

## **VOTE-BUYING AND THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN NIGERIA: TRENDS AND CHALLENGES, 2015 - 2019**

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### **Abstract**

It is an established fact that vote-buying has become a dominant factor and an alarming phenomenon in Nigeria's electoral process. Its trends and challenges in the country's electoral process have become a worrisome issue. Vote-buying has also become an accepted norm in Nigeria's political activities and threatens her readiness to embrace good democratic governance. Buying for political posts is left for rich individual politicians due to the huge amount of money involved in the preparation for elective offices. The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is the clientalism theory because it explains the linkage between Nigeria's electoral process and vote-buying, focusing on the 2015 and the 2019 general elections. In spite of the electoral laws and the INEC's stance on vote-buying, the act has gradually become a regular phenomenon. This makes it imperative in this study to explore the ugly phenomenon of vote-buying in Nigeria's electoral process via its challenges for free, fair, credible and acceptable elections. The paper adopts the documentary method for gathering data from secondary sources and recommends that Nigeria needs to develop strong institutions and adopt sound measures that are politically neutral to address the phenomenon of vote-buying in the country. Therefore, addressing the menace of vote-buying through apolitical and neutral agencies can go a long way in nipping in the bud of electoral irregularities that

characterized politics and electoral process for a long time.

**Keywords:** Vote-buying, Electoral Process, Politics, Democracy, Political Parties.

### **Introduction**

The phenomenon of vote-buying in Nigeria has become a common practice since the return to a democratic system in 1999. This electoral fraud has been widely practiced either during political party primaries or general elections. Bunte and Ufen (2009, p.33) asserted that vote-buying has been highlighted in public discussions and practiced in almost every election across the country. The phenomenon is prevalent in societies with party ideology questions and principles, failure of political office holders to fulfill campaign promises and the neglect of rural communities in the provision of infrastructure and social amenities, but in Nigeria's electoral process, the prevalence and escalation of vote-buying is rooted in the elites' politics and was more pronounced in 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections.

Vote-buying is giving rewards to a person for voting in a particular way. It is a simple economic exchange whereby voters sell their votes to the highest bidder in an election. In Nigeria, as in some African States, the prevalence of vote-buying among contestants to political office and the electorate has caught the attention of scholars. Various analytical perspectives explain why the act of vote-buying

inhibits good democratic governance and the electoral process. Vote-buying in Nigeria has reached an alarming state to the extent that contestants to political office have spread their tentacles of inducements to election officials, security agencies and even the media. This explains why the case of Nigeria has become not only a matter of concern but also a discourse among scholars.

The challenges of vote-buying on the electoral process and good democratic governance aids poor governance and undercuts the citizens' ability to hold their elected representatives accountable and perpetuates corruption. Put differently, as vote-buying exists, contestants to political office continue to display undemocratic tendencies and abuse of democratic norms through their character of desperation to power by all means. On the other hand, the electorate wallow in lack of political education, poverty and illiteracy, which, institutionalized over the years, are likely to undermine the electoral process. It is against this backdrop that the civil society, media, legal practitioners and people of conscience continuously react against the act of vote-buying.

This paper focuses on trends and challenges of vote-buying on Nigeria's electoral process from the period between 2015 and 2019. It raises and answers the following questions: -

- What is the position of law in respect to vote-buying in Nigeria?
- Is vote-buying healthy for the electoral process?
- What are the challenges of vote-buying on the electoral process?
- What are the prospects of the vote-buying phenomenon in Nigeria?

### **Conceptual and Review of the Literature on Vote-Buying**

The concept of vote-buying carries different notions in different countries, depending on their historical, cultural and political backgrounds and their election models (Schaffer, 2007: p.34). Vote-buying is used to refer to the exchange of private materials benefits for political support or the use of money and direct benefits to influence voters (Bryant,

2005: pp.32-35). It is the exchange of private material benefits for political support. Vote-buying is defined as any form of financial, material or promissory inducement or reward by a candidate, political party, agent or supporter to influence a voter to cast his or her vote or even abstain from doing so in order to enhance the chances of a particular contestant to win an election. Thus, any practice of immediate or promised reward to a person for voting or refraining from voting in a particular way can be regarded as vote-buying. In most democracies, vote-buying is considered an electoral offence. Vote-buying has been an integral element of money politics in Nigeria. Recent experiences show that vote-buying takes place at multiple stages of the electoral processes and has been observed eminently during voter registration, the nomination period, campaigning and election day. It is more predominantly during Election Day, shortly before or during vote casting. Both definitions stress the goal of vote-buying, that is, to gain private materials or direct benefits for voters in return for their political support. Corroborating the above assertion, Fox (1994: pp. 38-40) argued that vote-buying is an aspect of exchange between material benefit and political support. In other words, it is the exchange of political rights for material gain.

Vote-buying, is a practice that involves at least two parties, the giver and the recipient. It also refers to the voter's direct experience in accepting either money or other materials from any candidate or member of a campaign team. According to Schaffer (2005: p.23), the aim of vote-buying practice is to influence the voter's choice that favors bidders. The willingness of the voter to comply is commonly manifested in three different forms of compliance, that is, the instrumental, the normative and the coercive, thereby influencing the political preference and voting behavior of voters. Arguably, vote-buying is a corrupt act, which usually takes the form of a gift or gratuity given for the purpose of influencing the action or conduct of the receiver, especially money or any valuable consideration given or a promise to a fiduciary agent, a judge, legislator, public officer, witness, voter, etc. This is to suggest that, as a corrupt act, vote-buying is any form of persuasion in

which financial gain is suggested by one person to another with the intention of influencing a person's vote. This includes not only the payment of a simple bribe, but also the payment of excessive stipends to election workers. Political bribery involves a situation where persuasion income is channeled and also the attitude of the voter to his voting preference is commercialized (Pam, 2008: p.123).

Like a typical market place, the politicians, political parties and party agents are the vote-buyers while prospective voters are the sellers. The commodity on sale is the vote to be cast while the medium of exchange could be monetary and non-monetary items. The market force that determines the value or price of a vote is the level of desperation of politicians to win in a locality. Although money and other valuables can use to effectuate vote-buying. Political actors have adopted two main approaches to buying-votes for election day. The first is the vote approach or promising the prospective voter some agreed amount of money before the individual casts his or her vote at the polling unit. In this approach, trust is the key to the contract. It is also known as pre-paid method of vote-buying. The second approach is the vote for cash. It involves giving or rewarding the voter with the agreed amount of money or material compensation after the individual has shown evidence that he or she voted for the party. There are several ways the voter can prove to the vote-buyer that he or she voted for the agreed candidate. One method is where the voter shrewdly displays the ballot paper that he has thumb printed in favor of a particular party, so that the party agent standing strategically nearby can confirm compliance with the unholy contract as he emerges from the cubicle at the polling unit. Another method is for the voter to photograph the thumb printed ballot paper to show as evidence. Thereafter, compensation in cash or in kind can occur either immediately or at the close of voting. In this approach evidence is key to the consummation of the contract.

Clearly, a better understanding of vote-buying cannot be complete in Nigeria without relating the act to corruption, which has made election results have effect on the performance of politicians when elected into office.

Precisely, performance is not a critical factor in electoral outcomes and because corruption is effective in achieving electoral victory, the incentive to resort to corrupt practices is very high. The main decisive factors in the electoral outcome has been ethnicity, intimidation and massive vote-buying. As far back as the 1950's, vote-buying and rigging have been identified as major characteristics of elections in Nigeria. Mostly, political parties in Nigeria do not articulate any concrete programme during campaigns on how to take the country out of the woods. They have been spending billions of naira not merely on campaign activities but in outright bribery and vote-buying. One of the emerging problems in Nigeria's democracy and electoral process is simply the phenomenon of vote-buying (Aiyede, 2008: p.41). Despite the regulation of political finance in the electoral act, its implication is a mirage. Contestants to political office spend lavishly during electoral campaigns. This enhances vote-buying and selling (Ojo, 2008: p.112). Vote-buying has been reported in almost every election in Nigeria since 1999 to describe the fraudulent electoral behavior of political parties, contestants and electorates.

Etzioni (2011: pp.34-35) have put different arguments on why vote-buying takes place in Nigeria. The resulting views suggest that it happens for various reasons and, therefore, theories have been put across in order to clarify each position that has been advanced. Thus, there exists a number of theoretical models that attempts to explain the motive towards vote-buying phenomenon (see Schaffer, 2008: pp.64-68). However, some of the silent reasons behind vote-buying in Nigeria are technological innovations, desperation of politicians who want to win elections at all cost and political parties lack the ideology to put in place comprehensive manifestoes, as well as the high evidence of poverty in the country and illiteracy among the electorate and attitudinal problem on the part of the people involved in both buying and selling all of which make vote-buying an easy activity. Most of Nigerian's attitude towards politics is not right, because most politicians view it as a call to investment from which huge profit is expected and not a call

to serve humanity (Davies, 2006; Ojo, 2008: p.203). Major strategies for vote-buying, especially in Nigeria, include a strategy to offer monetary payment as a direct exchange of cash for votes. Another strategy is to buy turnout, that is, to offer cash payments to induce core supporters to cast their votes (see Stokes, 2013; Nitcher, 2014: pp.315-320) or to induce opposition voter to stay at home (Cox and Kousser, 1981: p.85). In addition to cash, parties and contestants to political offices often distribute a wide range of other material goods, such as food and clothing, as well as services on Election Day (Helmke and Levitsky, 2006).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Clientalism theory is adopted to explain the linkage between Nigeria's electoral process and vote-buying, focusing on the 2015 and the 2019 general elections. Central to the argument of this theory is that gaining public loyalty and political support with any form of inducements is central to clientalistic practice. In this sense, Stokes, Dunning and Nazareno (2013) see clientalism as the exchange of goods and services for political support, often involving an implicit or explicit quid-pro-quo.

The theory emphasis a set of actions based on the principle of 'take there, give here' with the practice allowing both clients and patrons to gain advantage from others' support (Graham 1997). Electoral clientalism has featured predominantly in Nigeria's democratic politics. In general, electoral clientalism is understood as a relationship inn which candidates offer material benefits to the electorates in exchange for political support, which may include the vote (Gallego, 2014). The theory is germane to the present studies since it makes a strong link between the electorate process and vote-buying in a democratic state such as Nigeria. Election, being one of the processes of democratic institutions, serves as a linchpin of democratic exercise, which is said to be highly supportive when it is conducted according to conventions set out to regulate the political game. In this way, the past general elections of 2015 and 2019, had extremely determined by vote-buying. In the build up to these elections, the

ruling and opposition parties, as well as their respective candidates, in a bid to influence and subvert electorates' voting choice, indulged in the politics of vote-buying.

Invariably, candidates to elective positions (both at the federal and state levels) promise favors to cronies and involved in *cash-for-votes or votes-for-cash* and votes for other goods or commodities before, during and after the elections, mainly to gather political supports from the beneficiaries to the detriment of proper democratic participation, legitimacy and acceptable election results (Orizu, 2018). Also, in return for promised or given favors, the cronies mobilize political support and loyalty for their patrons. The implications are that vote-buying is used as a political tool by candidates across parties to maintain or capture power, hinder effective political competition, prove difficulty for electorates to make credible choices, and by extension contribute to political apathy.

The experience in the Nigerian electoral process is akin to the argument forwarded by the clientalism theory; fraudulent elections in Nigeria are in line with the selfish interests of the country's politicians who use the machinery of vote-buying to frustrate the electoral process. Thus, the intensity of struggle for power in Nigeria leads to prevalence and escalation of vote-buying before and during elections, especially the experience of the 2015 and the 2019 general elections.

### **Analysis of the 2015 and the 2019 General Elections**

Elections were held in Nigeria at different intervals since 1951. From that time to date, the country has conducted fifteen general elections, each of which was bedeviled by contestations and allegations of irregularities and violence. Although the elections of 1951/52 and those of 1954/59 were less violent, they were conducted at a time of intense regional political rivalry in the country's political development.

The current civilian regime, which started in 1999 following the prolonged military authoritarian rule has passed through elections in 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. In particular, the 2015 general election was highly

critical to the survival of Nigeria's nascent democracy as it was for peace, unity, security of lives and properties in the country. It came at a time when political elections became, more than ever before, a *do-or-die* affair characterized by the resurgence of ethno-religious, communal and electoral violence, insecurity as well as Boko Haram insurgency in the North-east, kidnappings and armed banditry on the local communities and villages in the North-western states, militants in the South-south, herdsman versus farmers' conflicts in the North-central states and the trend of inconclusive elections in the aftermath of the 2015 general elections.

Indeed, more than any other factor, what made the 2015 elections keenly contested was that it was the time about four major political opposition parties came together and agreed to form a *merger party* with the strength to compete with the ruling party (Mohammed, 2019: pp.126-127).

To crown it all, not only did the 2015 general elections receive the attention of Nigerians because it makes signals, but it also received the attention of international stakeholders. Surprisingly, the 2015 elections generated positive perception of the electoral process for a number of reasons. For the first time in Nigeria's history, a winner emerged from the opposition party based on free, fair and credible and acceptable electoral outcome. The 2019 general elections indicate no significant progress in Nigeria's electoral process because it was largely determined by ethnic and religious considerations, party affiliations rather than by personal qualities of candidates and performance of the ruling party and its outcome had resulted to disagreement over the authenticity of the result declared; accusations and counter accusations of electoral rigging and misconduct, to electoral violence of varying proportions.

### **An Overview of Trends and Challenges of Vote-Buying in the Nigerian Electoral Process**

The beauty of democracy is the availability of alternative candidates presented by political parties to replace governing officials in the

event that they have failed to provide governance to the satisfaction of the electorates. Secondly, multiparty politics prevents dictatorship arising from a one-party system. Multiparty system equally gives the electorate the freedom and opportunity to change the incumbent governing officials if they feel that they are no longer implementing policies and programmes that agree with their philosophy, principles or ideologies. It is therefore normal for the electorate to elect candidates of their choice by exercising their right to vote and be voted for. It is, however, disturbing and very worrisome to hear votes bought and sold openly in the open market. More so, when votes are sold, it brings to question, whether or not such an ugly act is permitted by the law.

According to article 63 of the 2022 Electoral Act:

*A person who – (a) corruptly by himself or by any other person at any time after the date of an election has been announced, directly or indirectly gives or pays money to or for any person for the purpose of corrupting or influencing that person or any other person to vote or refrain from voting at such election, or on account of such person or any other person having voted at such election, or (b) being a voter, corruptly accepts or takes money or any other inducement during any of the period stated in paragraph (a) of this section, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N500,000 or imprisonment not more than two years or both.*

What has become almost a political culture in Nigerian politics before the recent ugly trend of open vote-buying in the open market is buying and selling delegates at the primary elections of political parties. It also marks the beginning of a clear politics of vote-buying in Nigerian political and electoral history. Since then, the vote-buying phenomenon has characterized political elections in Nigeria.

In the past, there were more cases of snatching ballot-boxes and other forms of violence by politicians wanting to win elections by all means. There is also a long-time tradition of voter inducement by politicians through several means, which include sharing motorcycles, detergent, soap, salt and raw food, etc., which is usually before the election day not on the day of the election. It was in Ekiti State that the politics of “*Stomach Infrastructure*” was introduced in 2014 but recently, the country has seen a wave of vote-buying during the general elections. In other words, the recent ugly trend of open vote-buying in Nigerian politics, according to observers, began from the off-season elections in Edo, Anambra, Ekiti and Osun states, etc. There were allegations of vote-buying in Edo and Anambra States Governorship Elections. But those allegations were less pronounced in comparison to the widespread allegations of same in Ekiti State elections. A similar allegation was equally reported in Osun State Governorship Elections.

However, there were also pockets of allegations of vote-buying in some sections of the country in the just concluded 2019 general elections. A similar report shows high incidences of vote-buying facilitated by party officials and agents. This trend was seen particularly in the Gama Ward of the Nasarawa Local Government Area of Kano State supplementary governorship election. There were also reported cases of attempted inducement of observers with cash. Elections are said to be the central feature of democracy and for them to express the will of the electorate, they must be free, fair and credible. If an election is “*free*”, it means that all those entitled to vote are rightly registered and totally free to make their choice of candidates without imposition or inducement. There will be stability in the electoral process.

Vote-buying would be minimal and the electoral process easily be consolidated. Associated with this is the failure to develop political party ideology. Consequently, lack of party ideology affects the; “*Character*” of politicians and their level of “*Desperation*” for power; etc. For votes to be “*Bought*” and “*Sold*”, there must be a willing buyer (a desperate

politician) and a willing seller (a greedy electorate), leading to the act of vote-buying and creating an uneven playing field for electoral candidates to political office and giving victory to the highest bidder. Thus, the opportunity cost of vote-buying leads to the underdevelopment of the country.

Also, the menace of vote-buying aids poor governance and undercuts the citizen’s ability to hold their elected officials/representatives accountable. It deters aspiring political leaders from running for office because it suggests that money, rather than ideas or experience, leads to winning an election. In a true democracy, every citizen has the right to stand for office, subject to reasonable restrictions.

Vote-buying makes it impossible to meet these standards by penalizing potential candidates, who are in an economic disadvantaged position.

The growing trends of vote-buying promotes elitist politics and weakens popular participation, as only persons with resources get access to political office/positions, thereby people with grass-root solidarity hardly have access to political power because of their inability to participate actively in the monetized electoral process. In other words, it ensures that leaders who attain political power via financial inducement rule over the country and because such leaders get to power through commercial transactions, they tend to espouse self-seeking agenda while in office. It makes it nearly impossible for credible and competent candidates, who lack the required financial resources to compete for political power. It makes elected political leaders unaccountable to the people since they did not, in the real sense, come to power through legitimate means.

Vote-buying is equally capable of sparking off corruption amongst politicians after voting for them into power. The challenge is that would first recoup all the money invested during nomination of candidates, party-primary election and campaigns. This ugly development will definitely result in looting of state treasury. Vote-buying attached to materials or cash incentives, apart from increasing financial burden on politicians, has its serious challenge

on Nigeria's electoral process. It serves as a springboard to unsalable, incompetent candidates and unsuitable political parties to public offices; the nature of vote-buying in 2019 general elections motivates concern about the leadership quality, capacity of service delivery and effectiveness of emerging democratic institutions; and issuing results of the despicable elections conducted in Nigeria (Baidoo et al; 2018). When a candidate chooses to pay for support, rather than compete fairly for votes, they show disregard for democratic norms and a willingness to use illegal means. This obstructs the electoral process by interfering with the rights of citizens to freely decide who will represent them and their interest as well as results in the candidate with the deepest pockets winning the election, rather than those who would best serve their constituents. There is the challenge in the increment of money politics to the detriment of merit, ideology and free and fair competitive political competition. At another level, old and unproductive politicians are recycled into the political process with various implications that such individuals are only concerned with personal objects and the primitive accumulation of wealth. Indeed, the act of vote-buying poses serious threats to the electoral process in Nigeria.

### **Conclusion**

Vote-buying among members of political parties, candidates and the electorates has become a common political practice during the 2015 and the 2019 electoral cycle, which retard rather than help develop electoral process and is one of the factors militating against the conduct of crisis-free, credible and acceptable elections in Nigeria. The country is practising a '*patronage democracy*', a carrot and stick relationship between vote-buyers and vote-sellers in the consolidation of commercialization of the electoral process. The quantum of money in circulation during the Election Day challenged the electoral process. Vote-buying is prevalent in Nigeria because an average voter is poor and cannot resist the challenges of uncountable electoral bribes in cash or kind. Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy have been identified by scholars as the

major causes of vote-buying. The paper argues that vote-buying is the origin of bad governance, imposition of unsalable candidates to fill spaces in governance.

Insecurity of lives and properties, disunity amongst ethnic groups, secessionists' agitations from various ethnic associations, kidnappings, political assassination, religious bigotry, electoral violence and massive blood-letting in all part of the country are the product of vote-buying. Consequently, political parties during the 2015 and the 2019 general elections have remained weakest link in the chain of institutions of democracy that would provide an effective development of democracy through competitive elections. Their contributions to the electoral process in these general elections was marred by not only their failure to adhere strictly to the existing laws that guide their actions but also the attitudes of their members. This is a strong indication of parties' weak institutional and attitudinal practices that were manifested in their activities.

In sum, political parties should abide by the rules of the political game, their code and provisions of the Electoral Act (2010) and the constitution. The experience of both the 2015 and the 2019 electoral process indicates that, it is not yet the matter of euphoria, as political parties are still not deeply institutionalized. Vote-buying is a serious threat on Nigeria's electoral process, its predominance and escalation is still a concern as it has been reflecting in the nature of politics and elections.

### **Recommendations**

Looking at the challenges observed above, it is clear that vote-buying is against the electoral laws. INEC apparently has no power to arrest those perpetrating the act but it has the responsibility to create awareness and enlightenment to the voters. Political parties also have the right and responsibility to create enlightenment and awareness for the electorates. They need to be adequately educated about the meaning, nature and scope of vote-buying and its impact in stultifying the electoral process.

Security agencies have the power to arrest and prosecute and, therefore, need to take

the responsibility to minimize or eliminate the act of vote-buying. They should be patriotic enough; they should not be a party to the alleged crime of vote-buying. They must do their work with all sincerity and patriotism. In addition, the agencies at the polling units must make sure that no voter goes to the voting cubicle with a smartphone or any phone that could be used to get the picture of a ballot paper. They should also not accept voting and displaying to other voters. These are methods used by vote buyers to know that you have voted their candidate for a reward.

The prospects of organized and well informed Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), the media, religious bodies, traditional rulers, socio-cultural groups, legal practitioners and people of conscience should operate beyond rhetoric and take proactive actions against political parties identified to have been involved in vote-buying. They should continue to educate the electorate on its undesirability and the challenges on Nigeria's electoral process.

Secret ballot needs functional election legislation to ensure secret voting is not only a right on the part of the voters but an absolute obligation that must be observed during Election Days. Secret ballot is important to sustain the integrity of electoral process and one of the primary devices been applied to restrain vote-buying.

There is the need to sensitize the electorates to encourage voting based on accomplishments of candidates and the performance of the party in government.

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