

Beyond Poverty: How Vote Buying Influences Voters' Candidate Choice in Nigeria

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Abstract

Vote buying has become a defining feature of Nigeria's electoral politics, yet poverty, the conventional explanation for vote selling, accounts for only part of how inducements shape candidate choice. This article examines the mechanisms through which vote buying influences voters' candidate preferences in Nigeria. It adopts a qualitative secondary-synthesis design that draws on published analyses of Afrobarometer Round 8 data, descriptive findings from National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) reports on the 2023 elections, and peer-reviewed studies, and it applies critical discourse analysis to media reports, academic studies, and policy documents; no primary data were collected and no new statistical analysis was conducted. The synthesis indicates that vote buying operates through clientelist networks, targeting based on partisanship and ethnicity, institutionalized party practices, and the displacement of issue-based campaigning. The NBS reports that 40 percent of citizens offered money or favors in 2023 voted for the offeror because of the offer, whereas 55 percent said the offer did not influence their choice. Poverty alone does not adequately explain vote-selling behavior; partisanship, ethnic identity, social expectations, and normalized transactional politics also shape responses to inducements. Vote buying weakens democratic accountability by loosening the link between electoral mandate and governance performance and by marginalizing competent leadership. The article recommends coordinated supply- and demand-side reforms, including stronger enforcement, sustained voter education, and insulation of social protection programs from electoral manipulation.

Keywords: Clientelism, Democratic Accountability, Electoral Integrity, Ethnic Politics, Partisanship.

Introduction

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and largest democracy, has been under uninterrupted civilian rule since 1999, yet the quality of its democracy remains deeply contested, and vote buying is widely regarded as one of the most pervasive threats to

electoral integrity (Kramon, 2016; Adeleke et al., 2024). Vote buying is commonly defined as the offer of money, gifts, or other benefits in exchange for a voter's support at the polls (Stokes et al., 2013). In the Nigerian setting, Awoyemi (2025) shows that targeting is shaped by partisanship and ethnic dynamics rather than by economic circumstances alone, which is why the practice cannot be treated as a simple by-product of electoral competition.

The scale of vote buying in Nigeria is considerable. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024) reports that 22 percent of citizens were personally offered money in exchange for their vote before or during the 2023 general elections, up from 17 percent in 2019, a rise of five percentage points, while a further nine percent were offered other favors. Not every offer translated into a vote, however: the same survey indicates that offers influenced the choices of only a minority of recipients (see Section 4.4). Vote buying is therefore a central mechanism of electoral mobilization, but its relationship to candidate choice is more complicated than the idea of "buying" votes implies.

The significance of vote buying extends beyond the immediate exchange of cash for votes. It alters the relationship between citizens and their representatives, recasting political participation as a market transaction rather than a civic act (Kramon, 2016; Nichter, 2008). Where votes are traded, elections risk rewarding those with the deepest pockets instead of those with the strongest policy platforms or governance records. This has implications for governance quality, political accountability, and the meaning of democratic representation in Nigeria (Adeleke et al., 2024; Shehu et al., 2025).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the extensive literature on vote buying in developing democracies, significant gaps remain in understanding how vote buying influences voters' candidate choice in Nigeria. Much of the scholarship has emphasized economic determinants, on the assumption that poverty pushes voters to exchange their votes for immediate material gain (Stokes et al., 2013; Kramon, 2016), and some survey-based evidence supports a poverty effect (Jensen & Justesen, 2014; Achinike, 2026). Yet this explanation does not account for the complexity of vote markets, in which voters often accept inducements while keeping their preferred candidate, and in which partisans and co-ethnics may be targeted regardless of their economic circumstances (Awoyemi, 2025).

The 2023 elections brought these complexities into sharp relief. NBS (2024) survey evidence, reported in Section 4.4, indicates that a majority of recipients of inducements said the offers did not shape their vote choice. This challenges the simple assumption that vote buying automatically translates into vote selling, and it suggests that voters exercise agency within vote markets, accepting inducements while voting on other grounds such as partisanship, ethnic loyalty, or policy preferences (Adeleke et al., 2024).

Moreover, the mechanisms through which vote buying influences candidate choice are multifaceted and poorly understood. Reporting suggests that parties have refined their voter-targeting strategies, ranging from cash and food distribution to the diversion of social protection programs and the use of community leaders as intermediaries (Guardian, 2024;

New Telegraph, 2026). Targeting appears to be calibrated by ethnicity and partisanship and, to a lesser extent, poverty, producing a landscape of electoral inducement that resists simple explanation (Awoyemi, 2025).

This study addresses these gaps by synthesizing published empirical evidence and critically analyzing media, academic, and policy discourse on the multidimensional ways in which vote buying influences voters' candidate choice in Nigeria. It moves beyond the poverty-centric narrative to examine the political, social, and institutional factors that shape electoral behavior. Its contribution is interpretive and integrative: it generates no new survey data and conducts no original statistical analysis, but it brings together findings from separate sources and reads them through clientelism theory, rational choice theory, and prebendal democracy.

Research Questions

This article is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the mechanisms through which vote buying operates in Nigerian elections?
2. How does vote buying influence voters' candidate choice, and what factors mediate this influence?
3. To what extent does poverty explain vote-selling behavior, and what other factors are significant?
4. What are the implications of vote buying for democratic accountability and governance quality in Nigeria?

Significance of the Study

This study makes several contributions to the literature on electoral politics in developing democracies. First, it offers an integrated synthesis of the vote buying mechanisms reported in Nigeria, tracing a shift from simple cash-for-votes transactions toward more organized clientelist networks (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). Second, it challenges the conventional poverty-centric explanation of vote selling by bringing together evidence on partisanship, ethnicity, and social expectations (Awoyemi, 2025). Third, it examines the implications of vote buying for candidate selection and governance quality, contributing to debates on democratic consolidation in Africa (Adeleke et al., 2024; Shehu et al., 2025). Finally, it offers recommendations for electoral reform that address both the supply and demand sides of vote markets.

Scope and Limitations

This study focuses on vote buying in Nigerian elections from 1999 to the present, with particular emphasis on the 2023 general elections (Adeleke et al., 2024; Musa et al., 2024) and the 2024 off-cycle elections in Edo and Ondo States (Braithwaite & Fajimbola, 2025). The analysis is based exclusively on secondary sources: published academic studies, government and agency reports, and media coverage. This allows a broad overview of vote

buying patterns, but it limits the study to the availability, quality, and measurement choices of existing data, and it means that the study cannot test claims about candidate choice independently. Primary data collection through surveys or interviews would complement these findings but was beyond the scope of this article.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Vote Buying

Vote buying is defined as the practice of political actors using money, material goods, or promises to influence voters into backing a particular candidate during an election (Kramon, 2016). This definition encompasses a range of activities, from direct cash payments to voters to the provision of food, clothing, or other goods in exchange for electoral support. The concept is closely related to clientelism, which refers to transactions between politicians and citizens whereby material favors are offered in exchange for political support at the polls (Stokes et al., 2013; Diaz-Cayeros, 2008).

The literature distinguishes between different forms of vote buying. Turnout buying refers to inducements offered to encourage voters to participate in elections, regardless of which candidate they support (Nichter, 2008). Vote buying proper involves inducements offered in exchange for support for a specific candidate or party (Kramon, 2016). In practice, these forms often overlap, with politicians using inducements both to mobilize voters and to secure their support (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013).

Scholars have also distinguished between retail and wholesale vote buying (Stokes et al., 2013; Kramon, 2016). Retail vote buying involves direct transactions between candidates or their agents and individual voters. Wholesale vote buying involves the distribution of resources through intermediaries such as community leaders, religious figures, or party officials who mobilize blocks of voters (Adeleke et al., 2024). The Nigerian context features both forms, with political parties employing increasingly sophisticated strategies to reach voters at multiple levels (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026).

Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain vote buying in developing democracies. Clientelism theory, rooted in the work of scholars such as Stokes et al. (2013), views vote buying as part of broader patron-client relationships in which politicians provide material benefits in exchange for political support. In this framework, vote buying is not an aberration but a rational strategy for politicians to build and maintain electoral coalitions in contexts where parties are weakly institutionalized and ideological commitments are shallow (Diaz-Cayeros, 2008).

Rational choice theory offers another lens for understanding vote buying (Kramon, 2016; Nichter, 2008). From this perspective, both politicians and voters engage in cost-benefit calculations. Politicians invest in vote buying when the expected return in terms of votes exceeds the cost of the inducements. Voters sell their votes when the immediate material benefit outweighs the value, they place on voting according to their preferences (Stokes et

al., 2013). This framework helps explain why vote buying is more prevalent in poor communities where the marginal utility of cash or goods is higher (Stokes et al., 2013; Kramon, 2016).

The concept of prebendal democracy, developed by Joseph (1987), provides a particularly useful framework for understanding the Nigerian case. Prebendal democracy describes a political system in which state power is used for personal enrichment, and political offices are treated as sources of patronage rather than as vehicles for public service (Joseph, 1987). In this context, vote buying is consistent with the broader commodification of politics, in which elections are understood as opportunities for material gain rather than as mechanisms for selecting competent leaders (Shehu et al., 2025).

Vote Buying in the Nigerian Context

Vote buying has a long history in Nigerian electoral politics, and it has been described as an integral part of campaign strategy in the Fourth Republic (Essien & Oghuvbu, 2021). One factor said to have shaped its current form is the improved capacity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), particularly its use of digital technology, which has made ballot box stuffing and result falsification more difficult (INEC, 2026). Manipulation is then said to have shifted from the counting stage to the voting stage, as politicians target voters directly rather than altering results (Adeleke et al., 2024).

The 2022 party primaries illustrated the scale of the problem at the nomination stage. News reports indicate that delegates to the primaries of the two major parties were paid large sums, reportedly running to thousands of dollars, to secure their support for particular aspirants (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026).

The 2023 general elections appear to have marked a new peak. The NBS (2024) data discussed in Section 4.1 point to a rise in reported vote buying relative to 2019, and an empirical study of Kebbi State examined vote buying and turnout buying during the same elections (Musa et al., 2024). Braimah and Fajimbola (2025) associate the incidence of vote buying in the 2024 Edo and Ondo off-cycle elections with severe poverty, weak institutions, limited civic awareness, and patronage politics.

Determinants of Vote Buying

Scholars have identified multiple determinants of vote buying in Nigeria. Poverty is frequently cited as a key factor, on the assumption that economically vulnerable voters are more likely to be targeted and to accept inducements (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). The evidence, however, is mixed. Jensen and Justesen (2014) find that poorer voters are more likely to be targeted across sub-Saharan Africa, and Achinike (2026) reports a positive association between household poverty and exposure to inducement in a survey of Nigerian respondents. By contrast, Awoyemi's (2025) analysis of Afrobarometer Round 8 data indicates that poverty is not a strong predictor of being targeted for vote buying in Nigeria. Awoyemi (2025) finds that partisanship significantly increases the likelihood of being targeted. This is consistent with the argument that parties direct clientelist transfers toward

their own supporters, whose votes should already be secure, rather than toward swing voters (Stokes et al., 2013). The logic is that partisans are more likely to reciprocate inducements with votes, which makes spending on them more cost-effective (Kramon, 2016; Nichter, 2008).

Ethnicity also plays a significant role in targeting. Awoyemi (2025) reports that ethnic dynamics vary, with Hausa and Igbo voters showing distinct patterns. The Hausa, historically linked to higher levels of political mobilization, are said to draw on ethnoreligious networks rooted in Islamic traditions and regional solidarity (Horowitz, 1985; Posner, 2005), and these networks have shaped electoral behavior and the targeting of inducements (Awoyemi, 2025).

Institutional factors are also important (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026). Studies point to weak electoral institutions, limited voter education, and poorly enforced sanctions as conditions that allow vote buying to persist (Essien & Oghuvbu, 2021; Braimah & Fajimbola, 2025), and media reports suggest that parties have adapted their methods to circumvent reforms (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026).

Vote Buying and Candidate Choice

The relationship between vote buying and candidate choice is complex and contested (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). Some scholars argue that vote buying directly determines electoral outcomes by enabling candidates with greater financial resources to purchase victory (Diaz-Cayeros, 2008). Others suggest that vote buying has limited effects, with voters accepting inducements but voting according to other preferences (Nichter, 2008). Cross-national survey evidence from 37 elections in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America likewise suggests that the electoral impact of vote buying is limited on average (Gallego et al., 2023).

The Nigerian evidence suggests a nuanced picture. NBS (2024) survey data, discussed in Section 4.4, show that vote buying shaped the choices of a substantial minority of those offered inducements, while most reported no influence, which is consistent with the view that many voters exercise agency within vote markets (Adeleke et al., 2024).

As noted in Section 2.4, partisanship and ethnicity are the main factors reported to condition how inducements are received (Awoyemi, 2025; Stokes et al., 2013).

A further strand of the literature and media commentary argues that the normalization of vote buying has displaced issue-based campaigning and changed the basis on which candidates are chosen (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026; Shehu et al., 2025). This claim is examined in Sections 4.4 and 5.2.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the extensive literature on vote buying in Nigeria, several gaps remain (Awoyemi, 2025). First, much of the existing research has focused on the supply side of vote markets (the strategies and behaviors of politicians and parties) with less attention to the demand side (the motivations and calculations of voters) (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013).

Second, the relationship between poverty and vote selling has often been assumed rather than demonstrated, and the available evidence is mixed (Awoyemi, 2025; Achinike, 2026). Third, the mechanisms through which vote buying influences candidate choice are poorly understood, particularly the interplay between inducements, partisanship, ethnicity, and other factors (Stokes et al., 2013). Fourth, the implications of vote buying for governance quality and democratic accountability have not been fully explored. This study responds to these gaps by synthesizing existing evidence on the multidimensional ways in which vote buying influences voters' candidate choice in Nigeria.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative secondary-synthesis design combined with critical discourse analysis. It does not collect primary data, and it does not construct or analyze an original dataset. The quantitative evidence it draws on consists of descriptive statistics already published in the NBS (2024) corruption survey report and in Awoyemi's (2025) analysis of Afrobarometer Round 8 data (Afrobarometer, 2021); these figures are reported and interpreted, not recomputed. The qualitative component is a critical discourse analysis of media reports, academic studies, and policy documents on vote buying in Nigeria (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2008). The design is therefore best described as a narrative synthesis of published quantitative findings supported by discourse analysis, rather than as a mixed-methods design in the sense of Creswell and Creswell (2018), which typically involves the researchers' own collection and analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Data Sources

Afrobarometer Round 8 data: The Afrobarometer is a pan-African survey research project that measures public attitudes on democracy, governance, and economic conditions (Afrobarometer, 2021). Awoyemi (2025) reports that the Round 8 survey in Nigeria was conducted in 2021 with a nationally representative sample, and that it includes an item asking respondents whether they were offered food, gifts, or money in exchange for their vote in the most recent election. This study did not reanalyze the Afrobarometer data; it relies on the results published by Awoyemi (2025).

National Bureau of Statistics report: The NBS (2024) report, *Corruption in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends (Third Survey on Corruption as Experienced by the Population)*, released in July 2024, includes findings on vote buying in the 2023 general elections and compares them with 2019. It reports the share of citizens personally offered money or other favors, the share who said the offer influenced their vote choice, and changes in selected geopolitical zones (NBS, 2024). This study uses the figures as published and did not recompute them.

Academic studies: The analysis draws on scholarly studies of vote buying in Nigeria, including a qualitative study of the 2023 elections (Adeleke et al., 2024), a critical discourse analysis of the 2024 Edo and Ondo off-cycle elections (Braimah & Fajimbola, 2025), an

empirical study of Kebbi State in the 2023 elections (Musa et al., 2024), an analysis of Afrobarometer data (Awoyemi, 2025), and studies of the poverty, hunger, and democratic consequences of vote buying (Essien & Oghuvbu, 2021; Shehu et al., 2025; Achinike, 2026). Media reports: Media investigations, particularly those by The Guardian (2024) and New Telegraph (2026), together with BusinessDay (2023) and The Conversation (2022), provide accounts of vote buying practices and their effects on electoral outcomes.

Policy documents and civil society reports: Reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (2026), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (2023), the International Republican Institute (2026), and the Centre for Democracy and Development (2023) offer insights into the institutional dimensions of vote buying.

Data Analysis

Published quantitative findings were treated as secondary evidence. The prevalence statistics from NBS (2024) and the patterns of targeting by partisanship, ethnicity, and poverty reported by Awoyemi (2025) were extracted, compared across sources, and interpreted in light of the theoretical frameworks. The authors did not compute descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, or models of their own. Where figures from different sources differ in instrument, election, or unit of measurement (for example, NBS survey estimates and Centre for Democracy and Development observer reports), they are reported separately and are not combined.

Qualitative data were analyzed using critical discourse analysis, following the framework developed by Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2008). This approach examines how texts, including media reports, policy documents, and academic studies, construct meaning about vote buying and its effects. The analysis focused on identifying patterns in how vote buying is discussed, the assumptions underlying these discussions, and the implications for understanding electoral behavior.

Ethical Considerations

This study relies entirely on secondary data sources, all of which are publicly available and have been anonymized where necessary (Afrobarometer, 2021; NBS, 2024). No primary data collection involving human subjects was conducted, so no ethical review was required. All sources are cited appropriately to acknowledge the contributions of other researchers (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Findings: Synthesis of Published Evidence

This section synthesizes evidence published in the sources cited. Findings are reported as stated by those sources, and the authors did not compute any of the statistics presented. Where this study offers its own reading of the evidence, the passage is marked *Interpretation (this study)*; passages without that marker restate findings from the cited sources. Figures from different sources are kept separate because they differ in survey instrument, election, and unit of measurement.

The Prevalence and Scale of Vote Buying

The reviewed evidence indicates that vote buying is widespread and has increased. The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2024) reports that 22 percent of Nigerians were personally offered money in exchange for their vote before or during the 2023 general elections, up from 17 percent in 2019, and that a further nine percent were offered other favors such as food, clothing, or goods, compared with four percent in 2019. The NBS also reports that 10 percent said another member of their household, rather than they themselves, was approached in 2023, compared with five percent in 2019. Regional differences are discussed in Section 4.6.

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC, 2023) reported apprehending over 65 persons for alleged vote buying and inducement across 28 states during the 2023 governorship and House of Assembly elections. *Interpretation (this study)*: Set against the survey estimates of prevalence, this number of apprehensions is small, which is consistent with weak enforcement (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026), although arrest counts and survey prevalence measure different things and cannot be compared directly.

Mechanisms of Vote Buying

The reviewed studies and media reports describe vote buying in Nigeria as operating through several overlapping mechanisms (Adeleke et al., 2024; Braimah & Fajimbola, 2025; Shehu et al., 2025).

Direct cash payments: Cash is the form most prominently reported in survey evidence, with 22 percent of Nigerians reporting personal offers of money in 2023 (NBS, 2024), compared with nine percent reporting offers of other favors. Reported amounts vary widely. New Telegraph (2026) cites inducements of N10,000 to N20,000 in an Osun State governorship election, with some claims reaching N50,000, whereas the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) reported payments of about N1,000 to N2,000 in parts of Edo and Benue States in March 2023. *Interpretation (this study)*: Read together, these reports are consistent with rising prices for votes, which may reflect more competitive elections and the normalization of vote buying (New Telegraph, 2026), although the figures come from different elections and reporting methods and cannot establish a trend.

Material inducements: Beyond cash, political actors offer a range of material goods in exchange for votes (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). Press reports describe community-level distributions of staple foods such as rice, semovita, and noodles, and of farming inputs such as fertilizer and tools, often presented as empowerment or democracy dividends (Guardian, 2024; Adeleke et al., 2024). Adeleke et al. (2024), in a qualitative study of four states, report that inducements in the 2023 elections also took less conventional forms, including branded materials, payments linked to social events and to cooperative or artisan societies, and temporary support for particular groups.

Clientelist networks: Contemporary vote buying is increasingly described as working through organized networks of intermediaries rather than through direct exchanges between candidates and voters (Stokes et al., 2013; Kramon, 2016). Reports describe party

operatives, consultants, and contractors who handle the distribution of goods and, in some cases, divert part of the resources meant for voters (New Telegraph, 2026; Guardian, 2024), and Adeleke et al. (2024) suggest that such arrangements have been adapted to work around electoral reforms.

Tally systems: New Telegraph (2026) reports a more recent innovation in which compliance is verified through tally systems. According to that report, polling officials allegedly arrange voting cubicles so that party agents can see how ballots are marked, after which the voter receives a tally from a party agent and is paid outside the polling station (New Telegraph, 2026; Guardian, 2024). If accurate, this practice defeats ballot secrecy and allows parties to verify compliance before paying.

Decentralized payment systems: The same report describes payment dispersed across several locations, with voters directed by a tally keeper to different payment points so that the exposure of one point does not halt the scheme (New Telegraph, 2026). *Interpretation (this study):* The pairing of tallies with dispersed payment points suggests that parties are adapting vote buying to problems of monitoring and compliance, a point developed in Section 5.4.

Exploitation of social programs: Reports allege that incumbent politicians have used social protection programs for electoral gain. Programs such as N-Power, TraderMoni, and the Micro Enterprise Enhancement Scheme are reported to have been manipulated to finance campaigns (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026). *Interpretation (this study):* This is a distinctive form of inducement because it uses public resources, which blurs the line between legitimate social protection and electoral manipulation (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026).

Targeting Strategies

Awoyemi's (2025) analysis of Afrobarometer Round 8 data is the main source of evidence on targeting reviewed here. It indicates that targeting in Nigeria is shaped mainly by partisanship and ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, poverty.

Partisanship: Awoyemi (2025) finds that partisanship significantly increases the likelihood of being targeted for vote buying (the underlying clientelist logic is set out in Section 2.4). *Interpretation (this study):* Because partisans appear to be the most likely targets and the most likely to reciprocate, targeting may help explain why a substantial minority of recipients reported voting for the offeror because of the offer (Section 4.4), but the sources reviewed do not link the two datasets directly.

Ethnicity: Awoyemi (2025) also finds that ethnicity matters for targeting, that Hausa and Igbo voters show distinct patterns, and that ethnic networks play a significant role in mobilization among Igbo voters (the Hausa case is described in Section 2.4). *Interpretation (this study):* These findings suggest that ethnic identity operates both as a shortcut for political mobilization and as a channel for clientelist targeting (Horowitz, 1985; Posner, 2005).

Poverty: Awoyemi (2025) finds that poverty is not a strong predictor of being targeted for vote buying. Other studies report a role for poverty: Braimah and Fajimbola (2025) link

extreme poverty to a higher incidence of vote buying in the 2024 off-cycle elections, and Achinike (2026) and Jensen and Justesen (2014) report positive associations between poverty and exposure to inducement in survey data. *Interpretation (this study)*: The evidence is therefore divided on whether poverty drives targeting. The differences may reflect the different measures, samples, and election types involved, and they support the narrower claim made in this article, that poverty alone does not adequately explain vote buying, rather than the stronger claim that poverty is irrelevant.

Vote Buying and Candidate Choice

The reviewed evidence offers important insights into how vote buying influences candidate choice. The NBS (2024) survey reports that, among citizens personally offered money or favors in the 2023 general elections, 40 percent voted for the person or party that made the offer precisely because of the offer, while 55 percent said the offer did not influence their vote choice. Vote buying therefore shaped candidate choice for a substantial minority of recipients but not for a majority.

Interpretation (this study): Many recipients appear to accept inducements without changing how they vote, which indicates that an offer is not the same as a vote. This reading is consistent with cross-national survey evidence that vote buying has a limited electoral impact on average (Gallego et al., 2023) and with Nichter's (2008) argument about turnout buying. Self-reported influence is, however, an imperfect measure, since respondents may under-report or over-report the effect of inducements. The agency of voters is developed further in Section 5.4.

Partisanship and ethnicity are the main factors reported to mediate the effect of inducements (Awoyemi, 2025; see Section 4.3).

Media coverage reports that issue-based campaigning has been displaced: parties are said to be spending more on inducements than on policy campaigns, and voters' choices are described as increasingly shaped by candidates' financial resources rather than by manifestos (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026). *Interpretation (this study)*: These claims rest on media reporting rather than on systematic measurement, and they should be treated as informed commentary, not as established findings.

Institutionalization of Vote Buying

Adeleke et al. (2024), drawing on interviews and focus group discussions in four states, report that vote buying in the 2023 elections raised turnout and was more entrenched in general elections and among ruling parties than in off-cycle contests. *Interpretation (this study)*: This is consistent with the claim that vote buying has become institutionalized, a process that reflects its normalization and the weakness of enforcement mechanisms (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026).

The 2022 presidential primaries of the two major parties, discussed in Section 2.3, are cited in media reports as an example of institutionalization at the nomination stage (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026). *Interpretation (this study)*: If delegate payments of this kind

are routine, vote buying is not confined to general elections but also shapes who becomes a candidate, so that it is a central feature, not a peripheral one, of Nigeria's electoral politics. *Interpretation (this study)*: Institutionalization has implications for candidate selection. Where aspirants can buy their way through primaries, nominees may be chosen on financial resources more than on qualifications or policy platforms (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026; Shehu et al., 2025), which is the route by which vote buying is said to marginalize competent leadership.

Regional Variations

The NBS (2024) reports that the share of citizens offered inducements in the North-West rose from 23 percent in 2019 to 44 percent in 2023, with minimal or no change in the South-West, South-South, and North-Central zones. Observer reports on the March 2023 governorship and state house of assembly elections describe a different pattern: the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) recorded vote buying at 25.3 percent of observed polling units nationally, with the highest shares in the North-West (35.4 percent) and the South-East (41.4 percent). The two sets of figures measure different things, namely citizens' reports of personal offers in the 2023 election cycle and observers' reports of incidents at polling units in sub-national elections, and they are not directly comparable.

Interpretation (this study): In the North-West, where the NBS records its sharpest rise, Awoyemi's (2025) account of Hausa ethnoreligious networks offers one possible explanation of how inducements are mobilized (Horowitz, 1985; Posner, 2005). None of the reviewed sources tests this link directly, so it remains a hypothesis.

Interpretation (this study): In the South-East, where observers reported the highest share of polling units with vote buying in March 2023 (CDD, 2023), Awoyemi (2025) identifies distinct patterns among Igbo voters and notes the emergence of the Labour Party as a significant force in the 2023 elections. Greater competition between established and newer parties may have strengthened incentives to offer inducements, but this is an inference that the reviewed sources do not test.

Voter Perceptions and Attitudes

Beyond the transactional dynamics documented above, existing accounts of voter sentiment point to widespread fatigue with economic hardship and weak service delivery, which may increase the appeal of monetary inducements (Awoyemi, 2025; The Conversation, 2022). Poll reporting indicates that unemployment, insecurity, and poverty are among the electorate's most pressing concerns when evaluating candidates (BusinessDay, 2023).

Interpretation (this study): These accounts suggest that many voters retain independent judgment about candidates while a minority remain open to persuasion by inducements. Dissatisfaction with government performance may increase the appeal of vote buying where voters see little difference between candidates and prefer immediate benefits (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013).

Discussion

Beyond Poverty: The Multidimensional Nature of Vote Buying

The evidence reviewed in this study challenges the conventional wisdom that poverty is the primary driver of vote selling in Nigeria, although it does not show that poverty is irrelevant. Awoyemi's (2025) analysis finds that poverty is not a strong predictor of targeting, while other studies report positive poverty effects in particular settings or survey samples (Brammah & Fajimbola, 2025; Achinike, 2026; Jensen & Justesen, 2014). On balance, poverty alone does not adequately explain vote-selling behavior, and its role appears to depend on other factors (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013).

Poverty creates conditions of vulnerability that may make voters more susceptible to inducements, but it does not determine electoral behavior (Kramon, 2016). Partisanship, ethnicity, and social expectations appear to be at least as important in shaping how voters respond (Awoyemi, 2025). Vote buying is therefore not simply a transaction between wealthy politicians and poor voters but a social and political phenomenon embedded in broader patterns of clientelism and identity politics (Joseph, 1987; Posner, 2005).

The finding that partisanship raises the likelihood of being targeted aligns with research on clientelism in other contexts (Stokes et al., 2013): parties tend to reward their own supporters, reinforcing existing loyalties more than persuading opponents (Kramon, 2016; Nichter, 2008).

The role of ethnicity underscores the importance of identity in Nigerian electoral politics. Awoyemi's (2025) finding that Hausa and Igbo voters show distinct patterns suggests that ethnic networks are mobilized differently across groups. Ethnicity appears to operate both as a shortcut for political mobilization and as a channel for clientelist targeting (Horowitz, 1985; Posner, 2005), with the risk of reinforcing ethnic divisions (Joseph, 1987; Posner, 2005).

The Normalization of Transactional Politics

The reviewed evidence suggests that vote buying has become normalized in Nigerian electoral politics (Adeleke et al., 2024; Shehu et al., 2025). The rise in reported personal offers from 17 percent in 2019 to 22 percent in 2023 (NBS, 2024) is consistent with growing acceptance of transactional politics, although survey prevalence cannot by itself establish acceptance. This normalization has implications for the quality of democracy in Nigeria (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026).

Normalization is also visible in the reported displacement of issue-based campaigning, discussed in Section 4.4. If parties are shifting resources from policy campaigns to inducements, as media reports suggest (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026), this would reflect a change in electoral expectations in which immediate benefits take priority over civic engagement and substantive debate (The Conversation, 2022).

Normalization is further evident in institutionalization. The reported use of tally systems and dispersed payment points (Section 4.2) indicates that vote buying is organized and planned rather than ad hoc (New Telegraph, 2026; Guardian, 2024).

Together, these developments imply that candidates are increasingly selected on their capacity to finance inducements rather than on their policy platforms or governance capacity (Shehu et al., 2025).

Implications for Democratic Accountability

The findings have significant implications for democratic accountability in Nigeria (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026). Vote buying can sever the link between electoral mandate and governance performance, since voters who sell their votes have little incentive to hold elected officials to account (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). Where elections are won by purchasing votes rather than by presenting policy platforms, officials may answer to their financial backers more than to the electorate (Diaz-Cayeros, 2008; Shehu et al., 2025). The evidence on voter agency discussed in Section 5.4 suggests, however, that this link is weakened rather than severed for the many voters who accept inducements without changing their votes.

The marginalization of competent leadership, discussed in Section 4.5, is a further consequence reported in the literature (Shehu et al., 2025). Where nomination and election reward financial resources, qualified individuals who lack them may be discouraged from competing (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026).

The commodification of votes has broader implications for the quality of governance (Joseph, 1987; Adeleke et al., 2024). When political offices are treated as sources of patronage rather than as vehicles for public service, the incentive to govern effectively is diminished (Joseph, 1987). Elected officials may then focus on recouping their electoral investments through corruption and rent-seeking rather than on delivering public goods (Shehu et al., 2025). This may create a vicious circle in which poor governance sustains poverty, which in turn may make voters more susceptible to inducements (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013).

The erosion of public confidence in the electoral process is another reported consequence of vote buying (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026). Perceptions that elections are decided by the highest bidder may weaken trust in democratic processes and encourage political apathy. This sits uneasily with Adeleke et al.'s (2024) finding that vote buying raised turnout in the 2023 elections, which suggests that inducements may boost participation in the short term even as they erode confidence in the longer term. Widespread dissatisfaction with incumbent performance compounds this erosion (The Conversation, 2022).

The Agency of Voters in Vote Markets

The NBS finding reported in Section 4.4, that most recipients of inducements (55 percent) said the offer did not influence their vote while a substantial minority (40 percent) voted for the offeror because of the offer, is the central empirical anchor of this article, and this section develops its implications in full. First, it challenges the assumption that voters are passive recipients of electoral inducements (NBS, 2024; Awoyemi, 2025). Voters appear to exercise agency within vote markets, accepting inducements while voting on other

considerations (Adeleke et al., 2024). Vote buying is then less a simple exchange of votes for cash than an interaction in which voters strategically navigate the opportunities that electoral competition presents (Nichter, 2008). Second, the two figures together account for 95 percent of recipients, and the sources reviewed here do not report the remaining responses, so the split should be read with caution; self-reported influence may also be affected by social desirability.

Media reports describe a practice of accepting the money and then voting one's conscience (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026), and Adeleke et al. (2024) note that some voters have become more discerning about voting independently of inducements. The same reports suggest that this non-compliance produced frustration among politicians and intermediaries (Guardian, 2024) and that tally systems and dispersed payment points are attempts to counter it (New Telegraph, 2026).

Third, a 40 percent share of recipients is substantial, and an effect of that size could matter in closely contested elections, although none of the reviewed sources estimates the effect on electoral outcomes directly. Taken together, the evidence suggests that vote buying has significant but not determinative effects on electoral outcomes (Kramon, 2016; Gallego et al., 2023), and that partisanship, ethnicity, and policy preferences continue to shape voter behavior (Awoyemi, 2025).

The Role of Institutions

Institutional factors, introduced in Section 2.3, are central to how vote buying persists (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026). The small number of apprehensions relative to reported prevalence (Section 4.1) suggests that enforcement is weak (EFCC, 2023; INEC, 2026), and weak enforcement may itself contribute to the normalization of the practice.

As noted in Section 2.3, improvements in electoral administration, such as the use of digital technology, appear to have made result manipulation harder and to have shifted manipulation toward the voting stage (INEC, 2026; Adeleke et al., 2024). This illustrates how political actors adapt to institutional reforms and why technological fixes alone are unlikely to be sufficient (Braithwaite & Fajimola, 2025).

The reported exploitation of social protection programs (Section 4.2) is a further illustration of institutional weakness. Programs designed to address poverty and vulnerability can be diverted to campaign financing (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026), which makes it harder to distinguish genuine welfare provision from vote buying (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026).

Comparative Perspectives

The Nigerian case offers insights for other developing democracies (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). The patterns reviewed here, namely the importance of partisanship and ethnicity in targeting, the institutionalization of vote buying, and the agency of voters, are consistent with findings from other contexts (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013; Gallego et al., 2023). The reported scale of vote buying in Nigeria (NBS, 2024) is substantial, but this

study did not compare it with cross-national benchmarks and therefore makes no claim about Nigeria's relative ranking.

The Nigerian experience suggests that vote buying is not simply a function of poverty but is shaped by the broader political and institutional context (Shehu et al., 2025). The weakness of political parties, the prevalence of clientelism, and the lack of effective enforcement all contribute to its persistence (Joseph, 1987; Kramon, 2016). Efforts to address vote buying must therefore go beyond economic development to include political and institutional reforms (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026).

The lessons from Nigeria may be relevant to other countries facing similar challenges (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). Voter education, effective enforcement, and technological solutions are all pertinent to efforts to reduce vote buying elsewhere (Essien & Oghuvbu, 2021; Braimah & Fajimbola, 2025), but the Nigerian case also demonstrates the adaptability of political actors and the limits of piecemeal reforms (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings

This study has examined, through a synthesis of published evidence and critical discourse analysis, the multidimensional ways in which vote buying influences voters' candidate choice in Nigeria, moving beyond the poverty-centric narrative to consider political, social, and institutional factors (Awoyemi, 2025). The reviewed evidence indicates that vote buying is widespread and increasing, with 22 percent of Nigerians reporting personal offers of money in the 2023 elections (NBS, 2024), and that it operates through several mechanisms: direct cash payments, material inducements, clientelist networks, tally systems, and the diversion of social programs (Adeleke et al., 2024; Shehu et al., 2025).

Partisanship and ethnicity appear to shape who is targeted, whereas poverty is not a strong predictor in the Afrobarometer analysis reviewed, although other studies report poverty effects in specific contexts (Awoyemi, 2025; Achinike, 2026; Jensen & Justesen, 2014).

The influence of vote buying on candidate choice is significant but not determinative: it shaped the choices of a substantial minority of recipients, while most reported no effect, and voters exercise agency within vote markets (Section 5.4; NBS, 2024; Awoyemi, 2025).

Vote buying has become institutionalized and normalized in Nigerian elections, displacing issue-based campaigning and undermining democratic accountability (Adeleke et al., 2024; Shehu et al., 2025). The practice marginalizes competent leadership, rewards financial resources over policy platforms, and erodes public confidence in the electoral process (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026). These conclusions rest on published evidence and discourse analysis and should be tested with original data.

Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three modest theoretical contributions. Because it is a synthesis of published evidence, these contributions are interpretive and should be read as propositions

for testing rather than as new empirical findings. First, by bringing together evidence on partisanship, ethnicity, and social expectations, it supports a challenge to the poverty-centric explanation of vote selling, while recognizing that the evidence on poverty is mixed (Awoyemi, 2025; Achinike, 2026; Jensen & Justesen, 2014). Economic vulnerability alone does not appear to determine electoral behavior (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). Second, the study links the evidence on the targeting of partisans to clientelism theory, suggesting that clientelist transfers in Nigeria serve more to reinforce existing loyalties than to persuade opponents (Stokes et al., 2013; Kramon, 2016; Nichter, 2008). Third, the study relates vote buying to democratic accountability by showing how it can weaken the link between electoral mandate and governance performance (Diaz-Cayeros, 2008). The normalization of transactional politics has implications for the quality of democracy, as elected officials may answer to their financial backers rather than to the electorate (Joseph, 1987; Adeleke et al., 2024), although the evidence on voter agency indicates that this link is weakened rather than severed for many voters.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are offered:

Strengthen enforcement: The small number of apprehensions relative to reported prevalence suggests that enforcement is weak (EFCC, 2023; INEC, 2026). The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission and other law enforcement agencies should be given the resources and authority to investigate and prosecute vote buying cases, as the International Republican Institute (2026) has urged ahead of the 2027 elections.

Enhance voter education: Limited voter education is among the conditions associated with vote buying (Essien & Oghuvbu, 2021; Braimah & Fajimbola, 2025). Public enlightenment campaigns should be expanded and adequately funded, consistent with the call for strategic enlightenment campaigns in Braimah and Fajimbola (2025), with agencies such as the National Orientation Agency and INEC engaging voters on the value of voting on policy grounds and on the consequences of vote selling for governance quality (The Conversation, 2022).

Address the supply side: Parties and candidates should be held accountable for their role in vote buying. The campaign finance provisions of the Electoral Act 2022 should be enforced (INEC, 2026), and heavier sanctions for offences committed on election day, including vote buying, should be considered, a measure also proposed by Braimah and Fajimbola (2025).

Address the demand side: Efforts to reduce vote buying must also address the demand side of vote markets (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). This includes the economic vulnerabilities that make some voters susceptible to inducements (Achinike, 2026; Shehu et al., 2025) and the social and political norms that normalize transactional politics (Awoyemi, 2025). Social protection programs should be insulated from electoral manipulation, and the distinction between legitimate welfare provision and vote buying should be kept clear.

Electoral reforms: The Electoral Act should be amended to address the newer practices identified in this study, including tally systems and dispersed payment points (New Telegraph, 2026; Guardian, 2024). The introduction of electronic voting and other technological solutions should be explored, while recognizing the limitations of technological fixes alone (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026).

Promote issue-based campaigning: Political parties should be encouraged to return to issue-based campaigning, with manifestos that clearly articulate policy platforms. The media should play a role in promoting substantive political discourse and holding candidates accountable for their policy positions (Guardian, 2024; New Telegraph, 2026).

Directions for Future Research

This study suggests several directions for future research. First, primary data collection through surveys and interviews, or original analysis of Afrobarometer and NBS microdata, would complement the secondary synthesis conducted here and provide richer insight into voter motivations and decision-making (Kramon, 2016; Stokes et al., 2013). Second, comparative research across Nigerian states and regions would help identify the factors that explain variation in vote buying patterns (Awoyemi, 2025). Third, longitudinal research would enable analysis of trends in vote buying over time and of the effects of electoral reforms. Fourth, research on the relationship between vote buying and governance outcomes would help assess the consequences of transactional politics for development and democratic consolidation.

Concluding Remarks

Vote buying in Nigeria is not simply a function of poverty but a complex phenomenon shaped by partisanship, ethnicity, institutional weaknesses, and the normalization of transactional politics (Awoyemi, 2025). The practice has implications for democratic accountability, as it can weaken the link between electoral mandate and governance performance and marginalize competent leadership (Shehu et al., 2025). Addressing it requires comprehensive reforms that address both the supply and demand sides of vote markets, strengthen enforcement, enhance voter education, and promote issue-based campaigning (INEC, 2026; IRI, 2026). The future of Nigeria's democracy depends on the ability to move beyond the politics of inducement toward a politics of substance, in which voters choose candidates on policy platforms and governance capacity rather than financial reserves.

Conflicts of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Author Contributions

Anita Danlami: Conceptualisation, Writing – Original Draft, Project Administration. Mubarak Haruna: Methodology, Writing – Review & Editing. Confidence Ekeutomhinye: Formal Analysis, Data Curation. Ayo David Adeyemi: Investigation, Writing – Review & Editing. Esther Olamide Ayodele: Resources, Writing – Review & Editing. Yussuf Timileyin Adebayo: Supervision, Validation. [Author contributions listed reflect the CRediT taxonomy and should be confirmed or amended by the authors prior to submission.]

Data Availability Statement

This study relies entirely on secondary data. The Afrobarometer Round 8 data are openly available at afrobarometer.org, and the National Bureau of Statistics post-election survey data are available from the NBS. No new data were created for this study.

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