

Vote Buying

Paul A. Adekunle¹, Matthew N. O. Sadiku², Janet O. Sadiku³

¹International Institute of Professional Security, Lagos, Nigeria

²Roy G. Perry College of Engineering, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX, USA

³Juliana King University, Houston, TX, USA

ABSTRACT

Vote buying, which is also called electoral clientelism or money-for-votes, refers to the practice where political actors offer money, goods, services, or benefits to voters in an election. The payment may be direct (cash) or indirect (food, transport, goods) which is intended to influence voting behavior. This tends to undermine autonomy of voters and compromises electoral integrity. Vote buying is as a result of several factors such as poverty and economic inequality to weak institutions and law enforcement, patron-client political culture, low political awareness or trust, and cycle of corruption. The practice can be clandestine or public, depending on the legal risks and local political norms. Combatting vote buying would involve legal sanctions, electoral monitoring, civic education, campaign finance regulation, and institutional strengthening. The paper understudies the immediate/remote causes, the effects of vote buying, and how it tends to undermine democracy as well as sustainable development.

KEYWORDS: *Vote buying, political actors, politicians, voters, voting behavior, law enforcement, cycle of corruption, poverty, weak institutions, civic education, secret ballots.*

INTRODUCTION

Vote buying is a form of electoral corruption in which candidates, political parties, or their agents provide money, goods, services, or other material incentives to voters in exchange for electoral support, as shown in Figure 1. This is a direct violation of the principles of free and fair elections and undermines political equality by transforming voting into a transactional exchange rather than an expression of individual political preference, as shown in Figure 2. Within the broader literature, vote buying is commonly analyzed as a component of clientelism, where politicians distribute targeted benefit in return for political loyalty rather than pursuing programmatic, policy-based appeals. Some other scholars define vote buying as a contingent exchange: material benefits are offered with the expectation that recipients will reciprocate by voting for a specific candidate or party. This practice may occur before, during, or after elections and can involve direct cash payments, distribution of food or consumer goods, or promises of employment and services. As posited by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), vote buying distorts electoral competition and weakens democratic

accountability by privileging wealth patronage networks over policy debate. Vote buying has been well documented across various regions, including Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia. It has also been stated how economic vulnerability, weak institutional enforcement, and entrenched patron-client relationships contribute to the persistence of this practice. In most cases, poverty and inequality increases the attractiveness of short-term material inducements, while limited monitoring and enforcement reduce the perceived risks for political actors.

Although illegal in most democratic systems, vote buying remains challenging to detect and prosecute due to its secretive nature and the difficulty of proving voter compliance. However, its consequences extend beyond individual elections, contributing to corruption, reduced government accountability, and declining public trust in democratic institutions. Therefore, understanding vote buying is essential for strengthening electoral integrity and promoting sustainable democratic governance [1-4].

How to cite this paper: Paul A. Adekunle | Matthew N. O. Sadiku | Janet O. Sadiku "Vote Buying" Published in International

Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development (ijtsrd), ISSN: 2456-6470,

Volume-10 | Issue-1, February 2026, pp.1177-1182,

URL: www.ijtsrd.com/papers/ijtsrd100202.pdf



Copyright © 2026 by author (s) and International Journal of Trend in Scientific Research and Development Journal. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0) (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>)



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Vote buying (electoral clientelism or patronage politics) is the practice where political actors (candidates, parties, brokers) offer money, goods, or services to individual voters in return for electoral support (a promise to vote in a certain way). This is widely regarded as undermining free and fair elections and is illegal in many countries such as the United States, Argentina, Mexico, Kenya, Brazil and Nigeria, though it remains common in both emerging and established democracies [5, 6]. The historical origins and early practice are outlined below:

1. Pre-secret ballot era (18th-19th century): Long before modern electoral law, vote buying was often an open component of political contests:

- In 18th century England, wealthy aristocrats freely spent vast sums on voters in parliamentary elections, such as the famed “*Spendthrift Election*” of 1768 where candidates spent exorbitantly on voters’ support [6].
- In the United States, before the widespread adoption of the Australian secret ballot in the late 1800s, both major parties routinely paid voters or provided hospitality (e.g., cash, food, drink, or transportation) to secure votes. Vote-buying shops and direct payments to voters are documented for elections in the 1800s and early 1900s [6].
- In British and American elections of the 1830s-1870s, party agents would sometimes lock up voters in taverns to ensure they showed up at the polls, or explicitly pay them to vote for certain candidates [7]. Parties gave voters cash, food, alcohol, healthcare, poverty relief, and myriad other benefits in exchange for their votes. To also gain leverage over them, parties gathered information about voters’ debts, their crimes, and even their infidelities. This early period illustrates vote buying as a routine, often public feature of electoral competition when electoral secrecy and regulatory oversight were weak or non-existent or absent. Of recent in 2025 in the US, there were allegations of vote buying in the 2025 Wisconsin elections, where Elon Musk attempted to influence votes by promising and handing out \$1 million checks [6]. While in the UK, there were concerns about vote buying in the 2019 Conservative Party leadership election, where some donors had close ties to Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman [8]

2. Vote buying in the era of modern democracy

20th Century and expansion of democracy: As modern electoral reforms – including secret ballots, voter registration, and campaign finance laws spread

globally in the 20th century, formal electoral malpractice like vote buying was increasingly outlawed. However:

- In many new democracies emerging after colonial rule or authoritarian collapse, vote buying became a common feature of electoral competition rather than an exception [5].
 - Scholars studying electoral clientelism frame vote buying as both a product and a driver of political machine politics, a system where exchange (money/goods) for votes is foundational to maintaining power [9].
- 3. Electoral clientelism in modern politics –** Political scientists have noted that vote buying is closely tied to clientelism – a broader system where politicians exchange private benefits for political support.
- In many African, Latin American, and Asian countries – especially in rural or economically disadvantaged areas – vote buying becomes systematic and impacts electoral outcomes [10].

Latin America

- Brazil’s *Mensalao scandal* (2005) involved monthly payments to legislators in exchange for support in Congress – a form of elite vote transaction tied to legislative “votes” rather than ballots, but closely linked to electoral clientelism [11].
- Venezuela (2018): Reports indicated that political authorities alleged used food and state resources to induce electoral support [12].

Asia

- In Indonesia, money politics (*politik uang*) remains a prominent issue. Local tactics like *serangan fajar* (“dawn attack”, giving money just before Election Day) are well-documented [13].

Africa (e.g., Nigeria)

- In many modern African democracies, vote buying is prevalent and often linked to poverty, political patronage, and weak institutions. For example, in Nigeria, multiple elections since the return to civilian rule in 1999 show extensive vote-buying practices at all stages of the electoral cycle (registration, campaign, and election day) [14-18].

CAUSES AND DYNAMICS OF VOTE BUYING

Political science research has identified several drivers that make vote buying common in different contexts to include:

1. Weak institutions and poverty: Voters are more responsive to immediate material rewards where economic insecurity is high [5].

2. Clientelism: Patron-client networks make the exchange of benefits for political support a normalized part of politics [5].
3. Turnout vs. policy buying: Some scholars distinguish *turnout buying* (paying to get people to vote) from *vote choice buying* (paying to influence who a voter chooses) [5].
4. Competitive pressures: Where opponents pay voters, others feel compelled to match or exceed incentives [5].

Legal Reforms and Decline

Many countries today have introduced legal reforms to curb vote buying as elections have been democratized:

- U. K. Acts in late 1800s has helped to tackle bribery legally and set expense limits [19].
- Secret ballot reforms have also helped to reduce the ease with which buyers could verify whether a voter complied with an exchange [7], as shown in Figure 3.

All these notwithstanding, vote buying still persists globally, most especially where enforcement is weak, and socio-economic pressures sustains demand for money politics [5, 20].

Indirect Benefits of Vote Buying

Vote buying is a complex issue, and while it may seem beneficial to some, it is largely considered detrimental to democratic processes. Some of the potential benefits cited include [6, 21, 22]:

- Increased voter turnout: As this can motivate people to participate in elections, especially those who might not otherwise vote.
- Short-term economic gains: Voters may receive immediate financial benefits, which can be appealing in areas with poverty and economic hardship.
- Political advantage: Candidates who engage in vote buying may gain an electoral advantage, at least in the short term.

Conversely, these benefits come with significant drawbacks or negative consequences, which may include:

- Undermining democracy: It erodes trust in democratic institutions, and can lead to elected officials prioritizing personal gains over public service.
- Inequality: It disproportionately affects vulnerable populations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.
- Corruption: Vote buying fuels corruption and can lead to further electoral manipulation/fraud and malpractices.

Solutions to vote buying

Suggested solutions to combat vote buying in Nigeria would include [23-25]:

1. Electoral law reforms – Enacting robust legislation that clearly defines and prohibits vote buying, with stringent penalties for offenders.
2. Biometric voter registration (BVR) – adopting biometric voter registration and identification systems to enhance the integrity of the voter roll.
3. Voter education – Implementation of comprehensive civic and voter education programs to raise awareness about the negative impacts of vote buying, as shown in Figure 4.
4. Poverty alleviation – Need to address poverty and economic inequality to reduce reliance on vote buying.
5. Transparency and accountability – Implementing transparent campaign financing regulations and establishing asset declaration requirements for politicians.
6. Technology integration – Utilizing technology, such as electronic voting and result transmission (i.e., real-time transmission of election results), to enhance transparency and reduce electoral irregularities.
7. Independent investigative body – The establishment of an independent investigative and prosecutorial body to tackle electoral misconduct.

How advanced democracies curb vote buying

Curbing the menace of vote buying in advanced countries or democracies include [26-29]:

1. Strong campaign finance laws & spending limits:
 - This helps to cap donations and campaign spending.
 - Requires disclosure of funding sources
 - Criminalizes vote buying explicitly

Examples by:

- United Kingdom: Strict spending limits under the Representation of People Act and Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act.
- Canada: Donation caps and public reporting requirements reduce illicit influence.
- Germany: Transparent party financing under the Political Parties Act.

The impact is to reduce hidden financial incentives that enable vote buying.

2. Independent Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs)

This ensures that elections are monitored by non-partisan institutions, such as:

- Australian Electoral Commission

➤ Federal Election Commission

These bodies are to:

- Monitor campaign finance
- Investigate bribery complaints
- Enforce penalties

The impact helps to increase accountability and to deter illegal inducements.

3. Strict Criminal Penalties

Advanced democracies criminalize vote buying with serious consequences like:

- Fines
- Disqualification from office
- Prison sentences

Examples are:

- Japan: Public Offices Election Act imposes imprisonment for vote buying.
- South Korea: Strong prosecution record for electoral bribery.

The impact raises the cost of engaging in vote buying.

4. Transparent Voting Systems

Measures taken include:

- Secret ballots
- Secure ballot tracking
- Monitored polling stations
- Strict chain-of-custody rules

Examples as in:

- Sweden: High transparency and public trust reduce incentives for bribery.
- New Zealand: Independent oversight and simple voting process.

The impact ensures that secret ballots make it difficult to verify whether a bought vote was delivered.

5. Digital Reporting & Transparency Portals

Many advanced democracies require real-time disclosure of donations and expenditures online.

Examples are:

- Estonia: Digital governance infrastructure increases transparency
- United States: Public campaign finance databases through the FEC.

The impact is that public scrutiny discourages illicit financial inducements.

6. Civic Education & High Political Literacy

The countries with strong civic education systems reduce susceptibility to vote buying.

- Some examples are:
- Finland: Emphasis on civic education in schools.
- Norway: High political trust and voter awareness.

The impact is that educated voters are less likely to exchange votes for short-term benefits.

7. Social welfare Systems

In advanced welfare states, citizens are less economically vulnerable, reducing incentives to sell votes.

Examples are:

- Denmark: Strong social safety net.
- Netherlands: Universal welfare policies.

The impact reduces economic desperation that fuels vote buying.

8. Electoral Observation & Monitoring

Advanced democracies allow observers such as:

- Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)
- Carter Center

The impact is that external scrutiny strengthens electoral integrity.

CONCLUSION

Vote buying undermines the core principles of democracy by distorting free choice, weakening accountability, and eroding public trust in elections. Even though strong laws and independent institutions can reduce its occurrence, legal measures alone are not enough. There is the need for effective enforcement, transparent campaign financing, and strict penalties are essential to serve as deterrence. Furthermore, there is the need for improving socio-economic conditions and strengthening civic education to help reduce voter vulnerability to inducements. Ultimately, combating vote buying requires a comprehensive and holistic approach that combines legal reform, institutional integrity, and informed citizen participation to protect electoral credibility. More information on Vote Buying can be obtained in the books in [30-37] and the following related journals:

Electoral Studies

Oxford Review of Economic Policy

Journal of Public Economics

Annual Review of Political Science

Journal of Student Affairs in Africa

European Journal of Science, Innovation and Technology

American Political Science Review

Journal of electoral Studies

Journal of African Elections

Journal of Political Science and Leadership Research

African Studies Quarterly

Journal of development Economics

REFERENCES

- [1] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) (2022), *Electoral Process Primer: Vote Buying*, Sockholm: International IDEA.

- [2] F. C. Schaffer & A. Schedler (2007), “What is vote buying?” In: F. C. Schaffer (ed.), *Elections for sale: The cause and consequences of vote buying*.
- [3] S. C. Stokes (2005), “Perverse accountability: A formal model of machine politics with evidence from Argentina,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 99, no. 3, pp. 315-325.
- [4] S. C. Stokes et al. (2013), *Brokers, voters, and clientelism: The puzzle of distributive politics*, Cambridge University Press.
- [5] O. Joseph and V. Vashchanka (2022), “Vote buying,” (PDF), International IDEA Electoral Processes Primer 2.
- [6] “Vote buying,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/vote-buying>
- [7] S. C. Stokes, T Dunning, M. Nazareno & V. Brusco (05 June 2014), “What killed vote buying in Britain and the United States?” Cambridge University Press.
- [8] “Foreign electoral intervention,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/foreign-electoral-intervention>
- [9] A. Murugesan (28 September 2020), “Electoral clientelism and vote buying,” Oxford Research Encyclopedias, <https://www.oxfordre.com/politics/electoral-clientelism-and-vote-buying>
- [10] P. S. Jensen & M. K. Justesen, “Poverty and vote buying: Survey-based evidence from Africa – ScienceDirect,” *Electoral Studies*, vol. 33, March 2014, pp. 220-232, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/poverty-and-vote-buying-study-based-evidence-from-africa>
- [11] “Mensalao scandal,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/mensalao-scandal>
- [12] “2018 Venezuelan presidential election,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/2018-venezuelan-presidential-election>
- [13] “Elections in Indonesia,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/elections-in-indonesia>
- [14] N. D. Danjibo & A. Oladeji, “Vote buying in Nigeria: An assessment of the 2007 General Elections,” *Journal of African Elections*, vol. 6, no. 2.
- [15] T. Falola, “Nigeria: A history.”
- [16] J. Ibrahim (2018), “Elections and governance in Nigeria.”
- [17] R. Suberu (2010), “The Nigerian State and Politics.”
- [18] INEC Report on 2023 General Elections.
- [19] “Corrupt and Illegal Practices Prevention Act 1883,” Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/corrupt-and-illegal-practices-preventioin-act-1883>
- [20] E. Kramon, “Money for votes,” Cambridge University Press.
- [21] M. Dauda & A. A. Abdullahi (December 2019), “Vote trading in Nigeria politics,” (PDF), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338233088_vote_trading_in_nigeria_politics
- [22] E. J. Nwagwu et al., “Vote buying during 2015 and 2019 General Elections: Manifestation and implications on democratic development in Nigeria,” *Cogent Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022, <https://www.tandfonline.com>
- [23] G. Abuh, “National Assembly prioritizing electoral reforms ahead of 2027 – Hon. Nwogu calls for INEC overhaul and one-day voting,” <https://paaca.org.ng/national-assembly-prioritizing-electoral-reforms>
- [24] O. C. Ajayi (January 2025), “Vote buying and electoral practice in Nigeria: The experience from 2023 General Elections,” *Journal of Political Science and Leadership Research*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 13-28.
- [25] “The menace of vote buying in Nigeria electoral system: Issues, causes and solutions 2015-2023,” https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374459604_THE_MENACE_OF_VOTE_BUYING_IN_NIGERIA_ELECTORAL_SYSTEM_ISSUES_CAUSES_AND_SOLUTIONS_2015-2023
- [26] International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) – Reports on Electoral Integrity.
- [27] Transparency International – Corruption Perception Index.
- [28] OECD – Political finance transparency guidelines.
- [29] World Bank – Governance and Anti-corruption Reports.
- [30] B. Muhtadi, “Vote buying in Indonesia: The mechanics of electoral bribery.”

- [31] E. Kramon, “Money for votes: The causes and consequences of electoral clientelism in Africa.”
- [32] S. Gherghina & M. Nemcok (ed.), “Political parties and electoral clientelism.”
- [33] J. Kawata (ed.), “Comparing political corruption and clientelism.”
- [34] V. O. A. Adetula (2008), “Money politics in Nigeria: An overview.”
- [35] C. Ake (1996), “Democracy and development in Africa.”
- [36] R. Ajayi, J. & J. Y. Fashagba (2021), “Nigerian politics.”
- [37] P. T. Vande (2019), “Vote buying and credible elections in the 2019 election in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja.”



Figure 2. Voting

Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Voting>



Figure 3. Secret ballot

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secret_ballot



Figure 1. Vote buying

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vote_buying



Figure 4. Voter education project

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Vernon_E._Jordan_working_on_a_voter_education_project.jpg