
VOTE BUYING IN NIGERIA AND ITS EFFECT ON ELECTING CREDIBLE CANDIDATES: A STUDY ON THE 2023 NATIONAL AND STATE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS IN BAYELSA CENTRAL SENATORIAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

This study examined vote buying in Nigeria and how it affects the election of credible candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. Vote buying is the financial inducement of voters to influence them to vote for a particular candidate in order to enhance the chances of that candidate winning the election. This attitude of politicians in Nigeria and Bayelsa State in particular has steadily grown into a large-scale business as contestants and political parties are always on the move to outdo each other in order to win elections. This will no doubt affect the chances of electing credible candidates who do not have the money to buy votes. It is against this backdrop that the study investigates how vote buying hindered the chances of electing credible candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. The study adopted the survey research design method. Thus, the primary information for the study was obtained through questionnaires and oral interviews. A total of 3000 questionnaires were administered to respondents in the selected communities in the three local governments making up Bayelsa Central Senatorial District and 2,300 questionnaires were successfully retrieved. The data retrieved were analyzed using the arithmetic mean. The findings revealed that poverty is one of the major factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa State. The findings also discovered that the failure of security agents to arrest both buyers and sellers of votes is one of the reasons behind the widespread buying of votes in Bayelsa State. The study recommended amongst others that an effective strategy for the alleviation of poverty in the country should be put in place, and security agents should arrest and prosecute both buyers and sellers of votes during elections in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general.

Keywords: Democracy, Election, Vote Buying, Credible Candidates.

Introduction

Election is one of the pillars of democracy. Election provides the means through which eligible voters choose candidates of their choice for various political offices in any democratic system. It is on this premise that Thomas Rye stated that, “democratic government is ‘government by the consent of the governed’ (and that) elections give practical meaning to this notion of ‘consent’ by allowing people to choose among competing candidates and parties and to decide who will occupy public office” (The Guardian, 2022). This implies that the survival of any democratic government to a large extent depends on the credibility and transparency of the electoral process.

In Nigeria, since the advent of the Fourth Republic in 1999, the electoral process has faced several challenges one of which is the issue of vote buying. Vote buying which is been carried out by political parties and politicians is the financial or material inducement of prospective voters to sway them from voting for their preferred candidates. Political parties and politicians influence voters with cash to cast their votes in order to enhance the chance of a particular candidate winning the election.

Vote buying has gradually spread to all elections in Nigeria as political parties in the country try to outdo rival political parties by paying huge sums of money to voters in order to influence the outcome of the electoral process. This has made the vote-buying market increase tremendously and profitable to voters due to the competition among candidates and their political parties to buy votes at any cost. It is now a known fact in Nigeria that, most voters who leave their homes on Election Day to vote are driven by the money they will make for casting their vote.

The brazenness and the open display of money to sway voters before and during elections prompted many political and social analysts to describe Nigeria's democracy as “cash and carry democracy” where the party or the candidate that is the highest bidder for votes in most cases end up winning the election. Vote buying has now become the order of the day in Nigeria's and Bayelsa State electoral process. Candidates who could not afford to buy votes in the Election end up losing the election despite their pedigree and integrity. Those who could afford to buy votes find their way into various political offices with their money.

This ugly scenario has continued to dampen Nigeria's democracy and the electoral process. The inducement of votes to win elections has reduced Nigeria's democracy and the electoral process to a monetized electoral system leading to the enthronement of bad leaders. These candidates who find their way into various political offices with the help of money end up performing abysmally. It is against this backdrop that this study is carried out to examine how vote buying in Nigeria's electoral process affects the election of credible candidates in Bayelsa State.

Statement of the Problem

The phenomenon of vote buying has become a common practice in Nigeria's political space since the return of democracy in 1999. Vote buying is gradually been accepted by Nigerians as part of our democratic and electoral process. This has made it difficult for credible and transparent elections to take place in the country. Vote-buying in Nigeria has gotten to a disturbing state as political parties and politicians now spread their tentacles of inducements to election officials and security agencies (Vande, 2022). This explains why vote buying has become rampant and institutionalized in Nigeria's electoral process despite the criminalization of vote buying by the Electoral Act.

The introduction of the naira redesign policy in 2022 by the Federal Government through the Central Bank of Nigeria was also aimed at ensuring that the 2023 general election is not monetized and also to curb vote buying. In spite of the introduction of the naira redesign policy which led to a shortage of naira in the 2023 general election, politicians were able to maneuver their way by buying votes through electronic transfer of money to the accounts of voters who voted for their party candidates. For instance, in the 2023 National and State Assembly election in Bayelsa State, the two major political parties; the People Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC) stationed their party officials close to the polling units and monies were transferred to the bank accounts of voters who voted for their party candidates.

Vote buying has further cast doubt on the credibility of candidates elected into various political offices in Nigeria and Bayelsa State in particular. With the current state of vote buying in Bayelsa State, people with questionable character can easily find their way into political offices with the help of their money. This will no doubt affect the chances of credible candidates who do not have the money to buy votes to win election in Bayelsa State. It is on this premise that this study investigates how vote buying hindered the chance of credible candidates from winning the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions.

- (i) What are the factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa State?
- (ii) How did vote buying affect the chances of electing credible candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly Election in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District?

Objectives of the Study

The study was aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- (i) identify the factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa State.
- (ii) examine how vote buying affected the chances of electing credible candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Election

The survival of any democratic system depends on the credibility of the electoral process. This is because the legitimacy of any democratic government is determined by how free and fair the electoral process is. It is on this premise that Baidoo, *et al.*, in Vande (2022), stated that, elections seem to have become a major factor in the stabilization and democratization of emerging democracies. This means that the credibility of the electoral process is essential for a peaceful transfer of power and the stabilization democratic system.

When voters elect their representatives, they elect the leaders who will shape the future of their society. Thus, election empowers ordinary citizens to influence the future policies of their government through voting political leaders into various governmental positions.

Ojo (2016), sees election as a democratic means whereby voters participate in the selection of their leaders and representatives. He added that for an election to take place, there must be an elective post that needed to be filled. Vande (2022) opined that election is a formal act of collective decision that occurs in a stream of connected antecedent and subsequent behaviour, involving the participation of the people in the act of electing or choosing their leaders and participation in governance.

Schumpeter in Agu (2015) averred that election is the very heart of democracy. He went further to state that election is an “institutional arrangement”, a means of filling public offices through a competitive struggle for the people's vote. In the opinion of Agu (2015), the election is a process through which members of a group, club, society, community, or organization choose some of their members to hold offices at regular intervals.

Arising from the above definitions, election is the democratic means through which eligible voters in a country elect or choose those who will represent them in various political offices. It is important to note that in a democratic setting, there must be a vacant position before election can be conducted.

The provision of election in a democracy is to ensure that the masses decide those who govern them. The implication is that the government exercises its powers with the consent of the people. No wonder Joseph in Berouk (2008) stated that the primary purpose of elections is the legitimation of whatever regime currently holds governmental power. This means election provides the legitimate means through which a particular government exercises the powers of the state.

Vote Buying

Vote buying has gradually crept into Nigeria's electoral process as political elites now see it as a means to win elections. The practice of vote buying has been described as prebendal democracy, a concept developed by Richard Joseph. It involves self-serving political elites using state power to accumulate resources, a phenomenon known as the elite capture of democracy (Okoli, 2022).

Baidoo, *et al.*, (2018) sees vote buying as the use of money and direct benefits to influence voters. For Bryant (2005), vote-buying is the exchange of private material benefits for political support or the use of money and direct benefits to influence voters. The key element in the above definition is that there are financial or material inducements of voters to sway them from voting for their preferred candidates.

Yoon (2020) averred that vote buying is a multidimensional phenomenon that involves numerous stakeholders such as voters, political parties, candidates, and their agents. It means vote buying is a collaboration between voters, political parties, party agents, and the candidate vying for the elective position. The collaboration comes in because of the willingness of the voters to sell their votes. Ogunade describes vote buying as “democracy on sale”. He added that vote-buying can hamper the development of democracy in the country (Sesan, 2018).

It is important to state that vote buying is a criminal offence under the 2022 Electoral Act. Section 22 of the Electoral Act states that any person who -

- (a) is in unlawful possession of any voter's card whether issued in the name of any voter or not ; or
- (b) sells or attempts to sell or offers to sell any voter's card whether issued in the name of any voter or not ; or
- (c) buys or offers to buy any voters' card whether on his own behalf or on behalf of any other person, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine not more than N500,000 or imprisonment not more than two years or both.

It is sad to say that despite the criminalization of vote buying by the Electoral Act, vote buying in Nigeria has become institutionalized due to voters' willingness to sell their votes.

Vote buying from the foregoing is the financial or material inducement of voters to sway them from voting for their preferred candidates. Vote buying, therefore, is the financial or material inducement of voters before or during elections with the intent to influence voters to vote for a particular candidate.

Vote buying robs the masses of the freedom to choose their preferred candidate and also denies the poor their voice in the electoral process. Worst still, vote buying has made it difficult for good candidates to contest and win elections in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general. This is due to voter's preference to sell their votes rather than vote their conscience. The willingness of voters to sell their votes to the highest bidder has led to the institutionalization of vote buying in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general.

Some Factors behind Vote Buying in Bayelsa State and Nigeria.

Several factors contribute to vote buying in Bayelsa State. Some of the factors are:

(i) **Poverty:** Poverty is one of the factors why vote buying thrives in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general. Poverty simply means the lack of basic necessities of life. The rising inflation in the country has continued to push many Nigerians into poverty. The high level of poverty has caused many voters to sell their votes during elections. Even the politicians know that with the level of poverty in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general, voters will prefer selling their votes rather than voting for their preferred candidates.

(ii) **Ignorance:** Ignorance is another reason why voters sell their votes. Most voters are ignorant of the consequences of selling their votes during election. Voters are not aware that when they sell their vote during election, they can no longer hold their leaders accountable for poor performance. When victory is purchased rather than won in a free and fair contest, it leads to the capture of state resources for personal use. The result of it is the bad governance experienced in every level of government in the country.

(iii) The inability of security agents to arrest and prosecute vote trading is another factor encouraging vote buying in Bayelsa State. It is disheartening to state that most times vote buying takes under the watchful eyes of security agents who appear to be helpless. Security agents also encourage vote buying by collecting some of the monies meant for vote buying. This makes them close their eyes when politicians openly buy votes.

(iv) **The Desperation by Politicians to win election.** The desperation by politicians and political parties to win elections at all costs is another reason behind vote buying in Bayelsa State. With the traditional approach of snatching and stuffing ballot boxes to win elections now impossible due to the introduction of the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) machine by INEC, vote buying is now the alternative for politicians to win elections. Votes are snatched from rival political parties and candidates through the inducement of voters with money. All that is required by politicians and their cronies is to set aside a huge sum of money out of the loot from the state treasury to induce voters and corrupt security agents during election.

(iv) **Lack of Proper Voters Education.** There is no proper education given to voters regarding the selling of votes during elections. Most voters see vote-selling as normal without knowing that it is a criminal offence that is punishable by law.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the General Incentive Model developed by Clark and Wilson (1961). Clark and Wilson are of the view that if members of an organization know the kind of incentives the organization tends to give to them, there will be greater cooperation between the organization and its employees. This means that the extent of cooperation that an

organization will enjoy from its members depends upon the incentive made available to the workers. According to Clark and Wilson, organizations performing optimally must provide tangible and intangible incentives for their employees in order to bring maximum performance (Oduntan, et. al., 2023).

Applying Clark and Wilson's incentive model in a corporate organization to Nigeria's political system, the incentives provided by candidates and their parties during elections influence the behaviour of voters to sell their votes. When voters are aware that there is a benefit attached to voting for a particular candidate or party, they happily cast their vote without being coerced in order to enjoy the benefit. Because of the monetary benefits attached to voting for a particular candidate, poor and uneducated voters are more interested in selling their votes no matter how small the money may be.

The relevance of the theory to the study is that when voters know that there is an incentive for them to vote for a particular candidate or party, they happily cast their votes in order to enjoy the benefits. It is because of the incentive attached to voting for a particular candidate or party that has made vote buying widespread in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general.

Method of the Study

The study adopted the survey research design method. Thus, questionnaires were used to obtain the primary data from the target population. The target population consisted of eligible voters in the three Local Governments which are Kolokuma/Opokuma, Yenagoa, and Southern Ijaw in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. A total of 3000 questionnaires were distributed to voters in the selected communities in the above local government and 2300 questionnaires were retrieved.

The oral interview was also conducted to obtain firsthand information from voters and stakeholders. The information from the interview was used to substantiate the data collected from the questionnaires. Five persons were interviewed from each community selected for the study. The quantitative method of arithmetic mean was employed to analyze the data collected from the respondents.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1: The factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa?

S/N	Items statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD(1)	Total	\bar{x}	Decision
1	Poverty contribute to vote buying.	990	969	261	180	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(3,960)	(2,907)	(522)	(180)	7,569	3.2	Agreed
2	The desperation by politicians to win election.	978	997	194	131	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(3,912)	(2,991)	(388)	(131)	7,442	3.2	Agreed
3	Lack of voters' education contribute to vote buying.	966	778	321	235	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(3,864)	(2,334)	(642)	(235)	7,075	3.0	Agreed
4	Failure of security agents to arrest sellers and buyers of votes.	1,098	998	121	91	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(4,392)	(2,994)	(242)	(91)	7,719	3.4	Agreed
	Arithmetic Weighted Mean				3.2			
	Criterion Mean				2.50			

Source: Authors field data, 2023.

The data presented in Table 1 shows that the arithmetic weighted mean of (3.2) is greater (>) than the criterion mean of (2.50). The result showed that poverty is one of the major factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa State. This was followed by lack of voter education as another reason why voters sell their votes during elections in Bayelsa State. Also, the failure of security agents to arrest and prosecute both vote buyers and sellers is another reason why vote buying is rampant in Bayelsa State.

The findings are in agreement with several interviews conducted on the factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa State. For example, Miss Ebire, who is a student in one of the higher institutions in Bayelsa in an interview stated that the inability of security agents to arrest vote buyers is one of the reasons behind vote buying in the Bayelsa State election. She stated that if security agents can arrest those who buy votes during election, vote buying will stop. Also, a compound Chief in Agudama-Epie community in Yenagoa Local Government who preferred to be anonymous in the interview identified poverty and lack of voter education as one of the reasons why vote buying is on the increase. He stated that most voters are very poor and they prefer to sell their vote to buy food items rather than vote for their preferred candidate. He added that proper voter education should be given to voters to prevent vote buying in future elections.

Another voter named Emmanuel in Agudama-Epie community in Yenagoa Local Government who voted in Unit 22 stated that N3,000 was transferred to his bank account after he voted in the 2023 State Assembly election. He stated that he used the money to buy data for browsing. The transfer of money to the bank accounts of voters who voted for their candidates shows the desperation of politicians in Bayelsa State to win the election at all costs. Equally, several persons interviewed in Amassoma in Southern Ijaw Local Government, Sabagria in Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government, Biseni in Yenagoa Local Government, etc. stated that monies were either given to voters or transferred were made to the bank account voters after they voted in the 2023 National and State Assembly election. Most of the voters who admitted to collecting money stated that they used the money to solve their immediate problems.

The findings from the questionnaire and the interviews show that poverty is the major driving force behind vote buying in Bayelsa State. Most of the persons who were interviewed stated that they collected money in other to meet their pressing needs like buying food stuff, recharge cards, etc. To these persons, the money gotten from voting to meet their basic needs is more important than voting for their preferred candidates. This explains why vote buying has increased in Bayelsa State.

Voters will always prefer to collect the N5,000 or N10,000 given to them by politicians to meet their immediate needs rather than wait for promises from candidates who cannot afford to give them money after voting. This explains why political parties and politicians will always have their way during elections in Bayelsa State. As long as elections in Bayelsa State are monetized, voters are ready to collect the money and vote against their conscience. Most voters also believe that collecting money to vote is the only way they can get part of the money stolen by politicians. In other words, selling their votes during election is a way of benefitting from the state resources stolen by politicians. For these poor voters, it is better to collect the N5, 000 or N10, 000 than to wait for the promises of road construction, the building of health centres, schools, etc. which they may not see if the politicians eventually win the election.

Table 2 The negative effects of vote buying in the 2023 National and State Assembly Elections?

S/N	Item statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD(1)	Total	\bar{x}	Decision
1	Vote buying sways voters from voting for their preferred candidates	1092	971	127	110	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(4,368)	(2,913)	(254)	(110)	7,635	3.3	Agreed
2	Vote buying intimidates candidates without money to buy votes.	997	989	146	168	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(3,988)	(2,967)	(292)	(168)	7,415	3.2	Agreed
3	Vote buying hinders the chances of candidates without money to win election.	990	969	261	180	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(3,960)	(2,907)	(522)	(180)	7,569	3.2	Agreed
4	Vote buying corrupt security agents to be biased during election.	896	1,012	167	135	2,300		
	Weight of Responses	(3,584)	(3,036)	(334)	(135)	7,089	3.0	Agreed
	Arithmetic Weighted Mean						3.1	
	Criterion Mean						2.50	

Source: Authors field data, 2023

The data presented in Table 2 shows that the arithmetic weighted mean of (3.1) is greater (>) than the criterion mean of (2.50). Thus, the result showed that vote-buying sways voters from voting for their preferred candidates. The result also shows that vote buying intimidates candidates who do not have money to win elections in Bayelsa State. Also, the result showed that vote-buying corrupts security agents to be biased during elections.

The findings from the questionnaire are in tandem with several interviews conducted on how vote buying affected the chance of credible candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly. For example, Miss Florence an indigene of Amassoma town in Southern Ijaw Local Government stated that most of the voters who went to vote in the State Assembly election changed their mind and voted for a different candidate because of the money given to them. She stated that both the APC and the PDP were inducing voters with money and the party that was willing to pay the highest amount of money ended up securing the votes of the polling unit.

Also, a PDP chieftain in Sabagria community in Kolokuma/Opokuma local government who preferred to be anonymous averred that vote buying is now a normal thing in Bayelsa State elections. He stated that though his community is a PDP stronghold voters were still paid to vote for PDP for the party to win convincingly in Sabagria.

Miss Blessing an indigene of Biseni town in Yenagoa Local Government in an interview averred that security agents in polling units are also collaborators in vote buying. She added that because security agents are beneficiaries of money budgeted for vote buying they close their eyes when politicians openly buy votes during election. She stated further if security agents do not benefit from vote buying, they would arrest both the buyers and sellers of votes.

Similarly, a youth leader in Besni community who preferred to be anonymous because of his active involvement in politics in an interview added that vote buying affects the chances of candidates who do not have money to buy votes to win election in Bayelsa State. He added candidates from smaller political parties in Bayelsa State are intimidated by money during elections and this affects their chance of winning elections despite their pedigree and integrity.

The findings from the questionnaire and several interviews conducted with voters and stakeholders in various communities in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District clearly show that vote buying hindered the chances of credible candidates from winning the 2023 National and State Assembly elections. When politicians openly display money for voters to see, some voters will change their minds by collecting the money and vote against their conscience. The implication is that candidates who do not have the money to display and buy votes will end up losing the election to those who have the money to buy votes.

Conclusion

Vote buying has become one of the greatest threats to Nigeria's democracy since the return of civil rule in 1999. Voting buying is gradually becoming institutionalized as both the buyers and the sellers' votes are massively benefitting from this ugly scenario. This horrible scenario has prompted political analysts to describe Nigeria's democracy as a cash-and-carry democracy where the candidate with the highest bidder of votes ends up winning the election.

This ugly scenario continues to rear its ugly head in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District. There was an open display of vote buying in the 2023 National and State Assembly election by the two major political parties in Bayelsa State, the ruling People Democratic Party (PDP) and the major opposition party the All Progressive Congress (APC). In most of the polling units, cash was given to votes while in other polling units, monies were transferred through mobile phones to the bank accounts of voters due to the shortage of physical cash caused by the CBN naira redesign policy.

The widespread display of vote buying in the 2023 National and State Assembly election in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District is chiefly attributed to the high rate of poverty among the voting population, and the failure of security agents to arrest vote buyers and sellers in the various polling units. This made vote buying to be rampant in almost all the polling across the Senatorial district. The open show of voting buying affected the chances of credible candidate winning the election due to their inability to buy votes.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made based on the findings.

- (i) **Reduction of Poverty:** One of the major findings of this study relates to poverty as a reason why vote buying is widespread in Bayelsa State. The Federal Government should put effective strategies such as youth empowerment programmes, loans to small and medium scale businesses, etc. to address the problem of unemployment that has contributed to poverty in the country. This will help to reduce the level of vote buying in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general.
- (ii) **Proper Voters Education:** The findings also discovered that there is no adequate voter education in Bayelsa State. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Civil Society Organizations, and Religious Organizations should actively educate voters about the dangers of selling their vote during elections.
- (iii) **Arrest and Prosecution of Vote Buyers and Sellers:** The findings also discovered that the failure of security agents to arrest both buyers and sellers is one of the reasons behind

vote buying in Bayelsa State. Hence, security agents should live up to their responsibility. They should arrest and prosecute all buyers and sellers of votes. This will serve as a deterrent to politicians and voters who engage in this illicit business.

(iv) The findings of the study also revealed that vote-buying sways voters from voting for the preferred candidates. The National Assembly should come up with a law to demonetize our electoral system. This will help to fight vote buying in the country.

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