

VOTE-BUYING AND ITS IMPLICATION ON DEMOCRATIZATION: AN INTERROGATION OF 2023 GENERAL ELECTION IN THE SOUTHERN SENATORIAL DISTRICT OF ADAMAWA STATE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the implications of vote-buying on democratization in the context of the 2023 general elections in the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State, Nigeria. Grounded in James C. Scott's Clientelism Theory, the research conceptualizes vote-buying as a patron-client exchange where political actors offer material incentives for electoral support, thereby undermining democratic accountability and institutional trust. The study pursued three objectives: to determine whether material gifts influenced voting behavior; to explore voter perceptions of candidates' motives for vote-buying, and to assess its impact on democratic consolidation. Using survey design, data were collected from 400 respondents across nine local government areas. Findings indicate high voter participation (85.25%), alongside pervasive vote-buying: 57.75% confirmed receiving cash or goods, 73.5% viewed it as acceptable, and 53% voted based on material inducement. Additionally, 92.75% linked vote-buying to intimidation, and 74.75% believed it undermines democratization. Despite measures like BVAS and the Naira redesign policy, the practice remained entrenched and normalized. The study concludes that vote-buying distorts electoral integrity, diminishes accountability, and entrenches political clientelism. It recommends, sustained voter education on electoral ethics, enforceable campaign finance audits, and the establishment of a functional Electoral Offences Commission to prosecute offenders. These reforms are critical to restoring trust and enhancing democratic participation in Nigeria.

Keywords: *Vote-buying; Clientelism; Electoral integrity; Democratization; Political accountability; Nigeria; 2023 elections; Adamawa State.*

Introduction

Elections are universally recognized as a foundational pillar of democratic governance. They provide citizens with the opportunity to choose their leaders and hold them accountable, thus enabling the exercise of political rights and civic responsibilities. For elections to be considered legitimate and democratic, they must be conducted freely and fairly, with equal opportunity for all eligible voters to participate without coercion, manipulation, or inducement (Diamond, 2008). In the Nigerian context, however, elections have often been characterized by malpractices that undermine the very principles of democracy they are meant to uphold.

Historically, electoral misconduct in Nigeria was dominated by overt acts of violence, including ballot box snatching, voter intimidation, and the use of political thugs to disrupt the electoral process (Ibeanu, 2007). However, a more covert and systemic form of electoral corruption vote-buying has emerged as a major concern in recent years. While the use of money in politics is not unique to Nigeria, the scale and normalization of vote-buying in the country's

elections present a unique and troubling challenge to democratic consolidation (Nichter, 2014; Bratton, 2008).

Vote-buying refers to the act of offering money or material incentives to voters in exchange for their electoral support. In Nigeria, this practice has become increasingly pervasive, particularly during elections held in the Fourth Republic (since 1999). It is often executed through various agents—party officials, campaign coordinators, or local enforcers—who operate both overtly and covertly at polling stations across the country. The practice is not only illegal but also corrosive to democratic values, as it reduces electoral participation to a financial transaction and compromises the sanctity of the ballot (INEC, 2023).

Though vote-buying appears to be a recent phenomenon, its roots can be traced back to earlier political dispensations. During the Social Democratic Party (SDP) presidential primaries in Jos in 1992, there were widespread allegations of financial inducement to secure delegate votes. This practice became so entrenched that it was cited by General Ibrahim Babangida as one of the reasons for annulling the June 12, 1993, presidential election widely regarded as the freest and fairest in Nigeria's history (Omotola, 2010).

Over time, vote-buying has evolved to encompass various phases of the electoral cycle. It now occurs not only on Election Day but also during voter registration, party primaries, and political campaigns. Despite legal frameworks such as the Electoral Act of 2022 (as amended), which prohibits and penalizes vote-buying under Article 130, enforcement has been ineffective. The law stipulates that any individual who gives or accepts money or gifts with the intent to influence voting behavior is guilty of an offence punishable by a ₦100,000 fine, one-year imprisonment, or both. Nevertheless, politicians continue to engage in the practice with impunity, often exploiting institutional weaknesses and regulatory laxity (INEC, 2023; Electoral Act, 2022). The vote-buying "marketplace" in Nigeria operates like a typical economic exchange. Political parties and candidates act as "buyers," voters become the "sellers," and votes are the commodities. The value of a vote varies depending on several factors, including the competitiveness of the constituency, the desperation of candidates, and the socio-economic conditions of the voters. In some high-stakes areas, votes are sold for as much as ₦10,000 (approximately \$13 USD), as observed in the 2023 general elections (YIAGA Africa, 2023). This represents a 500% increase from the ₦2,000 reportedly offered during the highly monetized 2007 general elections, which former President Olusegun Obasanjo famously described as a "do-or-die" affair (Ovwasa, 2013).

In an attempt to curb vote-buying ahead of the 2023 elections, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) introduced a Naira redesign policy to limit the availability of cash. However, the policy proved ineffective, as many politicians resorted to using foreign currencies, such as the U.S. dollar, to circumvent the cash restrictions and continue buying votes (Premium Times, 2023). This demonstrates the extent of political actors' desperation and the failure of state institutions to enforce electoral regulations effectively. The socio-economic context also contributes to the persistence of vote-buying. High levels of poverty, unemployment, and income inequality make many voters susceptible to financial inducements. According to Bratton (2008), in many developing democracies, voters are often compelled by immediate survival needs rather than long-term political ideals. This dynamic creates a vicious cycle where poor governance leads to poverty, which in turn increases the vulnerability of voters to electoral manipulation.

Furthermore, the enormous cost of electoral campaigns has made political contests exclusive to the wealthy elite, who can afford to finance vote-buying on a massive scale. This

marginalizes credible but financially less-empowered candidates and entrenches a system of political patronage and elite dominance (Oboh & Ajike, 2018). The implications of vote-buying are far-reaching. It not only undermines electoral credibility but also erodes public trust in democratic institutions. It creates an environment where political office is seen not as a platform for public service, but as an investment to be recouped through corrupt practices. As such, combating vote-buying is essential for strengthening Nigeria's democracy and ensuring that elections reflect the genuine will of the people. This study, therefore, seeks to explore the dynamics, causes, and consequences of vote-buying in Nigeria's electoral process, with a focus on its growing influence in the 2023 general elections.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to investigate the implications of vote-buying in the 2023 general election within the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State. Specifically, it seeks to:

- i. Determine whether material gifts given by politicians and their agents influenced voting patterns during the 2023 general elections.
- ii. Identify the electorate's perception of the reasons candidates engage in vote-buying during the same election period.
- iii. Examine voters' views on the impact of vote-buying on the democratization process in the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual Clarification

Vote-buying: In the Nigerian political context, vote-buying is a pervasive electoral malpractice that involves the exchange of money, food items, or other material incentives for votes. It is a transactional relationship where voters are induced to vote for a particular candidate or party. This practice has become increasingly normalized in Nigeria's electoral landscape, particularly during general and off-cycle elections. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) highlight how the 2023 elections were deeply marred by such practices, with credible allegations of political actors using newly printed currency to sway voters. Vote-buying compromises electoral integrity and weakens the legitimacy of democratic outcomes.

Democratization: In Nigeria refers to the ongoing transition and consolidation of democratic norms since the end of military rule in 1999. While regular elections are held, the quality and credibility of these elections are consistently undermined by systemic issues including electoral violence, weak institutions, and, prominently, vote-buying. As Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) argue, the mere occurrence of elections is not sufficient for democratization if electoral processes remain corrupt and uncompetitive. Nigeria's democratic journey remains fragile, with clientelism and transactional politics forming major obstacles to democratic deepening.

Typologies of vote-buying in Nigeria range from direct cash handouts on election day to more subtle forms such as "empowerment programs" where voters receive food items, wrappers, or job promises in exchange for political loyalty. Politicians often deploy party agents and local intermediaries—known as "vote canvassers" to distribute incentives in rural areas where monitoring is limited (Onapajo, 2022). There is also abstention buying, where opposition voters are paid to stay away from the polls, and turnout buying, where potential supporters are rewarded just for voting, regardless of monitoring ability (Omilusi, 2023).

Vote-Buying and Democratization

Impact on Electoral Credibility

Vote-buying significantly undermines the credibility of elections by distorting the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. In the 2023 general elections, widespread

reports of financial inducements offered to voters at polling stations compromised public confidence in the electoral outcome (Anene & Iyala, 2025). Despite technological innovations like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), which aimed to enhance electoral integrity, the persistent use of vote-buying overshadowed these reforms (Tom, 2025). When voters perceive that elections can be won through financial influence rather than merit or policy debate, the credibility of the process is eroded, fostering cynicism and diminishing the legitimacy of elected officials (Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025).

Impact on Political Accountability

Political accountability suffers when politicians can secure electoral victories through vote-buying instead of policy performance or service delivery. In such environments, politicians have little incentive to remain answerable to the electorate once elected. As observed in the 2023 elections in parts of Adamawa, many candidates invested heavily in short-term transactional relationships, knowing that financial incentives would substitute for their lack of governance record (Okoye et al., 2025). This undermines the foundational democratic principle of holding leaders accountable based on their actions in office, and it perpetuates a cycle where public officials prioritize private gain and patronage over governance.

Impact on Voter Participation

Paradoxically, vote-buying may increase voter turnout, but for the wrong reasons. Rather than being motivated by civic duty or policy preferences, voters participate to gain immediate material benefits. In the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa, interviews and election observation reports indicated that voters, particularly from impoverished communities, felt "obliged" to participate because of the expectation of financial inducement (Ezeabasili & Chibuzo, 2025). This distorts the democratic ideal of meaningful participation and turns voting into a marketplace transaction. Over time, this erodes the intrinsic value of democratic engagement and reduces elections to episodes of opportunistic exchange rather than civic expression.

Impact on Institutional Trust

Vote-buying damages trust in key democratic institutions, especially electoral bodies like INEC (Independent National Electoral Commission). When voters witness blatant vote-buying without consequences or when they believe that election results reflect who paid more rather than who was most popular trust in electoral institutions is deeply eroded. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) highlight how INEC's inability to curtail these practices in 2023 led to increased skepticism among the electorate, particularly in regions like Adamawa where reports of vote trading were widespread. Institutional trust is central to democratic consolidation, and its erosion contributes to political disengagement and resistance to democratic norms (Okoye et al., 2025).

Theoretical framework

The phenomenon of vote-buying in the 2023 general election in the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State is best understood through the lens of Clientelism Theory, first articulated by James C. Scott in 1972. Clientelism describes a hierarchical, reciprocal relationship between political patrons (candidates or parties) and clients (voters), where material benefits—such as cash, food, or clothing—are exchanged for political support. In this framework, voters are not mobilized by policy proposals or ideological alignment, but by promises of immediate, tangible rewards. This theory aptly explains the dynamics observed during the 2023 elections in Adamawa, where political actors strategically targeted impoverished communities with inducements to secure loyalty and votes.

In the Southern Senatorial District, this patron-client dynamic was evident in how campaign resources were channeled through local intermediaries party agents, religious leaders, and youth associations—who acted as brokers of electoral support. These brokers distributed money and goods to voters, often in a door-to-door fashion or within religious and community gatherings, reinforcing informal political networks rooted in loyalty and dependency. Rather than fostering a democratic culture based on accountability and civic participation, these exchanges entrenched short-term, transactional relationships between citizens and elites.

Clientelism, in this context, creates a distorted version of democracy. While it increases voter turnout superficially, it undermines the quality of democratic choice. Voters are conditioned to associate elections with material gains, and politicians, in turn, prioritize resource mobilization for vote-buying over investment in policy development or governance reform. As a result, credible candidates without financial muscle are marginalized, and public office becomes a tool for personal enrichment and patronage repayment. This was clearly visible in the 2023 elections, where campaign narratives were drowned out by the scramble for financial inducements.

Methodology

The study was conducted in the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State, comprising nine Local Government Areas Numan, Lamurde, Guyuk, Shelleng, Demsa, Ganye, Mayo-Belwa, Toundou, and Jada. The region is characterized by a mixed urban–rural population, diverse ethnic composition, and strong agricultural livelihoods. Its political significance and recurring reports of vote-buying during the 2023 general elections justified its selection as the study area. The research adopted a survey design suitable for collecting data from a large population within a limited timeframe, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods to examine voters’ perceptions, attitudes, and experiences regarding the implications of vote-buying on democratization. The population consisted of eligible voters, electoral officials, party agents, and community leaders across the nine LGAs. The projected 2022 population of the nine LGAs in the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State is 1,764,719, based on a 2.6% annual growth rate from 2006 census data. A total of 400 respondents were drawn using the Taro Yamane formula for sample size determination, and a multi-stage sampling technique was employed selecting one ward from each LGA through stratified random sampling and respondents through systematic random sampling using the voters’ register as a frame.

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

$$N = 1,764,719$$

$$n = \frac{1,764,719}{1 + 1,764,719 (0.05)^2}$$

$$n = 400$$

A structured questionnaire was the main instrument for data collection, divided into sections on demographic information and on causes, forms, and implications of vote-buying, rated on a five-point Likert scale. Key informant interviews with selected electoral officers and community leaders complemented the survey data. The researcher and trained assistants personally administered the instruments to minimize non-response, ensuring ethical standards such as voluntary participation, informed consent, and confidentiality. Data were analyzed

using SPSS version 25, employing descriptive statistics (frequency counts, percentages, and mean scores).

Results

This section presents and analyses data collected from 400 respondents in the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State. The analysis focuses on patterns and relationships between electoral participation, vote buying practices, and perceptions of their impact on democratic processes. Tables are accompanied by interpretive commentary that links the findings to the study's objectives and relevant literature on electoral behavior and political corruption in Nigeria.

Table 1: Participation in the 2023 General Election

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	341	85.25
No	59	14.75
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Table 1 shows that voter turnout in the 2023 general election was relatively high, with 85.25% of respondents reporting participation. This suggests substantial electoral engagement within the district. However, the remaining 14.75% abstention rate may reflect issues such as voter apathy or distrust in the electoral process a pattern consistent with national findings.

Table 2: Issuance of Cash or Goods during Elections

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	231	57.75
No	169	42.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Over 57% of respondents confirmed witnessing the distribution of cash or goods during elections. This reflects persistent vote buying practices and suggests the commodification of voter choice, a problem widely discussed in electoral integrity studies. The findings indicate that vote buying remains normalized and likely affects electoral outcomes.

Table 3: Attitudes toward Gifts to Voters during Campaigns

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes (Acceptable)	294	73.5
No (Unacceptable)	106	26.5
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024.

A significant majority (73.5%) believe that giving gifts to voters during campaigns is acceptable. This finding reveals a troubling moral normalization of vote buying, implying a weak ethical perception of electoral corruption.

Table 4: Frequency of Material Inducements by Politicians

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Always	288	72.0
Sometimes	70	17.5
Rarely	33	8.25
Never	9	2.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

An overwhelming 72% of respondents reported that politicians “always” offer material gifts or cash during elections. This reinforces the prevalence of systemic clientelism and supports literature describing Nigerian elections as transactional rather than ideological. The consistent recurrence of inducements demonstrates entrenched political patronage networks.

Table 5: Voting Behavior and Material Promises

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	212	53.0
No	188	47.0
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

More than half (53%) of the respondents admitted voting because of promises of cash or material gifts. This suggests that vote buying significantly influences electoral decision-making. The finding is critical because it links directly to the study’s objective of understanding how material incentives shape political participation.

Table 6: Vote Buying and Intimidation

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	371	92.75
No	29	7.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

A striking 92.75% of respondents associate vote buying with intimidation during campaigns. This high proportion indicates that coercion and inducement are interlinked, reinforcing the argument that electoral corruption operates through both psychological and material control mechanisms.

Table 7: Main Political Parties and Vote Buying

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	311	77.75
No	89	22.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Approximately 78% of respondents believe that major political parties are primarily responsible for vote buying. This suggests institutionalization of the practice within dominant party structures, supporting the argument that electoral malpractices are not isolated but systemic.

Table 8: Influence of Material Gifts on Voting Decisions

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	215	53.75
No	185	46.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

A narrow majority (53.75%) acknowledged that material gifts influenced voter decisions in their area. This implies that despite growing democratic awareness, economic vulnerability still shapes electoral behavior, thereby weakening democratic consolidation.

Table 9: Perceived Impact of Vote Buying on Democratization

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	299	74.75
No	101	25.25
Total	400	100

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Most respondents (74.75%) agreed that vote buying undermines democratization. This reflects a paradox while many accept vote buying as normal, they simultaneously recognize its negative implications.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State reveal significant patterns in electoral participation and the pervasive influence of vote buying on Nigeria's democratic processes. Voter turnout was notably high, with 85.25% of respondents indicating participation in the 2023 general election, suggesting substantial civic engagement. However, the 14.75% who abstained may reflect persistent voter apathy or disenchantment with the electoral system trends consistent with national observations (Omotola, 2023). This duality

underscores the tension between democratic enthusiasm and skepticism in Nigeria's evolving political landscape.

A central theme emerging from the data is the normalization of vote buying. Over half (57.75%) of respondents reported witnessing the distribution of cash or goods during elections, and 73.5% considered such campaign gifts acceptable. These findings suggest that material inducement has become an embedded feature of electoral behavior, often viewed more as campaign support than as corruption. This moral ambiguity is shaped by socioeconomic hardship, which blurs the distinction between voter welfare and unethical inducement. The findings mirror broader studies that frame Nigerian elections as transactional exercises (Agbaje & Adejumbi, 2021), where poverty and political desperation drive both the supply and demand for vote buying.

The prevalence of material inducement is further evidenced by the 72% of respondents who stated that politicians "always" offer gifts during elections, with 53% admitting to voting based on such promises. These results highlight the entrenchment of clientelist networks, where political loyalty is exchanged for short-term material gain (Ibrahim & Garuba, 2021; Bratton, 2020). The fact that 92.75% of respondents associate vote buying with intimidation suggests that coercion often accompanies inducement, reinforcing a system where voter autonomy is compromised through both material and psychological manipulation. This paints a troubling picture of elections as arenas of manipulation rather than free expression.

Lastly, the findings reveal that while material inducements influence voter behavior, there is widespread awareness of their corrosive impact on democracy. Nearly 78% blamed major political parties for institutionalizing vote buying, and 74.75% agreed that the practice undermines democratization. Yet, 53.75% still admitted that such gifts shaped voting decisions in their communities. This contradiction accepting inducement while recognizing its harm reflects what Gyimah-Boadi (2021) describes as "democratic disillusionment," where voters feel trapped in a corrupt system but see few viable alternatives. Ultimately, the findings illustrate a deeply conflicted electorate one that engages with the democratic process while simultaneously contributing to its erosion.

Conclusion

The study revealed that material inducements such as cash and goods significantly influenced voting behavior during the 2023 general elections, with over half of respondents (53%) confirming their votes were motivated by such promises. Voters largely perceived that politicians and their agents engage in vote buying primarily to secure electoral advantage, often exploiting socioeconomic vulnerabilities, as evidenced by the 73.5% who considered the practice acceptable and the 72% who observed its consistent use. Furthermore, while many voters normalized the act of receiving gifts, a strong majority (74.75%) simultaneously acknowledged that vote buying undermines democratization by distorting free choice and reinforcing patron-client relationships. These findings underscore a complex dynamic in which economic need, political manipulation, and ethical ambivalence intersect to weaken electoral

integrity and hinder democratic consolidation in the Southern Senatorial District of Adamawa State.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by the study's findings and are aligned with its three core objectives:

- i. INEC and civic organizations should implement sustained, community-based voter education programs that promote issue-based voting and highlight the long-term consequences of vote buying. These initiatives should be tailored to areas with high incidences of electoral inducement and focus on first-time voters and economically disadvantaged groups.
- ii. Political parties should be mandated to adopt enforceable internal codes of conduct and be subject to regular, independent audits of campaign financing. These audits should ensure transparency in campaign funding and impose strict penalties for candidates or agents involved in vote buying, including disqualification and legal prosecution.
- iii. A specialized Electoral Offences Commission should be formally established and adequately resourced to investigate and prosecute electoral malpractices, including vote buying. Simultaneously, community-based democracy forums should be launched to increase public awareness of how vote buying undermines voter autonomy and weakens democratic accountability.

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