

## ELECTION CAMPAIGNS AND VOTE-BUYING IN NIGERIA: MEDIA STUDY PERSPECTIVES

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### Abstract

The study examined the dynamics of vote-buying and election campaigns in Nigeria within the media study perspectives. It focuses on the multifaceted dimensions of election campaigns, political campaign strategies and the phenomenon of vote buying. Despite Nigeria's 23 years of uninterrupted democratic rule since the Fourth Republic commenced in 1999, the persistence of vote buying poses significant challenges to the integrity and legitimacy of the electoral process. The study employs a qualitative descriptive approach with secondary data to conduct an in-depth review of existing literature to reveal the elements embedded in election campaigns and vote buying practices. It explored the communication systems and mass media strategies deployed in vote buying transactions thereby revealing the socio-behavioral patterns of Nigerian voters. The study applies the agenda setting theory to explain how political agenda influences voters' expectations and perceptions. It subsequently identified stimulus words and phrases deployed in election campaigns that enable vote buying practices thereby revealing the relationship between political campaigns and vote buying in Nigeria. It also identified poverty, unemployment and the absence of robust institutions as causes of vote buying. It establishes the understanding of agenda-setting theory to elucidate the complex dynamics between campaign communication and voter behavior, providing insights for future empirical studies and policy interventions aimed at safeguarding the integrity of Nigeria's electoral process. The study therefore recommends the need for policies that will mitigate the influence of inducements on the electoral process.

**Keywords:** Election Campaigns, Vote-Buying, Agenda-Setting, Media Studies, Stimulus

## Introduction

Democracy is a system of government that provides qualified citizens participatory right in election processes. Monsiváis-Carrillo (2022) posits that people have varied perspectives democracy and desired outcomes. However, Monsiváis-Carrillo, (2022) further argues that a useful and relevant democracy must be such that yields free and fair electoral outcomes. The emerging democratic governance structure(s) respects and observes the rule of law where citizens have equal civil and political rights and freedoms. Elections are a fundamental part of democracy. They are the process by which citizens choose their representatives and leaders. Elections must be conducted in a transparent and accountable manner for them to be fair and free.

The Nigerian state subscribes, from independence in 1960 to democratic dispensation with military coups and leaderships in-between. Nigeria currently runs what is known as the Fourth Republic of its democratic dispensation (Monday, 2021) The Fourth Republic began on May 29, 1999, following the death of military dictator Sani Abacha and the subsequent transition to democracy. The 1999 Constitution of Nigeria governs the Fourth Republic, which establishes a presidential system of government (Matfess, 2016).

The Fourth Republic recorded both progress and challenges. On the one hand, there have been significant improvements in the country's democratic institutions and practices. For example, there have been seven successful presidential elections and the opposition defeated the incumbent once. Also, there have been challenges in the process that delivers each transition. One of such is the prevalence of vote buying practices in Nigerian elections (Oladapo et al., 2020). Vote buying is a form of electoral corruption in which money or other goods exchange hands between contestants and voters. Vote buying can have a significant impact on electoral outcomes and undermine the legitimacy of the democratic process. Despite the prevalence of vote buying, Korovin, (2020) establishes that politicians often campaign vigorously during election circles.

However, the above standpoint is reinforced with the charging to court of Chief Adebutu, the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) governorship aspirant in the 2023 election by the government of Nigeria for alleged vote buying. The PDP governorship candidate distributed 200,000 'verve cards' with his name printed on the cards and loaded with N10, 000 each and distributed to potential voters (Akinyele, 2023; Apanpa, 2023; DailyPost, 2023). Also, few studies have been carried out to understand the communication dynamics of vote buying on the socio-behavioural patterns of voters in Nigeria. These few studies include how vote buying represents a form of political clientelism dealing with pre-electoral transfers of money or material benefits from candidates to voters (Lucky, 2014). Christopher et al., (2022) examines the issue of vote buying as a negative factor against good governance in Nigeria, while Mohammed, (2020) discusses the menace of vote buying in Nigeria and way forward.

This study's core objectives are to contribute to the emerging media studies on vote buying; and enrich the theoretical base of the concept to engender media study interests. Through the foregoing objectives, the study hopes to provide direction for future media studies, focus on vote buying in Nigeria by highlighting possible approach, categorization of variables, and the need to establish the relationship between election campaign and vote buying on one hand and vote buying and election outcomes on the hand. The study also contributes to the ongoing discussion on the paradox between electoral campaigns and vote buying in the Nigerian electoral system and its implication for the sustenance of democracy.

### **Methodology**

This paper adopted qualitative approach to conduct an in-depth review of available literature to examine the elements involved in election campaigns and vote buying. It further highlights the media study approach on the menace towards proposing basis for empirical studies on vote buying while also suggesting a theory to guide such studies. The reviewed materials include Acts of Legislative House, reference books, journals, magazines, newspapers, images and other written materials linked to the issues.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Fortunato and Martin (2016) provide insight into the understanding and explanation of complex political communication using agenda setting theory. The introduction of agenda-setting theory out of its media eco-chamber to the realm of political environment shows how elastic the theory could readily be adaptable to the explanation of non-media-related concepts and issues. Fortunato and Martin, (2016) fluidly applied agenda setting theory to explain the existing connections between the media environment and election campaigns. In the same vein, Lampoltshammer et al., (2023) also applied the foregoing understanding of agenda setting theory to reveal the link between the press and political discourse.

It is therefore obvious that politically related communication involves elements of agenda setting that moderate voters' expectations. Media agenda and political agenda often have a meeting point through which the existing dominant political agenda is moderated and mainstreamed into election processes. However, the acceptance of such mainstream dominant political agendas as the norm will form part of the focus of this study. Hence, situating the relationship between media theory within election campaigns enabled us to understand and explain how electorates relate to the various promises of politicians, including on-and off-campaign trial promises.

The agenda-setting theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1970s, posits that the media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions and influencing the salience of issues. This theory suggests that the media do not tell people what to think but instead what to think about (Ardèvol-Abreu et al., 2020; McCombs et al., 2014). Agenda-setting theory, traditionally applied to media studies, has been extended to political communication research to understand how political campaigns influence the priorities and attitudes of voters (Fortunato & Martin, 2016; Lampoltshammer et al., 2023; Stasiak-Jazukiewicz et al., 2020). Nigerian politicians use different campaign strategies to voters and to galvanise their support base.

However, politicians in Nigeria pushes narratives that are aimed at convincing the electorate that their offerings are the best options. Such narratives are often laden with words and phrases that stick with the electorates and pave the way for vote buying. The narratives pushed are deliberately in the realm of agenda setting. We consider such agenda setting narratives as stimuli that tend to promote illegality or negative actions that are at variants with the tenets of democracy. Our attempts at isolating negative stimulus that shape public opinions and perception proposes that agenda setting theory should be approached from two perspectives, positive and negative stimulus.

This study therefore posits that there is a link between mass communication at the campaign trails and the shaping of voters' expectations during the Election Day which enables acceptance of vote buying as part of the election campaign practices (Onayinka et al., 2018). The question that the Agenda Setting theory has enabled us to set for this work is to ask how the Nigerian electorates enabled a fusion of election campaign and vote buying to coexist within the electoral process.

### **Election Campaigns**

Election campaigns are pivotal moments in democratic systems, providing candidates and political parties with opportunities to convey their messages, policy proposals, and visions for governance. Political communication plays a significant role in the success of election campaigns, as candidates strive to connect with voters, shape public opinion, and secure electoral support. This article aims to explore the multidimensional aspects of election campaigns, the influence of political communication, and the implications of modern campaigning strategies. Politicians' campaign adopts different platforms and different strategies to win elections (Kao et al., 2022). Campaign strategies, instruments and media adopted depend on which of the strategies politicians consider most effective, audio-visual means, new media, broadcast radio and television stations, religious institutions, and indigenous media (Ali & Al- Ahababi, 2022; Rufai, 2023; Stier et al., 2018).

According to Kao et al., (2022) studies on democracies in developing countries have shown that vote buying is widespread. Researchers have investigated how politicians decide who to target with vote buying, how voters view vote buying, and the consequences of vote buying. However, most studies have only compared support for candidates who offer handouts to those who do not. They have not explored how offering handouts compares to other campaign strategies, such as promising future goods or community benefits, explicitly refusing to engage in vote buying, or building support based on ethnic or local ties.

From the foregoing, vote buying can be regarded as one of the campaign strategies by politicians to win elections. For instance, in Nigeria, politicians use money and food items as means of inducing voters and thereby buy their votes (Jaja & Agumagu, 2019).

### **Vote-Buying in Nigeria's Democratic Process**

Vote buying is a form of electoral corruption in which voters are offered money or other inducements in exchange for their votes (Nichter, 2014). Vote buying remains a pervasive phenomenon often discernable in countries practicing participatory democracy that allows leaders' emergence through elections. According to Guerra and Justesen, (2022) vote buying represents a political clientelism involving pre-electoral transfers of money or material benefits from candidates to voters especially in developing countries. In Latin America, it is a common practice to deploy vote buying strategies to win over voters during election period and this practice is pervasive in the whole region (Justesen & Manzetti, 2023). Also, there is the use of rent seeking method to win voters in authoritarian countries like China (Ma et al., 2022). Hence, it is obvious that vote buying is a worldwide phenomenon.

This practice is widespread in Nigeria, and it has significant implications for the country's democratic process (Nwagwuet al., 2022). Vote buying undermines the principle of popular sovereignty, as it allows wealthy and unscrupulous candidates to buy their way into power, regardless of their competence or public support. This erodes citizens' trust in the electoral system and reduces political participation. Vote buying also perpetuates a cycle of corruption and impunity. Politicians who engage in vote buying may feel entitled to recoup their "investment" through corrupt practices while in office, leading to a vicious cycle of electoral corruption and governance challenges (Aspinall et al., 2017; Nichter, 2014). In addition, vote buying exacerbates socio-economic inequalities. The practice tends to target vulnerable populations who are more susceptible to inducements due to poverty and lack of access to essential services. Consequently, this reinforces patterns of marginalization and perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

There are several factors that contribute to the persistence of vote buying in Nigeria. These include weak law enforcement, the lack of political will to hold vote buyers accountable, poverty,

and socio-economic disparities. Addressing vote buying requires a multi-faceted approach. Strengthening law enforcement and electoral institutions to enforce anti-corruption laws and regulations is crucial. Additionally, promoting political transparency, accountability, and civic education can empower citizens to resist inducements and make informed voting decisions.

Vote-buying is an illicit electoral phenomenon characterised by the act of enticing voters to endorse a specific political candidate through intermediaries and representatives of a political party. These individuals actively seek to secure votes for the designated candidate(s) from voters either prior to or on the day of an election. Such inducements come in the form of money, food and clothes and describe vote-buying as any form of financial, material and 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 to enhance the chances of a particular contestant winning an election (Ma et al., 2022; Nwagwu et al., 2022). It is an electoral trading engagement whereby an agent or a proxy of a political party or a politician offers monetary or comestible inducements to obtain the votes of the electorates.

Unlike in marketing, where a seller persuades prospective buyers to purchase his products and services, it is the buyers who persuade the electorates (sellers) to sell their votes in the electoral process. It is a reversal of roles in the vote-buying and selling process. For instance, in an off-cycle elections conducted in the Ekiti, Anambra, Ondo, Osun and Edo states as well as the 2019 general elections, Lecturer and Chukwuma, (2020) discovered how flagrant sharing of money, food and valuables among the voters by political contestants and party agents during elections qualifies Nigeria as a moneyocracy or 'cash-and-carry' democracy.

The pervasive nature of vote-buying often receives responses from the Nigerian state through its legislative houses with the laws that criminalise voters' inducements (Adebisi & Olowu, 2022; Awopeju, 2011).

### **Forms of Vote-Buying**

Voters' inducements, also known as electoral clientelism, are another form of electoral corruption that has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary democracies. These inducements can take various forms, such as direct cash handouts (Lecturer & Chukwuma, 2020), promises of social services or development projects, (Justesen & Manzetti, 2023) employment or patronage, food and material goods, or community and social events (Busia et al., 2021). Voters' inducements have significant implications for democratic governance. Voters inducement goes contrary to the ideals of participatory democracy and defeats the purposes of free choice (Mohammed, 2020). The various forms of vote buying undermine the principle of political equality, foster short-term, transactional relationships between politicians and voters, and perpetuate corruption and a culture of entitlement among politicians (Israel & John, 2020).

### **Causes of Vote-Buying in Nigeria**

#### **Poverty**

Poverty remains a pervasive issue in Nigeria, with a significant portion of the population living below the poverty line (Arejiogbe et al., 2023). Various factors contribute to the high level of poverty in Nigeria. These factors include high population growth, infrastructural deficit, poor standard of living among others. These factors lead to a large proportion of the Nigerians population experiencing multidimensional poverty (Justice et al., 2023). Due to high level of poverty, it creates a large pool of vulnerable voters among citizens, making them susceptible to inducements offered during election periods. Politicians exploit the economic hardships faced by many Nigerians by offering financial incentives, food items, or other forms of assistance in

exchange for votes (Dimnwobi et al., 2023; Saidu et al., 2023). For impoverished individuals, the immediate relief provided by vote buying may outweigh concerns about the long-term consequences for democracy and governance. This cycle perpetuates a culture of dependency and undermines the integrity of the electoral process.

Israel and John, (2020) regard vote-buying as a transactional engagement between politicians and electorate with the aim of influencing voters in the realm of political economy. Thus, voters' inducement is transactional involving a willing buyer and a willing seller with both parties taking something out of the transaction. Mares and Young's, (2016) work through examination of political literature, disaggregated the concept of vote buying (tagged as clientelism) on two parallels, the positive and negative inducements. They argued that application of either positive or negative inducement depends on countries, regions and individuals. However, this study argues that in every electoral process, voters' inducement occurs, and it has minimal bearing with geographical location if literature has recognised positive and negative inducements. The above justification rests on assessing election campaign as positive inducement while gifts such as monetary and material are negative inducements.

### **Unemployment**

Unemployment rates in Nigeria have remained high, particularly among youth and recent graduates (Olubusoye et al., 2023). The lack of viable employment opportunities contributes to economic insecurity and disenchantment with the political system. Many unemployed individuals may view vote buying as a means of accessing financial assistance or patronage from political actors (Enilolobo et al., 2019; Okolie & Igbini, 2020). Politicians, aware of the frustrations and aspirations of unemployed youths, leverage promises of job creation, empowerment schemes, or government appointments as inducements during election campaigns. The prospect of securing employment or livelihood opportunities through political connections influences voting behavior and perpetuates the cycle of patronage politics.

### **Absence of Strong Institutions**

Weak institutional frameworks and ineffective governance mechanisms exacerbate the prevalence of vote buying in Nigeria (Ojeka et al., 2019). The absence of robust regulatory bodies and enforcement mechanisms undermines accountability and transparency in the electoral process. Political elites often wield disproportionate influence over state institutions, enabling them to manipulate electoral outcomes and perpetuate corrupt practices. The lack of credible electoral oversight and enforcement mechanisms diminishes public trust in the electoral system and erodes confidence in democratic institutions. Without strong institutions to safeguard the integrity of elections and hold perpetrators of vote buying accountable, the practice continues unabated, undermining the democratic aspirations of the Nigerian populace (C.J.S. et al., 2021).

Addressing the root causes of vote-buying in Nigeria requires comprehensive reforms aimed at tackling poverty, promoting economic opportunities, and strengthening institutional capacity. Effective governance, transparency, and citizen engagement are essential for fostering a democratic culture that prioritizes the collective welfare of the nation over narrow political interests.

### **Recommendations**

The study focused on the need to expand research efforts and academic discourse on vote buying within the field of media studies. Arising from that the following recommendations are made:

- (a) There is need to deepen understanding of the elements of electoral communication strategies and voter behaviour as related to media studies. Such understanding enhances explanation of the mechanisms through which vote buying influences electoral outcomes.
- (b) By conducting empirical studies and theoretical analyses, media scholars can contribute valuable information on the prevalence, causes, and consequences of vote buying in Nigeria and other democratic contexts.
- (c) The study highlights the need for proactive policy interventions and electoral reforms aimed at curbing the prevalence of vote buying and strengthening electoral integrity.
- (d) Policy makers and electoral authorities should prioritize the enforcement of existing anti-corruption laws and regulations, particularly those pertaining to electoral malpractice and voter inducements.
- (e) Electoral reforms should focus on enhancing transparency, accountability, and fairness in the electoral process, including the regulation of campaigns, financing, monitoring of political expenditures, and prosecution of vote buying offenders.
- (f) Furthermore, electoral institutions should collaborate with civil society organizations, media stakeholders, and international partners to promote public awareness campaigns, civic education initiatives, and grassroots mobilization efforts aimed at combating electoral corruption and promoting democratic values.
- (g) The study emphasizes the importance of strengthening democratic institutions and governance mechanisms to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process. Efforts should be made to enhance the independence, professionalism, and capacity of electoral management bodies, law enforcement agencies, and judicial institutions responsible for overseeing elections and adjudicating electoral disputes. By fostering a culture of transparency, accountability, and rule of law, democratic institutions can effectively deter electoral malpractice and uphold the principles of free and fair elections.
- (h) Furthermore, institutional reforms should prioritize the inclusion of marginalized communities, protection of electoral rights, and promotion of inclusive political participation to ensure the legitimacy and credibility of electoral outcomes.

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