson, 2024). Recent

studies have successfully applied content analysis to examine electoral and political communication in Nigerian newspapers (e.g., Aondover et al., 2025; Beckers, 2020).

Search Criteria

Article selection followed explicit search criteria to ensure relevance and consistency across the dataset. Articles were collected from the official websites of *Punch* and *Daily Trust* using keyword searches that included "vote-buying," "electoral inducement," "money politics," and related terms within the period of January 2025 to May 2026. Only news articles, editorials, and opinion pieces that explicitly addressed vote-buying as a central topic were included. Articles that mentioned vote-buying incidentally or in unrelated contexts were excluded. The search covered all publication days within the specified timeframe to capture comprehensive coverage. Duplicate articles (e.g., reposted content or syndicated stories) were removed. This approach aligns with content analysis protocols that require clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure that the sample represents the population of interest (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992; Krippendorff, 2018). Table 1 shows the process used to select the final sample of articles for this study.

Table 1. *Inclusion and exclusion criteria*

Stages	Inclusion Criteria	The Punch (Results)	Daily Trust (Results)	Remaining Corpus
Stage 1: Initial Search	Electronic database search across the newspapers' official sites	15,900	10,000	25,900
Stage 2: Chronological Filter	Restricting focus to articles published within the 2025–2026 timeframe.	249	178	427
Stage 3: Purposive Sample	Selection of the 10 most relevant pieces.	10	10	N = 20

In the first stage of this data collection process, a broad electronic database search was conducted using the specified keyword across the digital archives of *The Punch* and *Daily Trust*. The initial search yielded 15,900 from *The Punch* and 10,000 from *Daily Trust*. Together, the newspapers yielded a total of 25,900 results. In the second stage, a chronological filter was applied, and only articles published between 2025 and 2026 were included. This timeframe reduced the corpus to 427 articles in total, comprising 249 from *The Punch* and 178 from *Daily Trust*. The final stage involved purposive sampling. At this stage, brief news updates, short event notices, or passing mentions that lacked substantive analytical value were excluded. This selection criterion gathered the 20 most relevant, context-rich articles, 10 from each newspaper. Therefore, a total of 20 articles were analysed, which was enough to attain the saturation point for a qualitative study.

Validity and Reliability

In content analysis, validity and reliability were addressed through established procedures to ensure the credibility and replicability of findings (Krippendorff, 1980; Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). According to Krippendorff (1980), validity in content analysis depends on the alignment between research questions, coding categories, and theoretical constructs. In this study, content validity was established by developing and reviewing a coding instrument with two experts in communication research. Reliability was ensured through coder training and the calculation of intercoder reliability coefficients, following Neuendorf's (2009) guidelines for content analysis reliability. Neuendorf (2009) recommends that coders independently code a subset of the data to assess consistency. Two trained coders were employed to code the selected articles, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and refinement of coding categories being a qualitative study. Validity and reliability concepts for content analysis require attention to both measurement consistency and contextual appropriateness. These procedures ensure that the study's findings are both trustworthy and replicable by other researchers (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999).

Coding and Analysis

The process of coding and analysis involved developing a structured coding sheet that captured manifest content (e.g., vote-buying mentions, article type, publication date) and latent content (e.g., framing themes, causal interpretations, moral evaluations) aligned with Framing Theory (Goffman, 1974; Chong & Druckman, 2007; D'angelo, 2019). The coding sheet included categories for emerging themes regarding causes and consequences of vote-buying. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis to explore themes regarding the causes and consequences of vote-buying across the two newspapers. The findings are presented through thematic categories. Similar studies have successfully utilized this

qualitative analytical approach to understand media representations (e.g., Aondover et al., 2025; Beckers, 2020).

Findings

The first research question aimed to explore how selected Nigerian digital newspapers frame the causes of vote-buying between 2025 and 2026. Table 2 presents eight emerging themes on the causes of vote-buying reported in the selected newspapers. The findings show that the causes of vote-buying include a combination of socio-economic vulnerabilities and systemic institutional flaws, such as poverty and illiteracy, a desperation to plunder public funds, unregulated cash flow at polling units, institutional failure, the compromise of electoral staff, and judicial and legal shortcomings. At the foundational level, the practice is driven by the exploitation of poverty and illiteracy, which leaves vulnerable citizens susceptible to short-term financial inducements. This vulnerability is heavily preyed upon by politicians driven by a desperation to plunder public funds, viewing electoral victory as a financial investment rather than a call to public service. This issue is further worsened by a widespread lack of accountability and impunity, as political actors rarely face legal consequences for manipulating the electoral process.

Table 2. *Emerging themes on the causes of vote-buying*

SN	Themes	Representative Quotes	Source
1	Exploitation of poverty and illiteracy	"The former Bayelsa governor expressed concern over how some wealthy and influential politicians exploit poverty and illiteracy to manipulate voters with cash and material inducements."	*Punch* 6, July 2025
2	Desperation to plunder public funds	"Those who buy votes do so with only one intention—to gain access to public funds. By bribing voters today, they are purchasing a licence to plunder tomorrow."	*Punch* 19, August, 2025
3	Lack of accountability / impunity	"The painful truth is this: nobody has ever been prosecuted or jailed for vote buying in Nigeria. This lack of punishment has turned the crime into business as usual."	*Daily Trust* 22, August, 2025
4	Unregulated cash flow at polling units	"Professor Mohammed stated that during election periods, politicians often carried huge amounts of money to pay party agents and logistical expenses. This unrestricted possession of cash at polling units has been mainly responsible for vote buying..."	*Daily Trust* 25, February, 2025
5	Collective blame and institutional failure	"On the issue of carrying huge sums of money to induce vote-buying, the blame goes to all parties; voters, political parties, security and law enforcement agencies as well as INEC."	*Daily Trust* 25, February, 2025
6	Compromise of electoral staff	"How often have we had reports of INEC officials and ad hoc staff being given cash to compromise the election process?"	*Daily Trust* 25, February, 2025
7	Security agency complicity	"What about reports of security agents escorting the cash to polling stations and even helping in the distribution to voters and INEC staff?"	*Daily Trust* 25, February, 2025
8	Judicial and legal shortcomings	"The courts and judicial system too, with their resort to technicalities on electoral cases involving vote-buying and other electoral offences, do not help matters."	*Daily Trust* 25, February, 2025

Source: Prepared by the authors

According to the findings, politicians exploit societal vulnerabilities to secure power as an investment for personal enrichment rather than public service. For example, *Punch* reported on July 6, 2025, that "The former Bayelsa governor expressed concern over how some wealthy and influential politicians exploit poverty and illiteracy to manipulate voters with cash and material inducements." This exploitation is driven by a predatory political motive, as reported by *Punch* on August 19, 2025, that "Those who buy votes do so with only one intention—to gain access to public funds. By bribing voters today, they are purchasing a licence to plunder tomorrow." Additionally, the findings reveal that vote-buying is caused by structural weaknesses within election operations and the active complicity of regulatory, security, and judicial institutions. *Daily Trust* reported on August 22, 2025, that "The painful truth is this: nobody has ever been prosecuted or jailed for vote buying in Nigeria. This lack of punishment has turned the crime into business as usual." This systemic failure is driven by institutional compromise, as *Daily Trust* reported on February

25, 2025, asking, "How often have we had reports of INEC officials and ad hoc staff being given cash to compromise the election process?" and further noted on February 25, 2025, "What about reports of security agents escorting the cash to polling stations and even helping in the distribution to voters and INEC staff?" Also, there is a failure of the legal system to hold perpetrators accountable. *Daily Trust* reported on February 25, 2025, that "The courts and judicial system too, with their resort to technicalities on electoral cases involving vote-buying and other electoral offences, do not help matters."

The physical presence of cash on election days catalyzes transactional voting. For example, *Daily Trust* reported on February 25, 2025, that "Professor Mohammed stated that during election periods, politicians often carried huge amounts of money to pay party agents and logistical expenses. This unrestricted possession of cash at polling units has been mainly responsible for vote buying..." Responsibility for this phenomenon is a collective blame, widespread rather than isolated. The same newspaper reported on February 25, 2025, that "On the issue of carrying huge sums of money to induce vote-buying, the blame goes to all parties; voters, political parties, security and law enforcement agencies as well as INEC." Another report by *Daily Trust* in 2025 warned that if this trend is allowed to carry on unchecked, "the 2027 election may not be about leadership, competence, or ideas; it may simply be about who has the deepest pocket." This issue creates a cycle where wealthy political actors manipulate vulnerable citizens. The findings show that vote-buying could lead to public offices being occupied by individuals who lack a genuine commitment to public service. As the *Punch* reported in 2025, former Governor Henry Seriake Dickson lamented that this practice directly "leads to the emergence of unqualified leaders who have nothing to offer the country". Financial barriers push visionary, competent, and popular candidates entirely out of the political space simply because they cannot match the massive cash distributions of wealthy opponents.

The second research question aimed to determine how the selected newspapers frame the consequences of vote-buying on democratic credibility and institutional governance within the period. Table 3 shows five emerging themes on the consequences of vote-buying as reported in the selected newspapers. The findings reveal that the consequences of vote-buying include negative effects on governance, democracy, and socio-economic development, such as undermining democratic integrity, eroding leadership competence, looting public funds, compromising election credibility, stifling socio-economic development, inciting electoral violence, destroying economic opportunities, and eroding public trust. For example, *Punch* reported on 6, July, 2025 that "Vote buying and selling disenfranchise the people and undermine the integrity of our democratic process. It's a dangerous development that leads to the emergence of unqualified leaders who have nothing to offer the country." According to a report by *Daily Trust* on 22, August, 2025, "If this trend continues, the 2027 election may not be about leadership, competence, or ideas; it may simply be about who has the deepest pocket." Furthermore, *Punch* reported on 19, August, 2025 that "Those who buy votes do so with only one intention—to gain access to public funds. By bribing voters today, they are purchasing a licence to plunder tomorrow." Another report by Daily Trust on 25 February, 2025 states that, "This unrestricted possession of cash at polling units has been mainly responsible for vote buying, which in turn compromises the integrity of elections." These findings suggest that the unmonitored flow of cash in electoral spaces undermines public trust and allows wealthy, unqualified individuals to dominate public offices.

Table 3. *Emerging themes on the consequences of vote-buying*

SN	Themes	Representative Quotes	Sources
1	Undermining democratic integrity & leadership quality	"Vote buying and selling disenfranchise the people and undermine the integrity of our democratic process. It's a dangerous development that leads to the emergence of unqualified leaders who have nothing to offer the country."	*Punch*, 6, July, 2025
2	Erosion of Ideals and Competence in Leadership	"If this trend continues, the 2027 election may not be about leadership, competence, or ideas; it may simply be about who has the deepest pocket."	*Daily Trust*, 22, August, 2025
3	A precursor to looting and public fund plunder	"Those who buy votes do so with only one intention—to gain access to public funds. By bribing voters today, they are purchasing a licence to plunder tomorrow."	*Punch*, 19, August, 2025

4	Compromising election credibility	"This unrestricted possession of cash at polling units has been mainly responsible for vote buying, which in turn compromises the integrity of elections."	*Daily Trust*, 25, February, 2025
5	Deprivation of infrastructure and development	"And when they get into office, the money meant for schools, hospitals, roads, and jobs is diverted into private pockets.	*Punch*, 19, August, 2025
6	Incitement of violence and election disruption	"The carrying of huge sums of money around polling stations also engenders violence as well as disorderliness, which in many cases results in the disruption of elections."	*Daily Trust*, 25, February, 2025
7	Destruction of socio-economic opportunities	"When you exchange your ballot for money or material gain, you are not just selling a vote—you are selling your future. You are selling away the schools your children should attend, the hospitals that should save lives, and the jobs that should lift families out of poverty."	*Punch*, 19, August, 2025
8	Erosion of public trust and accountability	"Therefore, any person or politician elected under this condition is not a reflection of trust by the people."	*Daily Trust*, 20, August, 2025

Source: Prepared by the authors

Moreover, *Punch* reported on 19, August, 2025 that "And when they get into office, the money meant for schools, hospitals, roads, and jobs is diverted into private pockets." According to a report by *Daily Trust* on 25, February, 2025, "The carrying of huge sums of money around polling stations also engenders violence as well as disorderliness, which in many cases results in the disruption of elections." To underscore the direct human impact of this practice, *Punch* reported on 19 August, 2025 that "When you exchange your ballot for money or material gain, you are not just selling a vote—you are selling your future. You are selling away the schools your children should attend, the hospitals that should save lives, and the jobs that should lift families out of poverty." Vote-buying undermines the investments made in electoral technology and laws designed to protect the system. For example, advanced tools like BVAS are rendered ineffective when politicians can easily bypass electronic security safeguards by buying votes directly at the booths. The current findings show that even with sophisticated technology in place, the presence of physical cash allows electoral fraud to proceed unchecked. According to a report by *Daily Trust* on 20, August, 2025, "Therefore, any person or politician elected under this condition is not a reflection of trust by the people." These findings suggest that the immediate financial gains provided by vote-buying inflict long-term institutional decay, stripping citizens of essential social infrastructure and destroying the foundational mandate of democratic accountability.

When financial inducements dictate electoral outcomes, the principles of representative governance crumble, replaced by a system where political power is bought rather than earned. This situation creates a steep barrier for visionary but financially disadvantaged candidates, fundamentally eroding the quality of leadership available to the public. A 2025 report by the *Daily Trust* highlights this risk, warning that "without urgent intervention, future electoral contests will entirely abandon the tracking of merit. Ultimately, the 2027 election may not be about leadership, competence, or ideas; it may simply be about who has the deepest pocket." Political actors view vote-buying as a heavy upfront business investment. As a result, their immediate objective upon securing office is to recoup their expenses. As *Punch* reported in 2025, this situation hands elected officials a "licence to plunder" public funds, with observers noting that "when they get into office, the money meant for schools, hospitals, roads, and jobs is diverted into private pockets." This redirection of public wealth directly worsens the economic misery of ordinary citizens. It plunges communities deeper into structural decay and reinforces a public distrust in democratic institutions. Therefore, the damage caused by vote-buying goes far beyond the polling unit. It directly leads to institutionalized public corruption and the open plundering of state treasuries. The media coverage reveals a connection between the physical cash distributed during campaigns and the looting of public funds once the politicians take office.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that vote-buying is driven by a combination of socio-economic vulnerabilities and systemic institutional flaws, such as poverty and illiteracy, a desperation to plunder public funds, unregulated cash flow at polling units, institutional failure, the compromise of electoral staff, and judicial and legal shortcomings. These findings provide empirical support for models that link poverty, intense competition, and weak enforcement to higher inducement intensity (Paalo et al., 2026; Undang, 2025). The newspapers repeatedly foregrounded poverty, political desperation, and loose cash-tracking as causes of vote-buying. This outcome shows that newsroom framings often echo the core premise of the Rational Choice theory that political actors and voters respond to perceived costs and benefits (Scott, 2000; Green, 2002). The reports describe vote-buying as a utility-maximising strategy by patrons who treat cash distribution as an investment with expected returns. The coverage also emphasised enforcement failures, legal gaps, and institutional complicity, presenting a narrative in which weak sanctions and politicised electoral bodies lower the expected costs of inducement, and thereby increase prevalence. These interpretive choices are examples of framing effects. The newspapers selected causal frames: economic deprivation, legal failure, and patronage rationality, that shape readers' attributions of responsibility and acceptable policy responses (Goffman, 1974; De Vreese, 2005).

The cost–benefit reasoning among political actors explains how candidates calculate returns on cash outlays, while voters weigh immediate material gains against future public goods. This concurs with several studies that highlight how material hardship and remittance influence inducement choices (e.g., Paalo et al., 2026; Undang, 2025; Camatarri et al., 2026). Theoretically, this pattern confirms the assumptions of the Rational Choice theory that politicians and voters respond to perceived costs and benefits (Boudon, 2009; Green, 2002). The findings also demonstrate that the way an issue is framed shapes the public's conception of the solution, aligning with media framing effects (Chong & Druckman, 2007; D'angelo, 2019). For instance, enforcement-framed stories produced recommendations for regulatory strengthening (Ohman, 2026; Abu Issa et al., 2025), whereas poverty-framed items foregrounded social safety nets and economic remediation (Paalo et al., 2026). In the Nigerian context, this interaction is critical because it highlights how media coverage can channel public pressure toward either institutional reform or socio-economic programs (Adeleke et al., 2024; Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025).

The findings also highlight the negative effects of vote-buying on governance and socio-economic development, such as undermining democratic integrity, eroding leadership competence, looting public funds, compromising election credibility, stifling socio-economic development, inciting electoral violence, destroying economic opportunities, and eroding public trust. These framings concur with studies that associate clientelism with lower institutional trust and subnational democratic erosion (e.g., Bauhr & Charron, 2025; Dikimono & Naphtali, 2025). This shows that editorial narratives tend to frame inducement as a mechanism that reshapes post-electoral incentives, making officeholders more likely to recoup campaign expenditures. In this regard, some field studies in the country report governance deficits following clientelist cycles (Omu-Ngebo et al., 2024; Nwachukwu, 2026). Nonetheless, other reports frame vote-buying as a fundamentally moral issue (Onyinye, 2024; Siyanbola & Adedeji, 2025), emphasizing reorientation over institutional reform. This contrast illustrates the power of framing theory to uncover how audiences are exposed to competing frames, ranging from legal and socio-economic remedies to individual behavioral change.

The current study echoes research findings that link clientelism to socio-economic and institutional decay (Dikimono & Naphtali, 2025; Abdullahi & Magaji, 2026). This issue indicates that public discourse increasingly views vote-buying as a threat to fair political representation. Equally, some findings prioritized civic education and moral reorientation (Onyinye, 2024; Anunike et al., 2024), shifting the focus toward long-term social change. When newspapers combined economic and institutional angles, they backed a comprehensive approach involving legal reform, stronger enforcement, and economic support. This aligns with evidence showing that a mix of strategies yields the best results (Sangchan, 2026; Sukarman et al., 2026). Eventually, the current study uncovers the causes and consequences of vote-buying through news coverage. The emerging themes suggest that addressing this phenomenon requires a combination of legal, institutional, moral, and socio-economic interventions.

Conclusion

This study investigated how selected Nigerian digital newspapers framed the causes and consequences of vote-buying between 2025 and 2026 using Rational Choice and Framing theories. According to the findings,

the vote-buying phenomenon is driven by a combination of structural poverty, calculative incentives, institutional shortfalls, and enforcement gaps. Economic precarity makes material inducements especially attractive, while gaps in enforcement and legal clarity lower the expected costs of engaging in inducement. The analyzed reports also linked vote-buying to negative effects on governance, democracy, and socio-economic development. Importantly, the newspapers presented varying frames that imply different solutions. For instance, some pieces argued for stronger enforcement and procedural reforms. Some reports highlighted socio-economic interventions and civic re-education. Others emphasised moral and attitudinal change. The findings, therefore, show that media framing does more than report events: it prioritises particular causal stories and policy responses, shaping public understanding about who is responsible and what should be done. The findings indicate that vote-buying is portrayed as a systemic problem that intersects with poverty, political competition, and institutional weakness. This implies that legal, institutional, moral, and socio-economic interventions are required to address the vote-buying phenomenon in the country.

The current study contributes to the literature on money politics and media framing by offering empirical evidence about how digital news outlets in Nigeria frame both the causes and consequences of vote-buying. For Nigerian democracy, the study suggests that a single solution alone is not enough. Stronger laws and better enforcement are important, but so are steps to reduce voters' financial pressure and make campaign funding and candidate selection more transparent. Media actors themselves can play a role by adopting clearer, evidence-based frames, which could help channel public pressure toward comprehensive reforms. However, this study is limited to a specific set of digital newspapers over a two-year timeframe and, therefore, may not capture the full variety of media voices, offline discourse, or subnational variations. Additionally, the content approach cannot directly measure how frames influenced voter behaviour or policy decisions. Future research should include a wider range of media samples, incorporate audience reception studies to test framing effects, and link media narratives to measurable changes in enforcement actions, electoral outcomes, or public attitudes over time. Also, longitudinal mixed-methods research that combines content analysis with surveys, administrative data, and field experiments would help establish causal pathways between media framing, public opinion, and institutional responses. This approach could offer more precise guidance for policymakers seeking to reduce inducements and protect electoral integrity.

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