



## Purchased Legitimacy and Development in Nigeria: An Analysis of Why People Sell Their Votes

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55248/gengpi.5.0124.0356>

### ABSTRACT

The article explores the growing phenomenon of vote-trading in Nigeria, focusing on how it affects the country's democratization. The article employs the duo of rational choice theory and social action theory to provide theoretical credence for why voters sell their votes. Findings show that socioeconomic variables, such as unemployment and poverty, have a major role in vote trading. Political mistrust and flawed election system further contribute to the prevalence of this democratic backslide. It observed that the implications includes but not limited to undermining sustainable growth, eroding democratic values, encouraging political apathy, and jeopardizing election integrity. The paper regrettably concludes that democracy in Nigeria deviates from democratic ideal of popular sovereignty, it is rather epitomized as a government off the people, bought the people and for some people. However, passing the National Electoral Offences Commission (NEOC) bill into law, judicial reforms, and strengthened anti-corruption efforts are among the most immediate actions recommended in the paper. The recommendations seek to improve voter vulnerability, increase electoral integrity, and promote a more responsible and responsive governance system in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Vote buying, Democracy, Poverty, and Elections

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria attained its twenty-fifth year of unbroken democratic rule this year 2024. Meanwhile, Nigeria's democracy, which is anticipated to consolidate, has persisted on a perilous path of regress. Vote trading has become ingrained in Nigerian electoral culture. Busari, (2020) remarked that electorates are left with the bi-polar choice of stomach or socioeconomic development infrastructure. Poverty has consistently put electorates at the mercy of wealthy politicians, predisposing them to all forms of electoral inducement. To support this argument, Nigerian politicians at political rallies frequently and openly chant "see and buy," a prominent political mantra in Nigeria connoting vote buying. The mantra is an open endorsement of vote trading – the practice of giving incentives in exchange for votes before or during elections. This practice is evident at all levels of elections in Nigeria; during each political party's primary elections conducted to elect the party's candidate and a growing electoral culture at all other elections. Fortunes are often expended to secure victory at the poll at each stage of election in the country.

While describing the "see and buy" voting approach, Olaniyan, (2020) emphasised that proof of thumb-printed ballot paper is required before payment for votes cast. Meanwhile, purchased electoral victory have no tendencies to positively improve the social and economic conditions of the electorates as rich political merchants will dominate the realms of power, argued Berberoglu, (2019) and inefficient government will be enthroned. High percentage of people's participation in elections at any level of government in Nigeria cannot be labelled as a direct desire to exercise the constitutional right to vote and be voted for during an election, rather, an opportunity to acquire their own portion of the wealth of democracy from political parties during the election, by and large from the national treasury.

Regrettably, all of Nigeria's major political parties have been accused of the crime at one point or the other. The commercialization of politics has enthroned poverty as a strategy for electoral accomplishment in Nigeria. This disturbing trend manifests through the strategic outspending of competing opponents, turning financial prowess into a decisive factor in swaying voters and securing victory at the polls. The electoral landscape becomes a battleground where financial resources rather than genuine policy discussions often determine election outcome, posing a significant challenge to the democratic principles in Nigeria.

Electoral inducement is not a new phenomenon in Nigerian politics, it emerges from the age long distribution of incentives such as basic and daily consumer goods like water, kerosene, and a quantity of food materials and other basic needs of the electorates before election to the contemporary Election Day exchanges of cash for votes. While vote buying is a rape on Nigeria democratic system, Mohammed, (2020) argued that socio-economic factors such as poverty, unemployment and illiteracy creates a cosy accommodation for vote buying and selling in Nigeria's democracy. Election should serve as a means for evaluating elected officials but the political class has continued to influence the process to their own benefits. To support this, Nwagwu et al., (2022) added that the essence of elections is to provide the people the opportunity to participate in all electoral processes to elect their leaders. Stressing that elections periods present ample chances for performance evaluation of the governments' programmes or activities (at all levels) centred on level of

accomplishment of their campaign promises on the security of lives and properties, education, economy, agriculture, and public health delivery, the standard of living, infrastructural facilities, and the war against corruption, poverty, and unemployment. Specifically, elections are cardinal process through which electorates legitimately allocate political powers to aspirants of elective public office.

Against this backdrop, the study investigates the factors prompting the electorates to sell their votes, and why transactional democracy is perceived as a norm in Nigeria by examining the motivations behind this disturbing phenomenon. The article shed light on the socio-economic, political, and psychological dynamics that contribute to the acceptance of vote-selling as a prevalent practice. This investigation is crucial for understanding the erosion of democratic values as it explores the interplay of factors that have led to transactional democracy to become a prevailing norm in Nigeria.

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## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Social Action Theory and Rational Choice Theory guided the conduct of this study. Action refers to behavior possessed of a subjective meaning (Campbell, 1996). Social action theory afford us a better understanding of actions behind human behaviour, which may be 'traditional', 'affective' 'value' or 'rational' (Oyedokun, 2016). The theory is a useful tool in the explanation of human causal regularities (Etzrodt, 2005). An action is social in as much as there are subjective connotations attached to it by the acting individual or group, it equally factors in the behaviour of others and is thereby oriented in its course (Prosch, 2004). According to Max Weber, human beings tailor their actions in accordance with social contexts and how these actions affect the behaviour of others around them. The political behaviour or the electorates in general and the voting decision is often socially motivated, these behaviour also have social implications on the polity and its inhabitants. Social factors like religion, tribe, political affiliation, incentives, etc. plays a dominant role in the Nigerian Electoral process and can influence political support in favour or against candidates and political parties.

Individuals are seen through the lense of the rational choice theory as being rational, self-calculating, self-interested and self-maximizing, he/she will therefore find it difficult to participate in collective action or work towards public good, unless the public good would lead ultimately to the attainment of their personal interests (Ogu, 2013). Voters are fully aware of each candidate's likely ideals or likely behaviour upon assumption of office, they often vote for who therefore is likely to maximize their interest via patronage (Desposato, 2002). In the light of a decision-making scenario, an actor considers a set of options, assigning consequences to them, orders these consequences according to their importance and value, and makes a choice among possible action (Burns & Roszkowska, 2016). The theory seeks to connect the inner world of the individual to the external world, pinpointing that humans are often out to maximize their benefits, pursue gains and minimize their costs through deliberate decisions (Adanali, 2016). Human as rational actors and participants in the political process make decisions that they assume is in their best interest. However, in most developing countries these decisions might be premised on myopic thinking which births immediate gains while serving as a ticket to extend the prevailing societal decade and making politics to serve the purpose of enriching a few and not for developmental purposes. These two theories enhance our understanding of the factors responsible for the sales and purchase of the legitimate voting rights of the populace.

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## DRIVERS OF VOTE TRADING IN NIGERIA

### *Socio-Economic Factors*

People who sell their votes frequently have socioeconomic factors such as poverty, unemployment, and economic uncertainty as the primary motivators (Jaja & Agumagu, 2019; Olawole, 2020). In many cases, individuals living in poverty may lack access to necessities such as food, clean water, and healthcare. Politicians often exploit this vulnerability by promising essential services like uninterrupted access to water, and free medical care among others if elected in exchange for votes. This was evident when the former governor of Ekiti, Peter Ayodele Fayose made the issue of stomach infrastructure a policy of high concern in the state. Stomach Infrastructure is a system whereby politicians give the electorates the dividends of democracy in cash, or in a form of basic needs like water, kerosene, mobile phones, and food materials like portioned rice, and beans among others. Such practice is not only prevalent in Ekiti State but the whole the country.

However, the vocabulary of "*stomach infrastructure*" gained more prominence in Nigerian politics after the Ekiti State governorship elections in 2014. The economic desperation of impoverished voters can lead them to accept monetary incentives offered by political candidates, viewing it as a means to address their immediate needs. In addition, the unabated crisis of unemployment in Nigeria continues to accommodate the desperate search for economic opportunities to meet their immediate need. Socioeconomic inequalities create a cosy accommodation for the buying and selling of votes. At a point where ballot snatching and thuggery are becoming less fashionable, poverty seems to have remained an intentional strategy in Nigerian politics and political gladiators are purposive in maintaining the new-age electoral weapon. Olawole, (2020) observed that the situation creates an opportunity for clientelist relationships between voters and politicians, where pre-election rewards are used to mobilize electoral support among the poor.

### *Political Factors*

The predisposition of the electorates to sell votes is notably fuelled by concerns about the perceived inefficiency of the electoral system, corruption, and a lack of trust in political representation. Widespread allegations and experiences of electoral system manipulation by politicians contribute to a favourable environment for vote buying/selling. The Nigerian electorates hold the belief that their votes make no electoral impact on the system owing to widespread corruption, rigging of elections and lack of transparency in the electoral system. Similarly, the electorates hold the perception that elected officials do not genuinely represent the interests and needs of the voters. Adojutelegan, (2018) added that bad governance and electoral malpractices influence the

electorates to sell their votes. When people feel disconnected from the political process and that their votes do not count, they may be more willing to engage in vote-selling, seeing it as a way to extract some personal benefit from a system they view as “*not working*”.

### ***Psychological Factors***

The psychological factors to explain why people sell their votes is categorized into two; short-term thinking and the impact of civic education on voters' behaviour. Short-term thinking is when individuals facing immediate financial needs or economic hardships prioritize quick monetary gain over the long-term consequences of their actions. This short-sighted approach may lead them to engage in vote-selling as a means of addressing immediate financial challenges. Also, civic education plays a pivotal role in shaping how individuals participate in the electoral process. A lack of civic education can lead to voters making ignorant decisions because they may not know how important it is to maintain the integrity of the electoral process. This ignorance can lead to a mentality that places more importance on immediate gains — like selling of votes — than on considering the larger consequences for the democratic process. (Nwagwu et al., 2022) added that the most vulnerable group are those who are economically deprived because they are more likely to be influenced by financial rewards or attractive incentives, frequently without thinking through the long-term effects of this kind of unsolicited actions. These voters—characterized by poor educational attainment, hunger, and idleness—make rash judgments because they are motivated by the immediate satisfaction of social demands, even when the advantages are minimal. Thus, people unintentionally jeopardize their future by putting themselves through a life of adversity, deceitful strategies, and intimidation engineered by political gamblers as a result of their short-sightedness.

To address this, deliberate measures must be made to improve civic education stating the long-term repercussions of vote-selling, and encourage Nigerian voters to participate in politics with more knowledge and responsibility.

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## **IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND DEVELOPMENT.**

In Nigeria, vote-buying has detrimental effects on the growth and integrity of elections. First of all, it compromises the integrity of the political process by altering the true representation of voters' choices, creating opportunities for manipulation, and weakening the transparency and justice that are essential to a legitimate election. Second, it erodes democratic ideals by undermining the foundation of democracy, voting as a civic responsibility, and the norms of free and fair elections. Furthermore, vote-trading may result in the election of politicians who place a higher priority on short-term advantages than on skill and long-term development pledges, which has a substantial influence on development. This may lead to leaders who put short-term gains ahead of long-term development objectives, which would be detrimental. Additionally, vote trading undermines the civic engagement required for a strong democracy by encouraging voter apathy and disenchanting voters with the election process.

Political finance plays a pivotal role in shaping and significantly influencing the dynamics among political parties, politicians, party members, and the broader electorate (Walecki, 2008). The profound connection between party financing and corruption underscores the critical importance of not overlooking the former, as doing so may inadvertently facilitate the latter (Adetula, 2008). Campaigns have evolved into platforms wherein candidates partake in extensive mobilization and manipulation of electoral regulations through inducement and political intimidation (Bratton, 2008).

Vote buying exerts a profound influence on the political landscape, emerging as a pivotal determinant in the participation of individuals in electoral politics and shaping the manner in which such participation occurs (Adetula, 2008). This phenomenon has given rise to an environment marked by gender inequality, where monetary politics, thuggery, and violence flourish, impeding the ability of women to compete, despite the occasional provision of nomination form waivers for women and youth (Best, 2008). Furthermore, it discourages qualified and willing citizens from engaging in the electoral process, thereby undermining the inclusivity of political participation (Onuoha & Okafor, 2020).

Undoubtedly, an electoral system lacking in credibility and marred by vote buying is incapable of fostering a transparent and accountable government (Ojo, 2008). Genuine citizen involvement through unfettered political participation is imperative for achieving the desired levels of answerability and accountability (Nwankwo, 2018). As long as the media continues to celebrate financial prowess in politics, the perpetuation of money politics remains a distinct possibility (Ojo, 2008).

The deleterious effects of vote buying extend beyond mere public distrust in the electoral system among Nigerians (Adetula, 2008). Such acts compromise the legitimacy of electoral outcomes, providing opposition parties with grounds to suspect fraud even in the absence of other forms of manipulation such as ballot stuffing, theft, and tampering with vote tallies (Bratton, 2008). Consequently, vote buying undermines the efficacy of the political process, particularly the ability of the principal electoral body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to facilitate free and fair elections (Aiyede, 2008). This, in turn, renders state resources expended on the electoral exercise futile, as outcomes become predetermined by the highest bidder, casting doubt on the credibility of the entire process (Oduntan, Azeem & Oladipo, 2023). Corruption, as evidenced in the prevalence of money politics, subverts the electoral system, shifting the focus from the performance of office holders to financial considerations (Aiyede, 2008). Vote buying is closely associated with escalating levels of poverty and unemployment, stemming from social dislocation and economic crises (Dickson, Danjuma & Ugwoke, 2019). Both the sellers and non-sellers of votes are vulnerable to the repercussions of compromised leadership, perpetuating a cycle of bad governance (Onuoha & Ojo, 2018). The nexus between vote buying and developmental challenges in Nigeria is evident in widespread project abandonment, inadequate infrastructure, and essential service deficiencies such as healthcare and water supply (Dickson, Danjuma & Ugwoke, 2019). Corruption further distorts and diverts the objectives of government welfare programs, posing significant hurdles to development (Aiyede, 2008).

Vote buying has the potential to compromise security operatives, fostering a sense of desperation among political actors due to the zero-sum nature of elections in Nigeria (Olaniyan, 2020: 393). Its cumulative effects contribute to election-related conflicts, escalating into violence that poses threats to

national security (Adeyi, 2008). Unregulated access to public funds by a select few at the expense of the populace creates conditions conducive to oppression, rebellion, resistance, instability, and insecurity (Smash, 2008).

Money politics begets unresponsive leadership, where the desires of political godfathers supersede the aspirations of the people, eroding the essence of democracy (Ayoade, 2008). The ruling class employs various incentives to manipulate the electorate in an autocratic manner, obstructing candidate selection and cabinet formation, thus hindering the democratic process (Oduntan, Azeez & Oladipo, 2023). Godfathers wield significant influence, imposing candidates and dictating government actions, leading to a purchased legitimacy that deviates from the principles of a genuinely earned mandate (Vande, 2020).

Vote buying undermines the effectiveness of the democratic system, eroding democratic ideals and fostering mistrust, political apathy, and authoritarian tendencies (Walecki, 2008: 11). The ramifications of vote buying extend beyond immediate electoral damages, encompassing delayed impacts that may culminate in anarchy when trust in the electoral process is eroded (Essien & Oghuvbu, 2021).

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## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING VOTE TRADING

This paper recommends the following to address the identified challenges to enhance the integrity and effectiveness of the electoral process. There is a pressing need for the speedy passage, concurrence, and Presidential assent to the National Electoral Offences Commission (NEOC) bill, which is currently languishing in the House of Representatives. This legislative measure holds the potential to strengthen the legal framework governing electoral conduct and provide a dedicated mechanism for addressing electoral offenses. To deter malpractices, it is essential to institute stiffer punishments for individuals engaged in various forms of electoral offenses. A robust legal deterrent can serve as a formidable tool in curbing illicit activities during elections. Meanwhile, a comprehensive overhaul of the judicial system is recommended to expedite the adjudication process for electoral offenses. This restructuring would contribute to the timely resolution of disputes, fostering public confidence in the legal mechanisms available to address electoral grievances.

Furthermore, the National Orientation Agency (NOA) should be revitalized to fulfil its mandate of enlightening the public on civic responsibilities, ethical conduct, and the significance of active participation in the electoral process. Public awareness campaigns can play a pivotal role in fostering a well-informed and politically conscious citizenry.

Implementation of well-coordinated poverty alleviation schemes as a means to address socio-economic factors contributing to vote-buying and corruption, aiming to create a more level playing field and reduce vulnerability to electoral malpractices. Finally, the anti-corruption war should be intensified to foster a climate of accountability and integrity within the political sphere, with robust measures serving as deterrents and contributing to the overall improvement of the electoral system.

Implementing these recommendations requires a collaborative effort from all concerned stakeholders, including lawmakers, the judiciary, civil society, political parties, and the electorates.

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## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the foundation of the social contract between the Government and the people must be built upon trust, freely given, and subject to withdrawal, with the right to rule contingent on public confidence expressed through popular sovereignty. Regrettably, the prevailing situation in Nigeria deviates from this ideal, epitomized by a democracy characterized as *government off the people, bought the people, and for some people*. This characterization implies that the government does not represent the people's interests but rather controlled by certain individuals or groups who hold significant sway over political system and processes. Furthermore, it explains the disconnect between the government and the people.

Having thoroughly examined the implications of purchased legitimacy and its repercussions on the Nigerian State, it is evident that vote buying contributes significantly to issues such as poverty, insecurity, corruption, underdevelopment, unresponsive leadership, and political apathy. Recommended measures, including the enactment of the National Electoral Offences Commission (NEOC) bill, political reforms, an intensified anti-corruption campaign, and poverty reduction initiatives, seek to address these challenges and foster a more democratic and accountable governance system.

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