

Vote-Buying in Nigerian Electoral Process: Evidence from Selected Media Outlets

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Abstract

Despite the 2019 Electoral Act criminalizing the offering and acceptance of money during elections, vote-buying remains a serious problem in the Nigerian political process. Additionally, the media can be seen as an effective means of bringing this unlawful act to public awareness and enlightenment. Therefore, this study sought to investigate emerging themes related to vote-buying incidents reported in Nigerian media outlets. The study employed a qualitative method in which data were gathered from 11 Nigerian newspapers and subjected to content analysis. The findings revealed vote-buying as a long-standing challenge to democratic development, where political aspirants utilize monetary inducements to secure electoral victories. Another emerging theme is the opportunistic behavior of delegates during primaries. Party delegates are portrayed as individuals possessing the strategic importance and ability to extract financial benefits from aspirants. The findings also highlight that vote-buying tends to deteriorate electoral integrity in the country. Despite these challenges, there are indications of resistance and efforts to counteract vote-buying. This research calls for a strict application of the Electoral Act and the development of preventive measures that can contribute to a more functional democratic process in the country. The study is envisaged to offer valuable information that can help policymakers and relevant authorities refine strategies against vote-buying.

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

Introduction

Electoral participation is a choice for those who wish to participate in the electoral process. The citizens of any democratic nation have the right to vote and express their opinion in any elections and to vote or be voted for political posts such as the presidency, governorship, federal or state legislative membership, local government chairmanship, or local councilorship. However, collecting any incentive from voters is undemocratic and tantamount to selling one's conscience for money or material gifts (Nwagwu, Uwaechia, Udegbunam, & Nnamani, 2022).

Vote-buying has emerged as a critical issue in Nigeria's electoral landscape. This issue undermines the integrity of democratic processes. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reported a notable increase in the prevalence of vote-buying during the 2023 general elections, with 22% of citizens indicating they were offered money or favors in exchange for their votes, up from 17% in 2019. This trend reflects a troubling shift where financial incentives overshadow informed political participation, leading to a culture where voters are coerced into transactional relationships with political candidates. As candidates struggle for electoral success, vote-buying distorts voter choice and raises ethical concerns regarding the legitimacy of election outcomes.

The consequences of vote-buying extend beyond individual elections and threaten the success of Nigeria's democracy. Reports indicate that many voters accept monetary offers to influence their voting decisions. Such practices contribute to a cycle of corruption and complacency, where voters prioritize immediate financial gain over long-term accountability and governance (Punch Newspapers, 2023). This phenomenon is exacerbated by socioeconomic factors that render many citizens vulnerable to exploitation by political elites. This issue further strengthens patronage relationships, which hinder genuine participation in the democratic process.

Despite existing legal frameworks aimed at curbing vote-buying, including provisions in the Electoral Act of 2018, enforcement remains weak and ineffective (Nwagwu et al., 2022). Observers have noted that monetary and non-monetary inducements are commonly utilized during elections, with reports of voters being offered various items alongside cash. The persistence of vote-buying raises critical questions about the sustainability of democratic governance in Nigeria and underscores the urgent need for reforms.

The media plays a crucial role in democracies by serving as a platform for public discourse, informing citizens, and holding political leaders accountable. It facilitates the exchange of ideas and opinions, allowing the public to engage with political issues and participate in the democratic process. Through various forms of communication, including news reporting, analysis, and commentary, the media shapes public opinion and helps set the political agenda (Farrell & James, 2024). Furthermore, credible and independent media are essential for ensuring transparency and accountability within government institutions, as they act as a watchdog that scrutinizes the actions of elected officials and informs citizens about their rights and responsibilities (Nord et al., 2024). This study sought to analyze the causes and effects of vote-buying as reported by selected Nigerian media outlets to highlight its detrimental impact on electoral integrity and public trust in political institutions.

Literature

Vote-Buying during Elections

Vote-buying is a pervasive issue that transcends borders. The phenomenon affects electoral processes across various countries and undermines the integrity of democratic governance. In the Philippines, for instance, Wong (2022) highlights how deeply entrenched patronage systems facilitate money politics, where candidates often resort to vote-buying rather than promoting their political platforms. This issue is exacerbated by a lack of ideological alignment among political parties, leading voters to prioritize personal connections or family affiliations over policy considerations. A significant portion of the electorate, particularly the poor, views vote-buying as a means to secure immediate material benefits, with approximately 40% of the impoverished population acknowledging its prevalence in their communities (Wong, 2022). This practice creates a cycle where financial incentives rather than informed decision-making drive electoral choices.

Similarly, in Indonesia, vote-buying has been recognized as a longstanding issue since the country's first elections in 1955. Muhtadih (2018) notes that despite legal frameworks aimed at curbing this practice, such as imposing prison sentences for offenders, the distribution of money remains a common tactic among political parties to sway voter behavior. In Africa, Zambia presents another example where vote-buying is prevalent. Chulu (2012) conducted a study during a bye-election that revealed how candidates distributed gifts to voters, a strategy to influence electoral outcomes. While the study found that these gifts impact voter decisions, it also acknowledged other factors such as candidate reputation and policy alternatives that shape voter preferences. This outcome highlights the complexity of electoral behavior in Zambia, where financial incentives coexist with traditional political considerations. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive strategies to address the multifaceted nature of vote-buying and its implications for democratic governance.

In India, the situation further complicates the narrative surrounding vote-buying. Still and Dusi (2020) explored how vote-buying manifests through various forms of persuasion, particularly within marginalized communities such as Dalits. The study suggests that while vote-buying is prevalent, it is often intertwined with broader socio-economic dynamics and populist programs to incentivize voter support. This situation indicates that addressing vote-buying in India requires understanding the underlying socio-political context and the motivations driving electoral behavior among different demographic groups.

In Nigeria, the increasing prominence of vote buying as a critical issue in electoral processes has gained significant scholarly attention. Research highlights the multifaceted drivers behind vote-buying practices,

including socio-economic disparities, institutional weaknesses, and political strategies. For instance, research by Onah and Udeh (2023) demonstrates how political radio programs in Southeast Nigeria influenced voter attitudes toward this phenomenon during the 2023 presidential election, showcasing the media's dual role in perpetuating and mitigating electoral malpractice. Complementing this perspective, Ayodeji et al. (2024) emphasize how systemic dysfunctions in Nigeria's electoral system have transitioned from overt election rigging to subtle yet pervasive vote-buying practices, undermining democracy and public trust.

Socio-political implications of vote buying are evident across varied democratic settings. Studies such as Enwereji (2024) reveal its deep entrenchment within Nigeria, correlating poverty and illiteracy with voters' susceptibility to financial inducements. Similarly, international analyses by scholars such as Birch (2020) associate the global prevalence of clientelism and vote-buying tactics with weakened institutional frameworks, highlighting how these practices are not only endemic to emerging democracies but also persist in supposedly stable systems. This interconnectedness underscores the need for holistic reforms encompassing political, social, and media dimensions.

Mitigating vote-buying practices requires a multi-pronged approach integrating policy reforms, voter education, and robust media accountability. Effective media campaigns addressing voter choices could foster informed electorates, reducing their susceptibility to financial enticements. Moreover, Chukwuma's (2024) investigation into policy recommendations reinforces the critical role of civic engagement and institutional transparency in strengthening democratic resilience. These findings illustrate that combatting vote buying necessitates a concerted effort across societal sectors.

Additionally, Lockwood (2013) examines vote-buying in international relations. The study argues that states engage in these practices when seeking diplomatic support or recognition on global platforms, illustrating how vote-buying can manifest in various forms across different contexts. This perspective emphasizes that while vote-buying is often viewed as an issue confined to domestic elections, it also reflects broader politics that can undermine national and international governance structures. The convergence of these findings from diverse countries highlights the urgent need for global discourse and action to combat vote-buying and restore integrity within democratic processes worldwide.

INEC Electoral Act 2019

The Electoral Act 2019 in Nigeria outlines specific offenses and penalties related to vote buying and undue influence during elections. The Act aims to uphold electoral integrity. Table 1 shows various punishments for electoral misconduct. Under Section 124, bribery offenses, such as paying money to influence voting or receiving gifts to cast or withhold a vote, are punishable by a fine of up to N500,000, imprisonment for up to 12 months, or both. This provision highlights the Nigerian government's attempt to address vote buying through deterrence by enforcing monetary and custodial penalties for offenders.

Table 1. Act 10. Bribery and conspiracy

Offense	Penalty	Reference
Paying money to any other person for bribery at any election	On conviction to a maximum fine of N500,000 or 12 months' imprisonment or both.	Section 124 E.A 2010
Receiving any money or gift, for voting or refraining from voting at any election	A maximum fine of N500,000 or imprisonment for 12 months or both	
Offense	Penalty	References
Accepting money or any other inducement during an election.	A fine of N 100,000 or imprisonment for a 12-month term or both.	Section 130 E.A 2010

Source: Electoral Act 2019

Offenses under "Undue Influence" pertain to accepting money or inducements during elections. The penalty for this offense is less severe, with a fine of N100,000 or imprisonment for up to 12 months. This penalty difference may reflect an attempt to differentiate between direct bribery and other forms of

electoral manipulation. However, critics may argue that the penalties are not stringent enough to effectively deter vote-buying, especially in a political landscape where such practices are deeply entrenched. This information could be an important reference point for understanding Nigeria's legal stance on electoral integrity and vote-buying challenges in maintaining a fair democratic process. Together, these laws reflect a legislative commitment to curbing electoral malpractices but raise questions about the adequacy of penalties in deterring systemic vote-buying practices in a politically and economically diverse electorate.

Methodology

Design

This study employs a content analysis technique to systematically investigate the prevalence and nature of vote-buying practices in Nigerian politics, particularly during the pivotal election campaigns in 2022. Content analysis allows for exploring how vote-buying is represented in media narratives (Krippendorff, 2018; Neuendorf, 2017). This technique helps provide insights into the dynamics of electoral malpractice across party lines. By analyzing news articles from various Nigerian newspapers, the study aims to draw empirical information regarding vote-buying within Nigeria's electoral landscape.

Search Criteria

The study accesses the archive of 11 different Nigerian-based newspapers to obtain information on vote-buying in Nigerian politics across the party lines in 2022. This year represents a critical time of electoral campaigns for the 2023 elections across the country. The search criteria for this study focused on news articles published in English from online newspaper sites during the year 2022. This timeframe was selected due to its significance in the upcoming 2023 general elections. The period was characterized by heightened political activity and competition among candidates. The study accessed the archives of 11 different Nigerian-based newspapers to ensure a diverse representation of perspectives on vote-buying. Articles that explicitly discussed instances of monetary inducements, electoral malpractice, and related themes were prioritized to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 2019). Table 2 shows the selected media outlets and their respective websites.

Table 2. Selected Newspapers

SN	Punch	Websites
1	Sahara Reporters	https://saharareporters.com/
2	Premium times	https://www.premiumtimesng.com/
3	Daily Trust	https://dailytrust.com/
4	Daily Post	https://dailypost.ng/
5	Tribune online	https://tribuneonlineng.com/
6	The Sun	https://thesun.ng/
7	Thisday Live	https://www.thisdaylive.com/
8	The Conversation	https://theconversation.com/global
9	Independent	https://independent.ng/
10	Leadership	https://leadership.ng/
11	The Nation	https://thenationonlineng.net/

Coding and Analysis

The coding process involved systematically categorizing the identified articles based on specific themes related to vote-buying practices. Each article was analyzed for key elements such as reported cases of financial inducements, quotes from political figures, and contextual factors influencing these practices. The coding framework was designed to capture the qualitative data and enable a robust analysis of how vote-buying is reported within the electoral discourse in Nigeria. This methodological approach could provide a detailed understanding of the phenomenon and contribute to ongoing discussions about electoral reforms and democratic governance in Nigeria (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The analysis involved synthesizing the coded data to identify patterns and trends in vote-buying practices (Babbie, 2016) as reported by Nigerian media outlets. By comparing findings across different newspapers and contextualizing them within the existing literature on electoral malpractice, this study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how vote-buying influences political behavior and electoral outcomes in Nigeria. The insights gained from this analysis are intended to inform future research directions and policy recommendations to help mitigate the impact of vote-buying on Nigeria's democratic processes.

Findings

The findings revealed the widespread use of monetary inducements to secure electoral victories. As shown in Table 3, vote-buying practices in Nigerian elections and their nature are highlighted by various media outlets. *The Punch's* report that a political aspirant distributed money delegates during the primaries illustrates how political aspirants used monetary inducements to secure votes. Similarly, Sahara Reporters revealed instances where over \$50,000 was given to delegates, which shows the high stakes and scale of financial manipulation during party primaries. These reports underscore how money influences political candidacy in democratic practices.

Table 3. Vote-buying practices reported by Nigerian newspapers

SN	Representative Quotes	Newspapers	Date
1	Atiku Abubakar doled out about \$20,000 to each delegate to beat his closest rival. He subsequently <i>emerged as the PDP candidate</i>	Punch	3 July 2022
2	Each delegate at the special convention had been given over \$50,000 in bribes to sway their votes in favor of particular aspirants.	Sahara Reporters	28 May 2022
3	Mr Sabo then kept N1.3 million and Mr Sabo shared N19.3 million being the bribes he got from the primary elections.	Premium times	2 June 2022
4	Party delegates are taking advantage of their parties' primaries to make money from aspirants, with some of them describing themselves and the electioneering season as beautiful brides and opportunistic respectively	Daily Trust	28 May 2022
5	The National Chairman of the All Progressives Congress, APC, Senator Abdullahi Adamu has said that delegates collecting money from aspirants	Daily Post	27 May 2022
6	The just-concluded governorship elections in Ekiti and Osun states as well as, the preceding primary elections, were an eye-opener	Tribune online	23 July 2022
7	A political group, Youths In Politics (YIP), Nigeria, on Sunday in Lagos kicked off voter education and sensitization campaigns against vote-buying	Sun online	21 July 2022
8	The electoral malfeasance of buying votes has become a disturbing feature of elections in Nigeria. · The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission	Thisday Live	3 July 2022
9	The 2022 primary and gubernatorial elections in Nigeria brought to the fore the reality of vote-buying	The Conversation	21 July 2022
10	Adam Namadi, a son of former Vice President, Namadi Sambo, has requested delegates to refund N2 million each he gave them after he failed to secure the ticket for the Kaduna North Federal Constituency of the House of Representatives	Sahara Reporters	24 May 2022
11	The recurring decimal of the anti-democratic malfeasance of vote-buying during the recently-held governorship election in Ekiti State	Independent	23 June 2022
12	Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) commissioner representing Niger, Kogi, and Kwara State in North Central Nigeria, Professor Mohammed Sani ...	Leadership	26 July 2022

13 It did not start today. It occurred during the Social Democratic Party presidential primary held in Jos in 1992. It was one of the justifications

The Nation 9 June 2022

Source: Prepared by Authors

Another emerging theme is the opportunistic behavior of delegates during primaries. Reports from *Daily Trust* described party delegates as “beautiful brides”, a metaphor reflecting their strategic importance and ability to extract financial benefits from aspirants. This trend points to the systemic exploitation of Nigeria’s electoral vulnerabilities, where primaries become venues for political ambitions. Furthermore, the *Premium Times* highlighted misappropriated bribes, such as N19.3 million distributed by Mr. Sabo. This instance demonstrates how vote-buying benefits specific individuals at the expense of collective governance. The broader implications of these practices are evident in reports from *Thisday Live* and *The Conversation*, which associated vote-buying with deteriorating electoral integrity. The newspapers emphasize how these practices have tainted gubernatorial elections in Ekiti and Osun states. The practice reduces elections to transactions devoid of ideological discourse. Additionally, *The Nation* showcased the entrenched nature of vote-buying as a long-standing challenge to democratic development dating back to 1992.

Despite these challenges, there are indications of resistance and efforts to counteract vote-buying. For example, the Youths in Politics group launched voter education campaigns to sensitize the electorate against the practice. However, the reports collectively call for more robust institutional mechanisms and societal reform to address this deeply ingrained problem, as exposing these malpractices without systemic and appropriate actions might not restore trust in Nigeria’s electoral process.

Discussion

In the Nigerian political context, the desperate political attitude of vote-buying began to be in the limelight in the Fourth Republic in varying degrees (Ayeni, 2019; Sakariyau et al., 2015). The inception of democratic rule had set up an electoral regulation blueprint in the form of the Electoral Act, which has been frequently reviewed as the situation demands a new development in the political processes to meet the standard requirement of free and fair democratic election procedures. However, the findings from this content analysis of vote-buying practices in Nigeria reveal a critical trend that mirrors issues observed in other countries. Reports from the selected media outlets indicate that political aspirants employ monetary inducements to secure electoral victories, with notable instances such as distributing money to delegates during the primaries. This practice aligns with previous research highlighting similar behaviors in the Philippines. Wong (2022) noted that entrenched patronage systems facilitate money politics, which leads voters to prioritize immediate material benefits over informed decision-making. The cycle of financial incentives driving electoral choices is not unique to Nigeria; it reflects a broader global trend where vote-buying becomes a normalized aspect of political campaigns, often overshadowing ideological discourse and policy considerations.

The opportunistic behavior of delegates, characterized by their description as “beautiful brides”, further emphasizes the exploitative nature of these electoral practices. This metaphor captures the strategic importance of delegates who utilize their positions to extract financial benefits from aspirants. This outcome mirrors trends observed in Zambia and Indonesia, where candidates have similarly distributed gifts and money to influence voter decisions (Chulu, 2012; Muhtadih, 2018). Such practices highlight the complexity of electoral behavior, wherein financial inducements coexist with traditional political considerations. The findings underscore the need for comprehensive strategies that address the complex nature of vote-buying and its implications for democratic governance across different contexts.

Moreover, the socio-political consequences of vote-buying are profound and far-reaching. The newspaper reports indicate a correlation between poverty and illiteracy and voters’ susceptibility to financial inducements. This outcome echoes the theme reported by Enwereji (2024) in Nigeria’s electoral landscape. This relationship suggests that addressing socio-economic disparities is crucial in mitigating vote-buying practices. Furthermore, international analyses by Birch (2020) have linked clientelism and vote-buying tactics to weakened institutional frameworks. This relationship emphasizes that vote-buying practices are not confined to emerging democracies but persist even in supposedly stable systems. The concurrence of these findings highlights the urgent need for holistic reforms encompassing political, social, and media dimensions to combat vote-buying effectively.

Despite the deep-rooted nature of vote-buying, there are indications of resistance against these practices in Nigeria. Initiatives, including voter education campaigns launched by groups such as *Youths In Politics*, aim to sensitize the electorate about the negative consequences of vote-buying and encourage informed voting choices. However, as previous research indicates, exposing these malpractices without implementing robust institutional mechanisms may not be sufficient for restoring trust in electoral processes (Gomez, 2012). The collective evidence from Nigeria and other countries underscores the necessity for comprehensive reforms that address both the symptoms and root causes of vote-buying while promoting civic engagement and institutional transparency. Only through concerted efforts across societal sectors can the integrity of electoral systems be safeguarded against corrupt practices that undermine democracy in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This content analysis sought to explore vote-buying practices against the Electoral Act in Nigeria. The findings highlight the prevalent issue of vote-buying in Nigeria and its implications for democratic governance. The widespread use of monetary inducements by political aspirants, as evidenced by reports from various media outlets, underscores a critical trend where financial incentives overshadow ideological discourse and informed decision-making. This practice tends to compromise the integrity of electoral processes and perpetuate a culture of corruption that erodes public trust in political institutions. The parallels drawn with similar practices in countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Zambia reinforce that vote-buying is a global phenomenon transcending national boundaries. This outcome necessitates comprehensive strategies to address the root causes and implications.

Future research directions should explore the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms to curb vote-buying practices. Given the penalties outlined in the Electoral Act 2019, further investigation into the enforcement of these laws and their impact on electoral integrity is crucial. Additionally, studies could examine the role of media in shaping public perceptions of vote-buying and its influence on voter behavior. Understanding how media campaigns can effectively educate voters about the negative consequences of vote-buying may provide valuable insights for enhancing civic engagement and promoting democratic resilience. Finally, comparative studies that analyze the socio-economic factors contributing to vote-buying could yield important findings that inform policy recommendations and strategies for fostering more transparent electoral processes.

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