

Vote Buying: A Critical Election Risk Factor in Nigeria

By

ODUNTAN, Alani Abdulsalam

PhD Political Science, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

Email: lania1964@gmail.com

Prof. AZEEZ Ademola

Department of Political Science, Afe Babalola University, Ado Ekiti, Nigeria

Email: ademolaazeez@abuad.edu.ng

Dr OLADIPO Temidayo

Department of Political Science, Afe Babalola University Ado Ekiti Nigeria

Email- temmiede@abuad.edu.ng

Abstract

In modern democracies, elections give a forum for the public to select their leaders. In Nigeria, it has become an avenue through which wealthy, corrupt political class perpetrate the practice of vote buying against both fellow candidates and the general public. Consequently, it is the aim of this paper to emphasise the risk poses by this ugly phenomenon of vote buying to the electoral process in Nigeria so as to enlighten the voting public on the consequences of the practice. This study is built upon the foundation of Social Exchange Theory and General Incentive Model and concludes that vote buying in any way is detrimental to the electoral process and ultimately to democracy in the Nigerian state.

Keywords: Vote buying, electoral, electorate, election risk, INEC

Introduction

Election has been seen as one of the veritable options of transition and succession in any democratic system. As a principal process of representative democracy, elections are supposedly the only means to decide who holds legislative or executive power (Lindberg, 2009). Therefore, election is keenly viewed by scholars as an integral part of democracy, in which some see it as synonymous to democracy (Collier and Mahon 1993; Coppedge 2005; Munck 2001; Sartori 1984; Schedler 2001). Election, regardless of its nature is always competitive in nature because the available seats of power are limited hence it provides means by which competition in society can be channeled into a constructive process with common rules to choose representatives of the people. Robust democratic institutions are usually understood as the ultimate guarantor for social peace. However, since electoral processes are intrinsically about the attainment of political power, often in high-stake contexts, elections — as a process of competition for power can be catalysts of conflict.

Since representative democracy affords the citizens the privilege of selecting at regular intervals those who will direct the affairs of the state through periodic credible elections, election according to Abah and Nwokwu, (2015) is the process of selecting leaders or representatives of the people through the votes of eligible electorates. From the above description, elections are expected to be competitive, free and fair both substantively and procedurally, and in which the ability of the elected representatives to exercise decision making power is subject to the rule of law and usually moderated by a constitution that emphasizes the protection of the rights and freedom of individuals (Wikipedia, 2000; Abah and Nwokwu, 2015).

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It is also worthy of note that election represents the main process through which people exercise their constituent power and sovereignty. The people decide at periodic intervals in order to determine who gets what, when, how and why. These efforts of deciding who gets what and how in the politics of the country had often led to election violence across the thirty-six states of Nigeria and other countries of the world (Agena, 2007).

In order for elections to express the will of the electorate, such election must be free and fair, and choices of voters at various voting points and the voting process must be secret and unfettered with. Hence, several factors continually militate against such attainments in Nigeria, particularly since the emergence of civil rule in 1999 (YIAGA, 2018).

However, the electoral process in Nigeria where the political leadership of the country is determined has been seen as a market space where huge amount of money and other materials are traded for the votes of the electorates. This has become a nightmare confronting the electoral system as the tempo has been heightened by the wealthy and corrupt political class in Nigeria. The intriguing fact about this emerging phenomenon in the electoral process is the expansion away from money to other kind things such as appointments to a section of the electorates to buy their votes, implementation of public amenities to some sections of the society to buy their vote, sharing of food and other items during the electoral periods to influence the vote of the electorates. The implementation of the promotion and appointments of civil servants at the time of the electoral duration, with the aim of influencing votes.

However, it is unfortunate that the only renowned mechanism through which the citizens determine their political leadership in Nigeria is being bastardised by this scenario being perpetuated by both the political class and some impoverished and uninformed voters who cooperate either voluntarily or involuntarily with political candidates who are in a do-or-die situation to emerge as the elected leaders of the country.

The Nigerian electoral process as evident in past elections is fraught with vote buying, ballot box snatching, rigging, violence, etc. (Adigun, 2019; Lucky, 2014; Unufe & Justin-Ugo, 2019). Out of these electoral mishaps, vote buying in recent times seem to have taken the centre stage (Lucky, 2014). This is also affirmed by Olatunji (2018) who stated that “the days are gone where rampant and widespread ballot-box snatching, political thuggery and figures falsification were the order of the day”. These days, political and electoral candidates influence the electorate to vote for them by offering incentives either in cash or kind. A reason for this could be the very high poverty level in the Nigerian state. It is reported that Nigeria still maintains its position as the poverty capital of the world with 93.9% of its people living below the poverty line (Uzoho, 2021). This position puts its people at the mercy of political candidates who are custodians of the state’s treasury.

With the prevalence of the vote-buying syndrome in the Nigeria electoral process, there seems to be a looming threat to the Nigerian democracy. The buying of votes from the electorate by political candidates poses a major threat to the credibility of elections and ultimately could weaken democracy in the state. This eventually remains a critical threat factor to the electoral process and if not identified and profiled early, it could lead to a derailment of the democratic process in Nigeria. It is based on the realities of the above fact that this paper therefore aimed to evaluate this recent “pandemic” in the Nigerian electoral process by interrogating the factors that facilitate vote buying and establish how it remained a critical electoral threat in Nigeria, identify the various methods of vote buying before and during election and examine its implication on the credibility of elections conducted within the Nigerian borders.

Conceptual Clarifications

Vote Buying

Vote buying is a concept that is yet to have a given universal definition in the literature. This is because scholars look at it from various political, cultural, and historical contexts as it relates to them. Despite their different outlooks on the concept, they still provide the same meaning of the term. Yoon (2020) asserted that vote buying is a multidimensional phenomenon which involves numerous stakeholders such as voters, political parties, candidates and their agents. According to Guardado and Wantchekon (2017), vote buying is a type of electoral corruption in which people buy votes in order to boost their chances of winning elections. It is a contract or an auction where the voters sell their votes to the highest bidder (Lucky, 2014).

Bratton (2008) described major elections in Africa as a resemblance of vote buying, as many elections in Africa are characterized by vote buying, as he established a link between poverty and the effects of vote-buying as voter turnout, electoral choices and partisan loyalties are more likely to be influenced by financial inducements of poor people. While long viewed as a corrosive and corrupting influence on Nigerian politics.

Another dimension to vote buying is from the perspectives of clientelism. According Saffu (2003) vote buying is regarded as a variety of clientelism in the sense that political class would distribute rewards either in terms of appointments, awards of contracts, siting of government projects, distribution scholarships and many other politically motivated rewards, incentives and cash to influence and mobilize electorates to vote in their favor. In a similar vein Valera et al (2004) see vote buying as the provision of material goods in exchange for electoral support. This description of vote buying exposed the actors involved and the relationship pattern. The actors involve are the patrons who are seeking to build and sustain power while the other actors are the clients looking for protection, access to benefits and services, or insurance against risk (Stokes, 2007).

Taking a cursory look at election, it is discovered that all elections are forms of transactions of different kind, as electorates are believed to trade their vote for certain outcomes which are of tremendous important to them such as infrastructures like better schools, roads, hospitals, lower taxes, special policies that favour them and so on (Schaffer, 2002). This is the reality of election. Invariably there exist two connotations; vote buying and vote trading. A vote could be said to be bought or sold depending on whether the electorate adopts the perspective of the candidate, while vote trading targets electoral choices and participation (Schaffer, 2005): in other words it is well established that there are vote buyers and sellers.

Mares and Young (2016) described vote buying as vote inducement, and they classified it into two categories called positive and negative inducements. Positive inducements according to Mares and Young (2016) are a category where vote buying involves incentives such as money, goods or favours with the aim at voting in favour of a particular candidate or political party. While the negative inducements are threat of sanctions on the individual's voting behaviour. Such sanctions as economic or threat of cutting voters off from benefits on which they are enjoying, or removing them from their ancestral land or residences, violence which include assault and death.

In the same vein, IDEA, (2017) described vote buying as the use of state and public sector powers and resources by politicians or political parties to strengthen their election prospects. It can also be seen as a situation in which voters are given little material commodities such as money or food just before an election in the hopes of gaining their votes (Schaffer,

2007). Adigun (2019) described vote buying as any sort of monetary, material, or promissory incentive or reward used by a candidate, political party, agent, or supporter to persuade a voter to vote or refrain from voting in order to increase the chances of a specific candidate winning an election. These definitions reveal the simple idea that any inducement made to citizens during election periods so as to influence them to either vote in favour of a given political candidate or refrain from voting is regarded as vote buying. Based on this, vote buying can be seen as the purchase of the civil right of the electorate by political candidates using the states' resources to subtly compel them to vote in their favour so as to win a given election. It is simply the use of both monetary and material resources belonging to the state by political candidates who are supposed to be faithful custodians of these resources to induce citizens to vote for them during an election.

It is pertinent to emphasise that due to the increased uncertainty of victory, vote buying is more likely to occur in locations where electoral rivalry is fierce (Kramon, 2013). The fierceness of the competition amongst political candidates compels them to seek mechanisms they can employ to have competitive edge over their counterparts. This scenario is likened to what occurs in the corporate world. Political candidates import the competition mentality in the corporate world into elections so as to win over their counterparts. And in doing so, they developed the act of vote buying.

Election Risk

Gani (2015) sees election as the hub or integral parts of democracy, but is besieged with violence which unarguably defeats the purpose of democratic governance. The study also examines election risk from the surge of arm proliferation, the acquisitions of arm which Gani, (2015) described as synonymous to possessions of voter's card. This trend has been a common phenomenon in Nigeria. To the extent that election periods are often fraught with fear, anxiety and desperation amongst the political class. This study described election in Nigeria as war due to the fact that political parties, candidates and supporters acquired their own personal security, militias and party thugs and were armed to carry out electoral violence. The above definition focused on electoral risk from the viewpoint of electoral violence as it further reveals how risky elections can be from the point of physical violence and coercive intimidation directly tied to impending electoral contest or to an announced electoral result.

Election risk as defined by Oduntan (2022), is the likelihood of the election process being interrupted by undesirable and damaging behaviours of people or organizations. It simply refers to the possibility of violence occurring before, during, or after the election. Election risk is defined as the probability of unfavourable events occurring during elections. Various factors such as electoral violence, election rigging, vote buying, ballot box snatching, etc. have the potential of disrupting the election process and as a result constitute the possible risks an election process can face.

From the foregoing, it could be established that electoral risks are not limited to violence but any unwarranted events or situation that can thwart the outcome of an election and can mar the electoral process. Such situations that could prevent the natural course or circumvent the flow of the process, and such can make the process danger prone, hence making the electoral process risky to involve in.

Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory

The social exchange theory was propounded by an American sociologist, George C. *Res Militaris*, vol.13, n°3, March Spring 2023

Homans in his essay, "Social Behaviour as Exchange" in 1958. According to Social Exchange Theory, people's activities are the outcome of cost-benefit calculations as they try to connect with society and the environment. If a person feels that they can get more from an activity than they lose by engaging in it, they will engage in it. In contrast, if a person believes the cost will outweigh the gain, the conduct will be avoided. If someone does not value sustaining a connection, or if they are skeptical of others and do not anticipate them to follow through with the reward, the balance shifts toward expecting a lesser value for any social trade.

In reference to this study, with 93.9% of the Nigerian populace being under the poverty line, it is very likely they would engage in vote buying. This is because the money they would be paid in exchange for their votes seems highly beneficial to them. Being paid N2,000 or N10,000, or otherwise in a day just for the sale of their votes, seems highly beneficial to these citizens who live below the poverty line. The short-term benefit they receive blinds their eyes from seeing the long-term cost or implication they incur upon themselves when the wrong set of leaders emerge.

2.3.2 General Incentive Model

This model or theory was developed by Clark and Wilson (1961). According to this model, the knowledge or awareness of the kinds of incentives to be received by employees of an organisation will influence their level of cooperation. The incentive system made available by an organisation explains the internal and external events happening in such organisation. In the opinion of Clark and Wilson (1961), all organisations performing optimally must provide "tangible and intangible incentives" to their employees in order to induce maximum performance. Adapting this model from the corporate world into the political space, the incentive system used by political parties influences or coerces voters to sell their votes in their favour. When voters are aware of the benefits attached to the sale of their votes, it automatically compels them to want to do so. Baidoo et al. (2018) asserted that these incentives are targeted at the poor and/or less educated voters who might be oppositional to them. They do this to ensure "negative vote buying" which deals with the reduction of votes for the opposition party and induce "turnout buying" which is concerned with increased votes for the party buying the votes.

Vote Buying in Nigerian Elections

In Nigeria, vote buying has long been synonymous to the country's money politics. Adigun (2019) revealed that vote buying is at the core of money politics in Nigeria. This means that the issue of vote buying gave rise to a new aspect of politics called money politics as revealed by various scholars (Davies, 2005; Ojo, 2006; Walecki, 2006). Vote buying can take many forms, including the offer of cash, the purchase of permanent voter cards (PVCs), food products, and willful breaches of the Electoral Act by politicians. Vote buying, however, has been recorded at several periods of the political cycle, most notably during voter registration, nomination period, campaigning, and the day of election (Matenga, 2016).

The intention of the perpetrators of this act is sometimes aimed at persuading electorates to vote in certain ways, or not to vote in the first instance. This is described by Mungai (2017) as strategies to alter turnout which is focus on either mobilising passive supporters or demobilising active opponents.

However, in Nigeria and many other African countries, several reasons have been adjudged to be the cause of electorates selling their votes and these are due to betrayal by leaders, poverty, and rampant corruption at top levels of leadership. Electorates, especially the poor and marginalized ones mostly see the disbursement of cash before elections as the only

thing they can get from the government and the political class (Leight et al, 2016). For example, the poor are likely to be the victims of vote buying because of their level of poverty opens them up for material inducements such as basic commodities like food (rice) and in most times some amount of money. Some politicians do go to the extent of sponsoring some community projects such as school building, street lighting, well digging, and drainage cleaning. It is worth to note that vote buying takes place at multiple stages of the electoral cycle in Nigeria and it is visible during voter registration, nomination period, campaign and election day. In the same vein, it has been observed that resources which could have been allocated and used for food security, quality health services, good education and economic development, are kept till the electioneering period and diverted to vote buying with a view to holding on to power and the incumbent are mostly culpable of this misdemeanor (YIAGA, 2018).

In the 2007 elections for instance, reports had it that voters were paid N2,000 each to sell their votes to the political candidates (Nwankwo, 2018). But in recent elections, it is reported that voters were paid a sum of N10,000 to sell their votes. This indicates a 500% increase from the amount paid in 2007. This concise analysis shows how the vote-buying market is growing in Nigeria and becoming increasingly profitable.

The issue of vote buying has become a norm in Nigerian politics, having been witnessed in every election whether presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial or at the council levels. An instance is the Edo State gubernatorial election, particularly in Auchi, Etsakor West local government where there were claims of vote buying and selling throughout all polling units. It was reported that the practice in that particular local government is very common as cash was delivered openly to voters.

The use of money to buy votes is not entirely what vote buying entails. Food, clothing, and other goods are also utilized in the purchase of votes. The INEC has highlighted concerns about politicians attempting to purchase votes by using food sellers during the 2019 general elections. On the signal of a party agent or the candidate's representative, a food seller would store free food for voters – either before or after voting – using this approach (Asadu, 2019).

Despite the prevalence of vote buying both in the rural and urban areas, the rural areas are more susceptible to the practice than those in the urban areas. Varrella (2015) provided a statistical evidence to prove this to be true. In addition, she showed that males are more prone to sell their votes than their female counterparts both in rural and urban areas in Nigeria. Although the practice of vote buying in Nigeria is deemed bad, it helps in unravelling how increasingly difficult it is becoming for politicians to rig elections (Effanga, 2021). This is true because politicians would not have resorted to buying votes from the people if they had an “expressway” to rig the election results. It therefore shows that the electoral process in Nigeria is on the right track to attaining transparency, fairness and integrity.

Causes of Vote Buying In Nigeria

According to research carried out in 2018 by YIAGA on vote buying in Ekiti state in Nigeria, the following are the causes of vote buying in Nigeria

1. Poverty
2. Hunger
3. Unemployment
4. Non-payment of workers' salaries, pension and allowances
5. Failure of political office holders to fulfil their previous campaign promises
6. Neglect of rural communities in the distribution of amenities

7. Improved electoral process
8. Corrupt leadership

Facilities Poverty

This has been adjudged to be the fountain and thriving mechanism for vote buying in Nigeria and Africa. The politician in this part of the world deliberately impoverished the people so as to continue to have a perpetual control of their choice of vote. This has been done to the extent where N5,000 is golden to a lot of Nigerians. Hence a largesse of N5,000 on election day is seen by these impoverished voters as a worthy gift to meet their needs. If not, how do we categorised trader money scheme by the federal government, which gives a loan of N5,000 to the traders. Of what impact is N5,000 to any trader now, considering the present rate of inflation.

Hunger

The combination of poverty and hunger has been the major factor that encourage the entrenchment of vote buying in Nigeria. This is because many households in Nigeria lack basic means of sustenance, hence every opportunity to get food and other means of sustenance freely seems golden to a lot of electorate in this class. Therefore, the politicians use the election period to distribute free foods and basic sustenance to the electorate to get their votes in return. To these voters, these basic sustenance means are of worthy value than their ballot. So, they see wisdom in collecting foods and other sustainability in exchange for their votes.

Unemployment

To a lot of voters who do not have means to generate income to be able to meet their immediate and long term needs, would see nothing in exchanging their vote for paltry cash that would enable them meet their immediate. Some would of them even want elections to be held at very short interval, not because of their love to vote but because of the vote buying and selling attached to the election process. This is made possible by the leaders who rather than providing employment to liberate a lot of households, they prefer to misappropriate the funds meant to develop infrastructures that could provide employment for the people, keep it till election time and distribute meagre cash to voters to alter their voting behaviour in favour of their political parties or preferred candidates.

Non-Payment Of Salaries And Wages

Nonpayment of several arrears of salaries and emoluments of workers and pensioners in a civil service economy accounts for why many voters could not resist the offer of cash to sell their ballots during the election. Many workers and pensioners could not meet their domestic obligations. For example, a family that has four prospective voters who are sure of gathering twenty thousand naira after casting and showing their ballot papers to a particular party, as exemplified by one of the respondents, would not think twice before opting for such offer because of the consideration of what the amount could do to alleviate their immediate suffering

Methods of Vote Buying In Nigeria

Looking at the electoral process in Nigeria, it is discovered that the process is characterised with many methods of vote buying such as distribution of gifts and food items which are distributed at various political meetings, campaigns and programs to influence voters to vote for them. This exercise goes on for weeks and days before election, and on the election days.

Another approach is what Onuoha and Ojo (2018) referred cash for vote. This involves an agreement for a certain amount of money by the voter and the agent. The voter received the

agreed amount of money before he casts his vote at the polling unit. This payment most time is done within the vicinity of the polling station or not too far from the polling unit. Before payment the buyer always requests for the evidence of Voters Card and assurance that the voter will vote for their party. This approach is called pre-paid method of vote buying.

In the same vein, Onuoha and Ojo (2018) described another approach as vote for cash. This entails agreement of reward or amount after the voter has voted and provided the evidence that he voted for the party of the buyer. This entails that after the voter had thumb printed in the voting cubicle he comes out and flash the thumb printed portion to the agent to ascertain that the voter actually voted for the party. Another form is that the voter uses his phone to snap the thumb printed ballot paper as evidence, which will aid his collection of the agreed amount, this is called “see and buy”.

Vote Buying as an Electoral Risk Factor in Nigeria

Although vote buying might be seen as favourable to political candidates during elections, it is a high level of risk to the credibility of the electoral process and even the state’s democracy. The selling of votes by the poor electorates in exchange for monetary and non-monetary incentives indicates that the electoral process is not a true reflection of the minds or will of the people. It simply shows an implicit and subtle autocracy where political warlords compel the people through monetary and non-monetary incentives to vote them or reinstate them into a political office. This depicts a scenario where the political class use incentives as a coercive tool to do their bidding during elections (– a characteristic of autocracy). This therefore implies the existence of the state’s democracy on shaky pillars.

For instance, Leight et al (2016) assert that "vote-buying endangers the validity of election results; undermines public trust in the democratic system; and negatively affects post-election politics, government accountability, and public perceptions of that accountability.

When the will of the people is not expressed in the ballot papers due to the influence of benefits during elections, persons who are unqualified to fill given political positions are voted for. This spells doom for the state’s affairs as these misfits are given power to rule in ways that are detrimental to the wellbeing of the citizenry. Mohammed (2020) consented to this when he stated that vote buying and selling gives an opportunity for the wrong individuals to get the job which usually leads to a series of loss, disruption of the economy and harmony of a society or state. When political candidates are elected into political offices based on the short-term benefit poor electorate receive from them, it only implies that their long-term benefits have been sacrificed at the altar of vote buying. Schaffer (2007) asserted that vote buying is just a recycling of corrupt and depraved politicians. The recycling of this kind of politicians implies that the electoral process would be void of transparency and filled with electoral malpractices. This is because they would like to sustain the system through which they got into their political offices, thereby increasing the level of corruption in the electoral system and even the society at large.

This justifies the assertion of Yoon (2020) who stated that a political leader who ascended the throne of leadership via the mechanism of vote buying would lack the will power to fight corruption being that he or she got to his/her political position through political corruption. This explains one of the rationales behind the Nigerian state being one of the most corrupt political entities in the world. According to Transparency International (2022), Nigeria is ranked as the 154th most corrupt nation in the world. Chairperson of Transparency International, Delia Ferreira Rubio, decried the corrupting role “big money” in political party financing plays and the undue influence it exerts on political systems in Sub-Saharan Africa

(Ojekunle, 2020). One of the significant roles this “big money” plays is in the issue of vote buying. During elections, political party agents arrive each polling unit with bags of cash so as to bribe electoral officials and buy the votes of the poor electorate.

As earlier mentioned, vote buying encourages bad governance. This in turn makes it very difficult for the citizenry to hold their elected representatives responsible. If a politician feels that all they have to do to win is buy off voters and government officials, they will have little motivation and resources to respond to issues that are important to their constituency, such as water and sanitation, education, and unemployment (Mohammad, 2020) since they have spent a large chunk of those resources on the electoral process.

Moreover, with vote buying contravening section 124 of the Electoral Act 2010 (as amended), an electoral process fraught with such practice could result in cancellation of the entire process when provided with sufficient evidences. When such occurs, it implies the state’s resources employed for the entire exercise has become a waste. Also, electoral official related to this offence might be relieved of their duties. This scenario exudes a negative perception to the public and gives the public the audacity to question the credibility of the electoral process.

Conclusion

Prior to the emergence of this ugly trend, what was in vogue then was packaging manifestoes through pamphlets delivered to the doorsteps of the electorate, or distributed at campaign grounds, Commercial buses, newspaper distribution outlets, and several other places. However, the desperate politicians resorted to snatching of ballot boxes, propagation of fake results when it became evident, they were losing in the elections and falsification of election results in conjunction with some rogue election officials or through mechanism of violence such as kidnapping the election officials and forcing them to falsify election results at gun point.

Although today, the trend of cash-for-votes, while indicating a departure away from ballot snatching and/or figures cooking, is however exposing the credibility of voting process, yet it remains a condemnable act in its entirety.

Consequent upon the foregoing, vote buying is an act to be frowned upon by the electorate and even the election management body who regulate the entire electoral process. This is because its prevalence increasingly questions the credibility of elections in the country. It makes unqualified politicians who are not a true reflection of the people’s choice to fill political offices. The emergence of these politicians into public offices leads to a series of loss, disruption of due democratic processes, poor economic performance and societal wellbeing of the citizenry as seen in recent times in the Nigerian state. It is therefore expedient for the electorate to be well informed of the consequences of vote buying to their future as individuals and as a political entity. In addition, INEC should publicly laud electoral officials who keep to the dictates of honesty and integrity during the conduct of elections. This would contribute greatly to the moral repair of societal norms and standards.

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