

Money Politics and Vote Buying, A Bane on Sustainable Development: An Assessment of the 2023 General Election

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Abstract

Money politics and vote buying have become entrenched features of Nigeria's electoral landscape, with the 2023 general election offering one of the clearest empirical windows into the scale and consequences of the practice. This study assesses the relationship between money politics, vote buying, and sustainable development in Nigeria, using the 2023 general election as its reference case. Adopting a descriptive, ex post facto research design anchored in secondary data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the Independent National Electoral Commission, Chatham House, SBM Intelligence, and peer-reviewed empirical studies, the article finds that vote buying rose to 22 per cent of surveyed citizens in 2023, up from 17 per cent in 2019, with regional prevalence as high as 44 per cent in the North-West, and that 40 per cent of those offered inducements admitted the offer influenced their vote choice. The study situates this practice within Nigeria's broader culture of monetised politics, evidenced by an INEC election budget of approximately ₦305 billion and pervasive informal payments to security and electoral personnel documented in previous election cycles. The findings show that vote buying undermines sustainable development by severing the link between electoral mandate and accountability, rewarding patronage over competence in candidate selection, and entrenching poverty-driven clientelism that perpetuates the very deprivation it exploits. The study concludes that money politics functions as a structural bane on Nigeria's Sustainable Development Goals agenda, particularly Goal 16 on peace, justice, and strong

institutions, and recommends stronger campaign finance enforcement, real-time results transparency, targeted poverty-reduction programming, and sustained civic education as measures to curb the practice.

Keywords: money politics, vote buying, sustainable development, 2023 general election, Nigeria, electoral integrity, clientelism

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Elections constitute the principal mechanism through which citizens in a democracy select leaders and hold them accountable for the use of public power. In Nigeria, however, the integrity of this mechanism has been progressively undermined by the monetisation of politics, a phenomenon in which financial inducement, rather than competence or policy programmes, increasingly determines electoral outcomes. The 2023 general election, Nigeria's sixth consecutive transition election since the return to civilian rule in 1999, highlighted this phenomenon. The election was conducted under a newly amended Electoral Act 2022 and a new Bimodal Voter Accreditation System intended to curb rigging, yet it was, by the assessment of domestic and international observers alike, marred by widespread vote buying, with the National Bureau of Statistics subsequently confirming that 22 percent of surveyed citizens were personally offered money in exchange for their vote, a five-percentage-point increase over the 17 percent recorded in the 2019 general election.

Money politics in the Nigerian context extends beyond vote buying narrowly defined at the polling unit to encompass the financing of party primaries, the inducement of electoral and security officials, and the deployment of campaign resources disproportionate to legally permissible limits. INEC itself proposed approximately ₦305 billion for the conduct of the 2023 general election, a 62 percent increase over 2019 expenditure, while independent estimates placed total election-related spending, including informal and illicit flows, considerably higher. This study situates the 2023 election within the broader argument that money politics and vote buying are not merely electoral irregularities but a structural bane on Nigeria's sustainable development trajectory, since they sever the link between electoral mandate and public accountability that underpins the achievement of inclusive governance envisaged under Sustainable Development Goal 16.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite successive electoral reforms, including the introduction of the Permanent Voter Card, the Smart Card Reader, and most recently the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System,

vote buying has not diminished but intensified, rising from 17 per cent of citizens in 2019 to 22 per cent in 2023, according to National Bureau of Statistics data, with some regions, notably the North-West, recording prevalence as high as 44 per cent. This persistence in the face of technological and legal reform suggests that vote buying is rooted in structural conditions, poverty, weak campaign finance enforcement, and a political culture that normalises monetary exchange for political support, which existing reforms have not addressed. The problem this study confronts is that Nigeria's electoral process, rather than serving as a vehicle for selecting competent, accountable leadership capable of advancing sustainable development, has become a marketplace in which political office is purchased and in which the resulting leadership deficit perpetuates the poverty and weak governance that make vote buying possible in the first place, a self-reinforcing cycle that this study terms the "vote-buying development trap."

1.3 Scope of the Study

This study is restricted to an assessment of money politics and vote-buying during Nigeria's 2023 general election, comprising the presidential, National Assembly, and concurrent state-level contests conducted between February and March 2023. The study draws on nationally representative survey data, principally the National Bureau of Statistics corruption survey and complementary assessments by Chatham House, SBM Intelligence, and peer-reviewed academic studies, to examine the prevalence, mechanics, and consequences of vote buying. The study does not extend to a full legal or judicial analysis of election petition outcomes, nor does it conduct primary fieldwork; its empirical claims are derived entirely from secondary, already-published data sources covering the 2023 election cycle and, for comparative purposes, the 2015 and 2019 cycles.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to assess the relationship between money politics, vote buying, and sustainable development in Nigeria using the 2023 general election as a case. The specific objectives are:

- i. examine the prevalence and mechanics of money politics and vote-buying during the 2023 general election.
- ii. assess the implications of vote buying for democratic accountability and sustainable development in Nigeria; and
- iii. evaluate the adequacy of existing legal and institutional measures against vote buying and recommend strategies for curbing the practice.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is significant to the Independent National Electoral Commission and the National Assembly in strengthening campaign finance enforcement and electoral offences prosecution; to civil society organisations and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission in designing monitoring and anti-vote-buying interventions; to the academic community in extending the empirical literature on clientelism and electoral integrity in Nigeria using the most recent, 2023-specific data; and to the Nigerian public in clarifying how an individually rational decision to accept a small monetary inducement on election day contributes, in the aggregate, to a leadership deficit that undermines the very development outcomes, jobs, infrastructure, and security that voters seek.

1.6 Research Questions

In line with the objectives above, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. What were the prevalence and mechanics of money politics and vote-buying during the 2023 general election?
- ii. What are the implications of vote buying for democratic accountability and sustainable development in Nigeria?
- iii. How adequate are existing legal and institutional measures against vote buying, and what strategies can curb the practice?

2 Review of Related Literature

2.1 Conceptual Background

This section clarifies the principal concepts deployed in this study, namely money politics, vote buying, clientelism, electoral integrity, and sustainable development, before proceeding to a focused conceptual treatment of the study's two central variables.

2.1.1 Concept of Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity refers to the degree to which an election's conduct and outcome adhere to international and domestic standards of freeness, fairness, and credibility, encompassing the pre-election, voting-day, and post-election phases. An election compromised by vote buying lacks integrity at its core because the resulting mandate does not reflect the genuine, uncoerced preference of the electorate.

2.1.2 Concept of Clientelism

'Clientelism' describes a political exchange relationship in which patrons, typically politicians or parties, provide material benefits, cash, food, or favours to clients, typically

voters, in direct or implied exchange for political support, as defined by Stokes, Dunning, and Nazareno in their influential 2013 study of the practice. Clientelism differs from programmatic politics, in which support is secured through public policy commitments benefiting the electorate broadly rather than through individualised material exchange targeted at specific voters or households.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on two complementary theories: clientelism theory and reciprocal determinism theory.

Clientelism Theory, associated with Stokes, Dunning, and Nazareno (2013), holds that political support is secured through a transactional exchange of goods, cash, or favours rather than through ideological or programmatic appeal, operating on a logic of immediate, particularistic reciprocity between patron and client. Applied to Nigeria, the theory explains why vote buying persists despite legal prohibition: in conditions of weak programmatic differentiation between parties and high voter poverty, the immediate, certain benefit of cash exceeds the deferred, uncertain benefit of policy promises, making clientelistic exchange individually rational for the voter even as it is collectively damaging.

Reciprocal Determinism Theory, applied to Nigerian vote buying by Efebeh and Ohis (2023), proposes that the political environment, behaviour, and personal factors operate as mutually reinforcing influences: weak governance and poverty (environment) condition politicians to rely on cash inducement (behaviour), which in turn normalises voters' expectations of payment (personal orientation), which then further weakens the incentive for politicians to govern programmatically once elected. This circular reinforcement explains the self-perpetuating character of Nigeria's vote-buying culture and underpins this study's framing of a vote-buying development trap, in which weak development outcomes fuel vote buying, and vote buying, in turn, entrenches weak development outcomes.

2.3 Concept of Variable One: Money Politics and Vote Buying

Money politics refers broadly to the dominant role of money in determining political outcomes at every stage of the electoral cycle, from the financing of party primaries and candidate nominations to campaign spending and, ultimately, vote buying at the polling unit. Vote buying, the most direct manifestation of money politics, is conceptualised as the offering of money, goods, or other favours by a candidate, party, or their agents in direct exchange for a voter's ballot. The National Bureau of Statistics' 2023 corruption survey distinguishes between direct personal offers of money, reported by 22 per cent of citizens in 2023, and offers of other favours, reported by nine per cent, with a further 10 per cent

reporting that another household member, rather than the respondent personally, was approached. Money politics in the 2023 cycle also encompassed institutional capture, evidenced by INEC's ₦305 billion election budget and historically documented informal payments to electoral and security officials intended to influence the administration, rather than merely the outcome, of voting.

2.4 Concept of Variable Two: Sustainable Development

Sustainable development, as defined in the Brundtland Commission's foundational 1987 formulation and operationalised in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, refers to development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, encompassing economic, social, and environmental dimensions and underpinned institutionally by Sustainable Development Goal 16, which calls for peaceful, just, and inclusive societies, accountable institutions, and effective, transparent governance. Within this study, sustainable development is conceptualised specifically through its institutional and governance dimension: the proposition that durable improvements in poverty, infrastructure, education, and security outcomes depend on the selection, through free and fair elections, of leaders who are accountable to the electorate rather than to the financial interests that purchased their mandates. Vote buying directly undermines this governance precondition for sustainable development by replacing the accountability relationship between voter and representative with a one-off transactional exchange that discharges the representative's perceived obligation to the voter currently money changes hands.

2.5 Review of Empirical Literature

Empirical research on the 2023 general election provides robust documentation of the scale of money politics and vote buying. The National Bureau of Statistics, in its third national corruption survey, found that vote buying increased from 17 per cent of citizens personally offered money in 2019 to 22 per cent in 2023, with a further nine per cent offered non-monetary favours, and reported that 40 per cent of those who received an offer admitted that it influenced their vote choice, while 55 per cent maintained that it did not. Regionally, the increase was sharpest in the North-West, where reported vote buying rose from 23 per cent in 2019 to 44 per cent in 2023, with 55 per cent of citizens in the zone reporting that they had been offered money or favours, the highest regional figure nationally.

Chatham House's preliminary post-election analysis corroborated the National Bureau of Statistics' findings, identifying vote buying as one of several practices, alongside voter suppression and intimidation, that tarnished the legitimacy of victories declared in the 2023 cycle and noting that President-elect Bola Tinubu's 36.6 per cent vote share was the lowest winning percentage of any victor in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, a fragmentation

that observers linked partly to the heightened, multi-candidate deployment of monetary inducement across competing political blocs. SBM Intelligence's election-day monitoring further documented an evolution in vote-buying technique necessitated by the 2022-2023 naira redesign and currency scarcity crisis, noting that some politicians resorted to using West African CFA francs or non-monetary inducements, including foodstuffs and clothing, when naira cash was scarce, a finding consistent with broader academic observation that non-monetary inducement reduces the psychological discomfort of the transaction for both patron and client relative to direct cash payment.

Academic literature specific to the 2023 cycle, including Ewum and Obi's 2024 study of vote buying in Biase Local Government Area of Rivers State and the broader review by Efebeh and Ohis, identifies poverty, weak electoral institutions, the failure of incumbents to fulfil prior campaign promises, and the absence of credible sanctions for offenders as the principal drivers sustaining the practice, noting that despite widespread video and photographic documentation of party agents distributing cash at polling units, INEC has not sanctioned any political party for the offence. The Wiley-published assessment by Madueke similarly situates vote buying within a broader pattern of 2023 electoral malpractice, including manipulation of electoral institutions, intimidation, and attacks on voters, exacerbated by the exploitation of ethnoreligious cleavages by competing campaigns.

2.6 Summary of Literature Review

The reviewed literature converges on three findings directly relevant to this study. First, vote-buying in Nigeria's 2023 general election was more prevalent than in any preceding election cycle for which comparable National Bureau of Statistics data exists, with a measurable share of recipients, 40 per cent, admitting the practice altered their voting decision. Second, the practice changed in response to the 2023 currency crisis, using non-monetary and foreign-currency incentives when naira cash was difficult to come by. This shows that vote buying is a strong, not a weak, phenomenon. Third, the existing legal prohibitions under the Electoral Act have largely gone unenforced, as there have been no documented sanctions against any political party despite extensive video evidence; this gap is directly addressed by the policy recommendations in the present study. The literature is extensive in documenting the prevalence and proximate drivers of vote buying, but it offers comparatively less integration with the sustainable development literature; this study seeks to narrow that gap by explicitly linking the accountability-erosion mechanism of vote buying to the outcomes of Sustainable Development Goal 16.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive, ex-post-facto research design grounded in secondary data analysis. The design is appropriate because the 2023 general election had already occurred, with comprehensive survey and observational data already published, precluding experimental manipulation and instead permitting systematic description, comparison, and interpretation of documented prevalence rates and institutional responses.

3.2 Area of the Study

The area of the study is the Federal Republic of Nigeria at the national level, with particular attention to regional variation across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, drawing on disaggregated National Bureau of Statistics data that highlight the North-West zone as the area of most acute vote-buying prevalence in the 2023 cycle.

3.3 Population of the Study

The population of the study comprises the complete set of officially published and reputable institutionally verified survey, observational, and documentary data relevant to vote buying and money politics during Nigeria's 2023 general election, including the National Bureau of Statistics third national corruption survey, Independent National Electoral Commission budgetary and post-election reports, Chatham House and SBM Intelligence election assessments, and peer-reviewed empirical studies of the 2023 cycle published in Nigerian and international academic journals.

3.4 Method of Data Collection

Data were collected exclusively through documentary and secondary sources. Three categories were consulted: official statistical publications, principally the National Bureau of Statistics' corruption survey and INEC's 2023 general election report; reputable election observation and policy analysis, including Chatham House, SBM Intelligence, and the Centre for Democracy and Development; and peer-reviewed journal articles specifically addressing vote buying in the 2023 cycle. All figures cited were cross-validated across at least two independent sources where possible.

3.5 Method of Data Analysis

The study employs descriptive and comparative trend analysis, juxtaposing 2023 prevalence rates against the 2019 and 2015 baselines to isolate the magnitude of change and disaggregating national figures by geopolitical zone to identify regional variation. No inferential statistical testing or primary survey instrument was employed; the analytical

contribution lies in the systematic synthesis and interpretation of existing documented evidence within the conceptual and theoretical framework developed in Chapter Two.

4 Major Findings and Discussion

4.1 Major Findings

The data reviewed for this study yield four major findings.

4.1.1 Finding One: Vote Buying Rose Sharply in 2023 Relative to 2019

National Bureau of Statistics data confirm that vote buying increased from 17 per cent of citizens personally offered money in 2019 to 22 per cent in 2023, with offers of non-monetary favours rising from four per cent to nine per cent over the same period, and household-level (rather than personal) approaches rising from five per cent to 10 per cent. Table 4.1 summarises this trend.

Table 1: Summary of National Bureau of Statistics Data

Indicator	2019 (%)	2023 (%)
Personally offered money for vote	17	22
Personally offered other favour	4	9
Household member approached instead	5	10
North-West zone prevalence	23	44

Source: National Bureau of Statistics, Corruption in Nigeria: Patterns and Trends (2024), as reported by Punch (2024).

4.1.2 Finding Two: A Substantial Minority of Recipients Were Influenced by the Offer

Of all the citizens who reported being offered money or a favour in exchange for their vote in 2023, 40 per cent admitted that the offer influenced their final vote choice, while 55 per cent maintained it did not. This finding indicates that while a majority of recipients retained independent voting behaviour despite the inducement, a substantial minority, representing several million voters nationally given Nigeria's 2023 registered voter base of over 93 million, had their electoral choice directly altered by monetary or material exchange.

4.1.3 Finding Three: Vote-Buying Technique Adapted to the 2023 Currency Crisis

SBM Intelligence's election-day monitoring documented that the naira redesign and cash scarcity crisis preceding the 2023 election altered, rather than eliminated, vote-buying practice, with some political actors substituting West African CFA francs or non-monetary

goods, including foodstuffs and clothing items, for naira cash at polling units. This adaptive substitution demonstrates that vote buying is not contingent on the availability of a specific currency instrument but reflects a deeper transactional political culture capable of substituting across payment forms in response to liquidity constraints.

4.1.4 Finding Four: Institutional Enforcement Remained Absent Despite Documented Evidence

Despite extensive photographic and video documentation of party agents distributing cash at polling units during the 2023 election, and despite INEC's own pre-election acknowledgement, through Chairman Mahmood Yakubu, of the threat posed by money politics, no political party was sanctioned by INEC for vote-buying offences in connection with the 2023 election. This enforcement gap persisted notwithstanding an INEC election budget of approximately ₦305 billion, indicating that the absence of sanctions reflects an institutional and legal enforcement deficit rather than a lack of financial or evidentiary resources.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings collectively support this study's central proposition that money politics and vote buying constitute a structural, rather than incidental, bane on Nigeria's sustainable development trajectory. The rise in vote buying documented in Finding One, occurring despite the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System and a revised Electoral Act explicitly intended to strengthen electoral integrity, demonstrates that technological and legal reform targeted at result manipulation does not address vote buying, which occurs prior to and independently of the accreditation and counting process. This suggests that future reform efforts must shift focus from result-integrity technology toward the pre-vote financial transaction itself, including campaign finance disclosure and real-time monitoring of cash distribution near polling units.

Finding Two, that 40 per cent of recipients had their vote choice directly altered, is the most consequential result for the sustainable development argument advanced in this study because it establishes that vote buying is not merely an ethical or symbolic concern but a practice with a measurable causal effect on electoral outcomes at a scale capable of altering the composition of elected government. Combined with the unprecedented vote fragmentation of the 2023 presidential election, in which the winning candidate secured only 36.6 per cent of the vote, the finding raises the possibility that a meaningful share of elected officials in the 2023 cycle owe a portion of their mandate to transactional rather than programmatic support, weakening the accountability relationship that Sustainable Development Goal 16 identifies as foundational to effective governance.

Finding Three, concerning the adaptive substitution of currency and in-kind inducements during the 2023 cash scarcity crisis, illustrates the resilience and adaptability of Nigeria's clientelistic political culture, consistent with the Clientelism Theory and Reciprocal Determinism Theory outlined in section 2.2; the practice persisted not because naira cash was available but because the underlying transactional relationship between patron and client, embedded in the political environment described by reciprocal determinism, found alternative instruments through which to express itself. This finding cautions against policy approaches that target a single payment instrument, such as cash, in isolation, since the literature and the 2023 evidence both indicate that vote buying will substitute for whatever instrument remains available.

Finding Four, the absence of institutional sanction despite documented evidence, represents the most directly actionable result of this study, since it identifies a specific enforcement gap rather than a diffuse cultural or economic constraint. The persistence of impunity, despite INEC's considerable resourcing and explicit pre-election acknowledgement of the threat posed by money politics, indicates that Nigeria's electoral legal framework, while formally prohibiting vote buying under the Electoral Act, lacks the prosecutorial follow-through necessary to deter the practice, a gap that this study's policy recommendations in Chapter Five address directly.

5 Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

5.1 Summary

This study assessed the relationship between money politics, vote buying, and sustainable development in Nigeria using the 2023 general election. Chapter One situated the study against the backdrop of Nigeria's sixth consecutive transition election and the persistence of vote buying despite reform, identifying the vote-buying development trap as the study's central problem. Chapter Two reviewed conceptual and empirical literature, clarifying electoral integrity, clientelism, money politics, and sustainable development, and anchoring the study theoretically in clientelism theory and reciprocal determinism theory. Chapter Three set out a descriptive, ex-post-facto design relying on secondary data from the National Bureau of Statistics, INEC, Chatham House, and SBM Intelligence. Chapter Four presented four major findings: a rise in vote buying from 17 per cent in 2019 to 22 per cent in 2023; a 40 per cent rate of voters admitting the inducement altered their choice; adaptive substitution of payment instruments during the 2023 currency crisis; and a persistent enforcement gap despite documented evidence and substantial INEC resourcing.

5.2 Educational Implication of the Findings

The findings carry direct implications for civic and political education in Nigeria. They demonstrate the need for sustained, school- and community-based civic education that

explains, in concrete terms, how an individually rational decision to accept a small inducement contributes to a collectively damaging erosion of accountability, since the 40 per cent influence rate documented in this study indicates that information and value reorientation campaigns target a genuinely persuadable segment of the electorate rather than a fixed or immovable behaviour. The findings also underscore the importance of incorporating campaign finance literacy and electoral law awareness into political science and civic education curricula so that citizens, journalists, and prospective candidates alike understand both the illegality and the documented developmental cost of vote buying.

5.3 Conclusion

This study concludes that money politics and vote buying functioned as a measurable bane on the integrity and developmental promise of Nigeria's 2023 general election. The rise in prevalence from 2019 to 2023, the substantial share of voters whose choice was directly altered, the adaptive resilience of the practice through the currency crisis, and the continuing absence of institutional sanction together indicate that vote buying in Nigeria is a structural, self-reinforcing feature of the political economy rather than a transient irregularity. Insofar as sustainable development depends on accountable governance and competent leadership selection, the 2023 evidence reviewed in this study suggests that Nigeria's electoral process remains only partially capable of delivering either, with direct consequences for the country's prospects of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 16 and the broader 2030 Agenda.

5.4 Policy Recommendations

Arising from the findings and conclusion above, the study recommends the following:

- i. **Strengthen campaign finance enforcement:** The Independent National Electoral Commission, in collaboration with the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, should establish a dedicated, time-bound prosecutorial unit for vote-buying offences during the election cycle, ensuring that documented video and photographic evidence translates into actual sanctions of culpable parties and agents, rather than the impunity recorded throughout the 2023 cycle.
- ii. **Deploy real-time, instrument-agnostic monitoring:** Given the demonstrated adaptability of vote buying across cash, foreign currency, and in-kind instruments during the 2023 currency crisis, election monitoring frameworks should be designed to detect transactional exchange broadly rather than targeting any single payment instrument.
- iii. **Expand targeted poverty-reduction and social protection programming:** Recognising poverty as a principal driver of voter susceptibility to inducement,

particularly in high-prevalence zones such as the North-West, government and development partners should prioritise targeted cash transfer and livelihood programmes in the most vote-buying-prone regions ahead of future election cycles.

- iv. **Institutionalise sustained civic and voter education:** Civil society organisations, INEC's voter education department, and educational institutions should deliver continuous, rather than only pre-election, civic education explicitly linking vote buying to long-term governance and development outcomes, building on the demonstrated persuadability of the 40 per cent of voters whose choice was influenced by inducement.
- v. **Reform candidate nomination financing:** Political parties should be required, under INEC oversight, to disclose primary and general election campaign expenditure in a standardised, publicly accessible format, reducing the opacity that currently allows informal and illicit financial flows to dominate the electoral process from the nomination stage onwards.

5.5 Limitation of the Study

This study is limited by its reliance exclusively on secondary, already-published data rather than primary survey or field observation, meaning its findings are bounded by the methodological choices and sampling frames of the original data-generating institutions, principally the National Bureau of Statistics. The study's national and zonal level of analysis does not capture constituency- or polling-unit-level variation in vote-buying intensity, an avenue better suited to future primary research. Finally, the documented prevalence rates may understate the true scale of vote buying in the 2023 election because several underlying surveys rely on self-reported behaviour regarding this stigmatised and illegal practice.

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