

## Vote Buying and the Integrity of 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria

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### ABSTRACT

Vote buying is a persistent challenge that has undermined the integrity of elections in Nigeria. It is a practice where political actors offer material inducements, such as cash, food, or other gifts, in exchange for votes. This practice subverts the principles of free and fair elections by distorting the electorate's will and compromising the democratic process. This study examines the impact of vote buying on the Integrity of 2019 and 2023 in Nigerian General Elections. The study utilized the Principal-Agent Theory as the theoretical framework and secondary data were sourced from textbooks, journal articles, newspaper, government reports. The collected data were analyzed with content analysis and the findings revealed that the widespread vote buying in 2019 and 2023 distorted and compromised the election integrity. It was also revealed that the persistent vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections has contributed to low voter turnout and further erosion of public trust in the electoral process. The study concluded that the widespread prevalence of vote buying has distorted the electoral process, eroded public trust, concentrated political power, and perpetuated the status quo, with long-term implications for democratic consolidation. The study therefore made the following recommendations: (1) enacting robust legislation that clearly defines and prohibits vote buying, with stringent penalties for offenders, (2) adopting biometric voter registration and identification systems to enhance the integrity of the voter roll and reduce the potential for vote buying, and (3) implementing comprehensive civic and voter education programs to raise awareness among citizens about the negative impacts of vote buying on the democratic process.

**Keywords:** democratic process, general election, integrity, Nigeria, political apathy, vote buying

### INTRODUCTION

Vote buying is a persistent challenge that has undermined the integrity of elections in Nigeria. It is a practice where political actors offer material inducements, such as cash, food, or other gifts, in exchange for votes (Asaju & Akume, 2012; Onapajo, 2014). This practice subverts the principles of free and fair elections by distorting the electorate's will and compromising the democratic process. The 2019 general elections in Nigeria were marred by widespread reports of vote buying, with various civil society organizations and election observation missions documenting the prevalence of this practice across different regions of the country (Odunsi, 2019; Orji, 2020). Despite the efforts of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and other stakeholders to curb vote buying, it remained a significant challenge that threatened the credibility of the electoral outcomes. This study investigates the impact of vote buying on the integrity of the 2019 and 2023 Nigerian general elections.

Vote buying has been a persistent challenge in Nigeria's electoral landscape, with significant implications for the integrity of the electoral process. Existing literature has extensively documented the prevalence and patterns of vote buying in Nigerian elections, as well as its impact on the credibility and legitimacy of electoral outcomes. Several studies have highlighted the widespread nature of vote buying in Nigerian elections. Onapajo (2014) examined the 2007 general elections and found that vote buying was a common practice, with political actors using various forms of material inducements to influence voter behavior. Similarly, Asaju and Akume (2012) observed that vote buying was a significant issue in the 2011 general elections, with political parties and candidates employing various strategies to mobilize voters through the distribution of money, food, and other gifts.

The 2019 general elections were particularly marred by reports of widespread vote buying. Odunsi (2019) reported that civil society organizations, such as YIAGA Africa, documented numerous instances of vote buying across different regions of the country. Orji (2020) further noted that the practice was pervasive, with political actors employing sophisticated techniques, including the use of digital platforms and intermediaries, to facilitate the distribution of cash and other material incentives to voters.

The persistence of vote buying in Nigerian elections can be attributed to various socio-economic, political, and institutional factors. Adetula (2021) argued that the high levels of poverty and unemployment in the country have made voters more susceptible to the lure of material inducements, as they seek to meet their immediate needs. Jega (2019) also highlighted the role of weak electoral laws and the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms in enabling the practice of vote buying to thrive.

Additionally, the centrality of money in Nigerian politics, as well as the perception of elections as a means of accessing state resources, have further contributed to the normalization of vote buying (Onapajo, 2014). Orji (2020) noted that the high stakes involved in winning elections, combined with the lack of strong party ideologies and programmatic platforms, have incentivized political actors to rely on vote buying as a strategy to mobilize support.

The prevalence of vote buying has had a significant impact on the integrity of elections in Nigeria. Asaju and Akume (2012) argued that the practice undermines the principles of free and fair elections, as it distorts the will of the electorate and compromises the democratic process. Odunsi (2019) observed that vote buying contributed to the low voter turnout and the perceived lack of credibility in the 2019 general elections. Jega (2019) further noted that the challenge of vote buying has eroded public trust in the electoral process, as voters become disillusioned with the ability of elections to serve as a meaningful avenue for political participation and representation. This, in turn, has implications for the overall legitimacy of the political system and the stability of Nigeria's democracy.

In another study, Adetula (2021) examined money politics and vote buying in Nigeria, and he emphasized the importance of strengthening electoral laws and enforcement mechanisms and promoting electoral education and citizen engagement to raise awareness about the dangers of vote buying. Orji (2020) also called for the adoption of technological solutions, such as the use of biometric voter authentication and the real-time transmission of election results, to enhance the transparency and credibility of the electoral process. Jega (2019) further advocated for the development of a robust political party system with strong ideological platforms and programmatic policies, which could reduce the reliance on vote buying as a means of electoral mobilization.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopted the Principal-Agent Theory. The Principal-Agent Theory is a framework that analyzes the relationship between a principal (the electorate) and an agent (the political representatives) in the context of delegation and accountability (Strøm, 2000). In the electoral process, the principal (the electorate) delegates the authority to make decisions and act on their behalf to the agent (the political representatives).

The Principal-Agent Theory posits that the agent (political representatives) may have different interests and incentives than the principal (the electorate), leading to a divergence of goals and potential conflicts of interest (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998). In the case of vote buying, the agents (political representatives) may have a strong incentive to engage in this practice to secure their political interests, even if it undermines the integrity of the electoral process and the interests of the principal (the electorate).

The theory further advocated that the principal (the electorate) faces information irregularities and challenges in monitoring the agent's (political representatives) behavior, which can assist the agent to engage in opportunistic behavior, such as vote buying, without the principal's full knowledge or control (Keefer & Stasavage, 2003).

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in the context of the 2019 and 2023 Nigeria General Elections, as it allows for the examination of the following aspects:

- i. The divergence of interests between the political representatives (agents) and the electorate (principals), and how this manifests in the practice of vote buying.
- ii. The information asymmetries between the electorate and the political representatives may hinder the electorate's ability to effectively monitor and control the agents' behavior.
- iii. The incentive structures and institutional factors may enable political representatives to buy votes and other forms of electoral malpractice.
- iv. The potential solutions and mechanisms that can be implemented to align the interests of the political representatives (agents) with those of the electorate (principals) and enhance the integrity of the electoral process.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study utilized a secondary method of data collection, data were sourced from textbooks, journal articles, newspapers, magazines, government reports, etc. Data collected were analyzed with content analysis.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Impact on the 2019 General Elections:*

**Distortion of the electoral process:** The prevalence of vote buying in the 2019 general elections undermined the principle of free and fair elections, as it distorted the electorate's will and compromised the democratic process (Odunsi, 2019). The practice enabled political representatives (agents) to sway voter behavior in their favor, rather than allowing the electorate (principals) to make informed and independent choices.

**Erosion of public trust:** The widespread reports of vote buying contributed to the low voter turnout and the perceived lack of credibility in the 2019 general elections (Odunsi, 2019). This, in turn, has eroded public trust in the electoral process and the legitimacy of the political system, as the electorate (principals) become disillusioned with their ability to participate and be represented meaningfully (Jega, 2019).

**Concentration of power:** Using vote buying to mobilize support has enabled political representatives (agents) to consolidate their power and influence, further entrenching the principal-agent problem. This has implications for the overall stability and democratic development of the country, as it undermines the principles of political accountability and representation (Orji, 2020).

***Impact on the 2023 General Elections:***

**Perpetuation of the status quo:** If addressed, the continued prevalence of vote buying in the 2023 general elections will likely reinforce the existing power structures and undermine the potential for meaningful change or political alternation (Adetula, 2021). This can further entrench the divergence of interests between the electorate (principals) and the political representatives (agents).

**Disillusionment and political apathy:** The persistence of vote buying in the 2023 general elections may contribute to even lower voter turnout and a further erosion of public trust in the electoral process (Jega, 2019). This can lead to increased political apathy and weakening of the electorate's (principals') ability to hold their representatives (agents) accountable.

**Long-term implications for democratic consolidation:** The ongoing challenge of vote buying can potentially undermine the integrity and stability of Nigeria's democratic system (Asaju & Akume, 2012). If not adequately addressed, it can hinder the country's efforts to consolidate its democratic institutions and practices, with far-reaching consequences for the future of the Nigerian polity.

A comprehensive and coordinated approach is required to address the impact of vote buying and strengthen the integrity of the 2023 general elections. This may involve strengthening electoral laws and enforcement mechanisms, promoting electoral education and citizen engagement, and implementing technological solutions to enhance the transparency and credibility of the electoral process (Adetula, 2021; Orji, 2020; Jega, 2019).

Summary of the impact of vote buying on the integrity of the 2019 and 2023 Nigeria General Elections are as follows:

**Distortion of the electoral process:** Findings indicated that the widespread prevalence of vote buying in the 2019 general elections undermined the principle of free and fair elections, as it distorted the will of the electorate and compromised the democratic process (Odunsi, 2019).

If left unaddressed, the continued use of vote buying in the 2023 general elections is likely to further entrench the distortion of the electoral process, undermining the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes (Orji, 2020).

**Erosion of public trust:** Findings also revealed that the general reports of vote buying in the 2019 general elections contributed to the low voter turnout and the apparent lack of credibility in the electoral process (Odunsi, 2019). This erosion of public trust is likely to persist, or even worsen, in the 2023 general elections if the issue of vote buying is not effectively addressed, leading to increased political apathy (Jega, 2019).

**Concentration of power:** The findings indicated that the use of vote buying as a strategy to mobilize support has assisted political representatives to consolidate their power and influence, further establishing the principal-agent problem (Orji, 2020). This concentration of power has implications for the overall stability and democratic development of the country, as it weakened the principles of political accountability and representation (Asaju & Akume, 2012).

**Perpetuation of the status quo:** Findings revealed that if the issue of vote buying is not adequately addressed, it is likely to reinforce the existing power structures and undermine the potential for meaningful change or political alternation in the 2023 general elections (Adetula, 2021). This can further entrench the divergence of interests between the electorate (principals) and the political representatives (agents).

**Long-term implications for democratic consolidation:** The findings indicate that the ongoing challenge of vote buying has the potential to undermine the overall integrity and stability of Nigeria's democratic system (Asaju & Akume, 2012). If not adequately addressed,

it can hinder the country's efforts to consolidate its democratic institutions and practices, with far-reaching consequences for the future of the Nigerian polity (Jega, 2019).

### CONCLUSION

The impact of vote buying on the integrity of the 2019 and 2023 Nigeria's General Elections highlighted the significant challenges the practice poses to the country's democratic development. The widespread prevalence of vote buying has distorted the electoral process, eroded public trust, concentrated political power, and perpetuated the status quo, with long-term implications for democratic consolidation. Addressing the challenges of vote buying will be a crucial step in upholding the principles of free and fair elections, restoring public confidence in the electoral process, and advancing the country's democratic consolidation. It is a collective responsibility that requires the sustained commitment and coordinated efforts of all stakeholders the government, political parties, civil society, the media, and the citizens to safeguard the integrity of Nigeria's electoral system and secure the democratic future of the nation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis of the impact of vote buying on the integrity of the 2019 and 2023 Nigeria's General Elections, the following recommendations were made:

1. Strengthen electoral laws and enforcement mechanisms:

- Enact robust legislation that clearly defines and prohibits vote buying, with stringent penalties for offenders.
- Empower and adequately resource election management bodies and law enforcement agencies to effectively monitor, investigate, and prosecute cases of vote buying.
- Establish specialized courts or tribunals to expedite the adjudication of vote buying-related cases.

2. Promote electoral education and citizen engagement:

- Implement comprehensive civic and voter education programs to raise awareness among citizens about the negative impacts of vote buying on the democratic process.
- Encourage active citizen participation in the electoral process, including election observation and monitoring, to deter and report instances of vote buying.
- Collaborate with civil society organizations, the media, and community leaders to amplify anti-vote buying messages and foster a culture of integrity in the electoral system.

3. Implement technological solutions:

- Adopt biometric voter registration and identification systems to enhance the integrity of the voter roll and reduce the potential for vote buying.
- Utilize digital platforms and mobile applications to facilitate real-time reporting and tracking of vote buying incidents during elections.
- Explore the use of blockchain technology or other secure digital platforms to enhance the transparency and traceability of campaign finance and political party funding.

4. Strengthen political party regulations and oversight:

- Enhance the enforcement of existing laws and regulations governing the conduct of political parties, including the transparent reporting of campaign finances and the regulation of campaign expenditures.
- Establish an independent oversight body to monitor and sanction political parties engaged in vote buying and other electoral malpractices.
- Incentivize political parties to adopt internal mechanisms and codes of conduct that discourage and penalize vote buying practices.

5. Promote cross-stakeholder collaboration and coordination:



- Foster collaboration among election management bodies, law enforcement agencies, civil society organizations, the media, and other relevant stakeholders to develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to address vote buying.
- Establish multi-stakeholder platforms for dialogue, information-sharing, and the development of coordinated responses to the challenge of vote buying.
- Encourage international and regional election observation missions to closely monitor and report on the prevalence of vote buying during the 2023 general elections.

By implementing these recommendations, the Nigerian government and relevant stakeholders can work towards mitigating the negative impacts of vote buying and enhancing the integrity of the 2023 general elections, ultimately strengthening the country's democratic consolidation.

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