
Original Paper

Commodification of *Secret Ballot* in Off-Cycle Elections: Evidence from Ekiti State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The age-long puzzle of why parties attempt to buy votes when the ballot is secret and people could simply accept campaign handouts and then vote as they wish seems to have been resolved by the efficacy of “see and buy” method in Nigeria. Since political power is perceived as a sure means to gaining state resources for personal enrichment, disenfranchised citizens often anticipate financial incentives during electioneering period. Employing participant-observation, surveys and desk research methods of data gathering in relation to off-cycle elections in Nigeria, this study provides useful insights into how democratic systems can innovatively address such threats given that the Ekiti State gubernatorial elections display significant differences from the context in which much of the literature on vote buying was developed. While issues around vote-buying have received considerable scholarly attention with emphasis on national elections, what Ekiti context presents is an interesting research study of off-cycle elections in a homogenous community with long history of dignity, extensive political awareness, resilience, contentment, and communal living.

Keywords: Democracy, Electoral Integrity, Vote Buying, Commodification, Secret Balloting

Introduction

There is widespread concern in many countries about low or falling turnout, public disaffection, party polarization, and the failure of elections to ensure legitimate outcomes (Norris, Wynter, & Cameron, 2018) because effective rigging, as evident in many electoral strategies, ensures that a party wins and gets away with it without losing legitimacy (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). In many countries today, the legitimacy of the electoral process is often contested even where elections have become the norm; either democratic or autocratic regimes. In Nigeria, the influence of huge amounts of money in deciding who wins an election is fast replacing ballot box snatching and high record of brigandage on Election Day just as Nigerians are beginning to celebrate relative decline of godfatherism (Atoyebi, 2018). Electoral fraud has thus taken a new dimension in the history of Nigeria with vote buying at polling booths (Oguntola, 2018) fast becoming a template that unscrupulous politicians are deploying to win elections.

Historically, vote buying was facilitated by the absence of the secret ballot and by suffrage restrictions that created small electorates. Today, all democratic societies have embraced secret ballot and universal suffrage (Aidt et al., 2015) and it is contended that secret ballot makes it difficult to authenticate whether a voter whose vote is bought actually votes as agreed. The validity of this submission in Nigeria where money has become a dominant, determinant factor, calls for academic interrogation. Over time, elections in the country have been perverted into instruments of entrenching political accountability, owing to the gross lack of electoral integrity.

Despite extensive literature on democratization and electoral integrity, less attention has been paid to the political economy of electoral democracy in Nigeria, particularly in the context of secret balloting and vote buying. Spanning different political regimes, candidates and political parties use many tactics to buy votes, from giving likely supporters an incentive to turn out (Nichter, 2008), to targeting the people who are most likely to reciprocate the gift with a vote (Finan & Schechter, 2012). While vote buying can increase political participation in many poverty-stricken African countries, the phenomenon can endanger government accountability and democracy, not only because it is an unlawful activity

under a well-specified electoral regulation; but also because it has metamorphosed from secrecy to *open market* dealings across all categories of voters particularly on election day, contradicting the core voter-swing voter dichotomy in literature.

Within the broader electoral democracy context, therefore, some pertinent questions arise particularly in reference to voting system and political behaviour: Has the introduction of secret ballot tamed the scourge of vote buying? Why do voters and vote-seeking politicians engage in economic exchange during electioneering? If holding formally participatory and contested elections is a necessary condition for sustainable democracy, can its integrity be ascertained amidst vote buying and selling by the major actors? In reality, has vote-buying been replaced with campaign promises to secure voter support? Are the existing administrative, technological and legal frameworks in Nigeria irredeemably susceptible to fraud and vote buying? Focusing on Ekiti State as a unit of analysis, what amalgam of domestic conditions and external factors facilitate the vote buying phenomenon? Assuming that Ekiti is typical of the rest of the federation, how can the country overcome clientelism and enthrone a regime of democratic accountability?

This study provides useful insights into how democratic systems can innovatively address such threats given that the Ekiti scenario displays significant differences from the context in which much of the literature on vote buying was developed. Employing participant-observation, survey and desk study methods of data gathering in relation to two off-cycle gubernatorial elections in Ekiti state (2014 and 2018), this study affirms that having flawed democratic processes, such as cash-for-vote during elections, may perilously entrench commodification norm in the polity. While the phenomenon of cash-for-votes may have been extensively treated in literature, what Ekiti scenario presents is an interesting research study of an off-cycle election in a homogenous community with long history of dignity, extensive political awareness, contentment and communal living. The ultimate objective of this study is to explore the dynamics of vote buying in Nigerian electoral politics, having Ekiti state as a case study and in doing so to present systematic answers to many of the key questions that have arisen in the literature on clientelism. It, therefore, seeks to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the Ekiti electoral circle as well as interrogate the nature, extent and implications of vote buying for democratic accountability and good governance. Specifically, the objectives of this study are to: 1. interrogate the dynamics and the combination of domestic conditions and external factors that facilitate commodification norm in Ekiti State electoral process; 2. explore the chains of operation and methods of vote buying before and during election in the state; 3. examine the short and long-term implications of vote-buying for democracy and good governance; and 4. suggest policy options for stemming the dangerous practice in the country's democratisation process.

Vote Buying in Ekiti: Domestic Drivers and External Influences

Elections must be free and fair for them to express the will of the electorate. However, several factors continually militate against such in Nigeria, particularly since the return to civilian rule in 1999. Of essential interest is the vote-buying phenomenon which has become a dominant, determinant factor and which was amply demonstrated in two off-season governorship elections (2014 and 2018) in Ekiti State. There are growing fears that the rising cases of vote buying where dominant candidates have more opportunities for capturing power may not only undermine the electorate's right of choice, but ultimately imperil Nigeria's democracy. In its fourth pre-election report released in January 2019, YIAGA Africa's observers witnessed the distribution of money or gift items in at least one LGA in each of Nigeria's 36 states and Abuja (IRI/NDI, 2019). No doubt, the intricate web of institutions, interest groups, individual leaders, and citizens who are intertwined at various levels of political engagement, significantly contribute to the contagious vote buying phenomenon. In the questionnaires administered during field work, questions concerning organization, targets and effectiveness of vote buying were raised. The following sections reveal findings from the field.

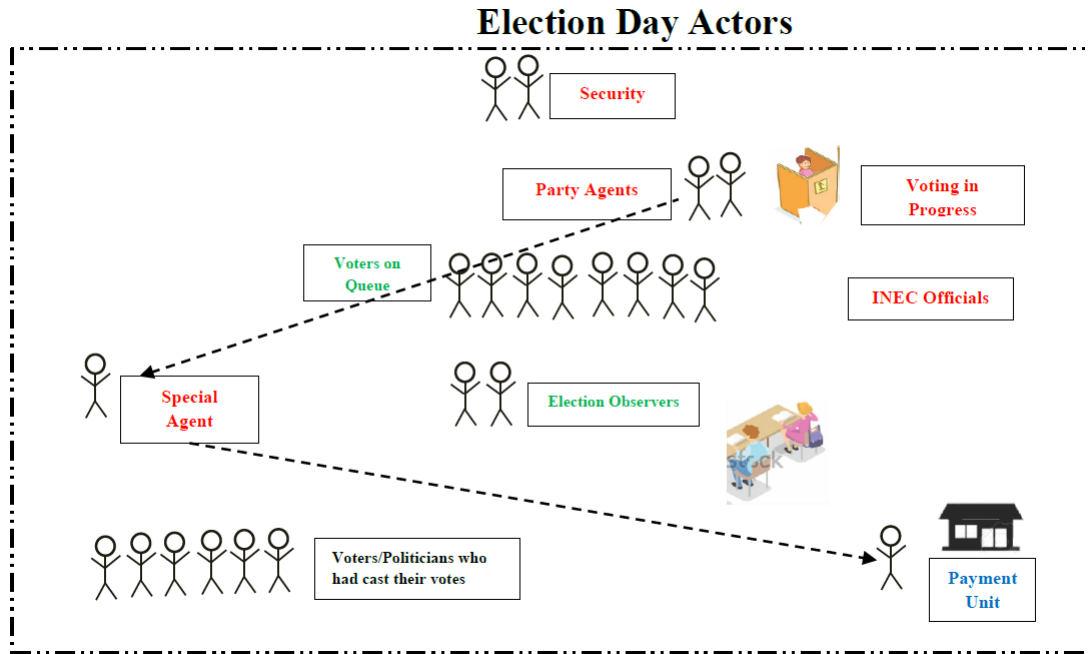


Figure 1. Election Day Actors in the Chain of Vote-Trading

Source: Mike Omilusi (2020)

Some political parties devised countering mechanisms having realised the challenge of defection by voters on Election Day and in an effort to ensure value for money. Evidence from the two elections (2014/2018) clearly shows that agents of the ruling party almost had the monopoly of vote-trading at the polling booths with limited or no resistance from security agents.

Though a party man, the role/identity of the special agent in the above diagram, regarding the assignment, is only known to the official party agent and a few party leaders at the polling unit. After authenticating the voter’s preference for their party, through secret codes/signals by the official party agent, the special agent takes the voter to the payment point (or in many instances, the payment point is described to the voter by the official party agent, only for the special agent to meet him/her there for confirmation or otherwise in case of fraudulent intention) - many of the polling units are hidden but not far. Usually, beneficiaries of the cash reward, do the extended marketing by informing other prospective voters what each party is parting with and the need to show the preferred party’s official agent their ballot paper after thumb printing for validation.

Votes had never been commoditized as it is now, the voters were never this willing to sell, the politicians this willing to buy; and the entire process so brazen. Every community in Ekiti goes agog at the eve of every election while vote-marketing and negotiations are ongoing. The import of vote buying in electoral contests signifies that elections are not for the poor - either in terms of standing for elective positions or benefiting from government policies. It is an extremely expensive enterprise. Unlike election promises that involve the prospects of benefits for large groups identified through general descriptive criteria, vote buying is a contractual relation between the candidate and the voter which involves personal financial or material gains. This section discusses the internal and external factors responsible for transactions that take place around Election Day and during the electoral campaign in Ekiti.

All things considered, it is unrealistic to expect an absolutely free and fair election, considering the pressure on the voters and the desperation of the politicians to win. In Figure 2 below, about 37 percent

of the respondents¹ confessed to being enticed with incentives before and during the election. However, about 63 percent of the respondents denied ever receiving incentives before and during the Ekiti election.

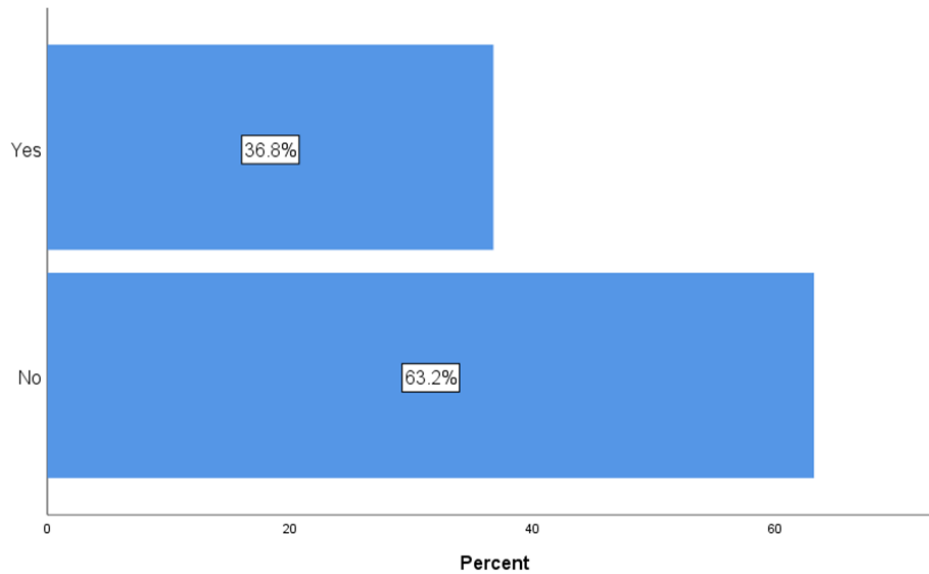


Figure 2. Those offered incentives before and during the Ekiti elections

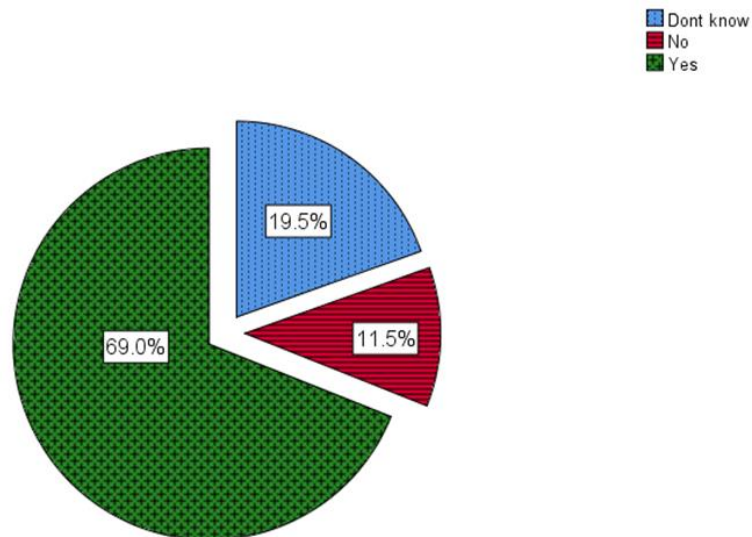


Figure 3. Those who witnessed vote-selling in their communities/local government areas

In support of the view above, Figure 3 shows that about 69 percent of the respondents revealed that voters were involved in vote-selling in their respective neighbourhoods/polling units during the election, whereas about 11 percent revealed that the act of vote-selling did not take place in their communities/polling units during the election.

¹ In another report, YIAGA Africa’s Watching the Vote project recorded that 8 percent of sampled polling units experienced incidents of vote buying or bribery on election day.

Corrupt Tendencies and Desperate Contenders

Corruption is not an inevitable feature of local elections but vote buying is more prevalent when the election is more competitive, making the candidates/parties more desperate and more ruthless for favourable results as witnessed in the 2014 and 2018 gubernatorial elections in the state. Since political office in Nigeria has become an enterprise investment with the highest investor making the most gains, politicians sell their properties and close down their businesses to fund elections. It is not unusual therefore, that desperation among the contenders features prominently across the election circle, precipitating cash-for-vote syndrome. The tension that engulfed Ekiti State, particularly in the 2018 election, was unprecedented. Given that inefficient and corrupt institutions provide an incentive for citizens to focus on short causal chains, the vicious circle of vote-trading/non-performance continues in the country.

Pronounced Poverty Level

Clientelism is commonly considered a hurdle in democratic transitions, especially where large fractions of the population are in poverty. The nexus between vote buying and poverty has earlier been explained. Chronic poverty and cynicism about government help explain the history of vote fraud. Control over scarce resources, including political appointments and bogus contracts, by local politicians also have played a role, allowing moneybags to influence elections with cash or threats.

Events around us suggest that the Nigerian ruling elite may have deliberately employed the tool of poverty to create a tranquilized polity with a dovish populace too hungry to act in their enlightened self-interest and so vulnerable to all manipulative tendencies (Odumakin, 2018). At the end of May 2018, according to The Brookings Institution (2018), Nigeria had about 87 million people in extreme poverty, compared with India's 73 million – and the practice of vote-buying has reportedly become more open and explicit. Thus, for the Ekiti elections, the politicians used networks of go-betweens, known as “canvassers,” or “loyalists” to whom they give public funds and resources. Prior to Election Day, they supplied voters with basic items such as food, television set, phones, food stuffs and recharge cards, among others. The notion that voters' expectations about what politicians can do for them increases politician incentives to engage in vote buying manifested during the governorship elections.

Uniqueness of Grassroots Election (Small Electorate)

Vote buying can easily be an effective means to win an election involving a small electorate because the number of votes needed to win, and hence the number of votes a candidate needs to buy, will be *ceteris paribus*, smaller. Put differently, vote buying is more likely to be crucial for the electoral outcome in grassroots elections (Lehoucq 2003). Ekiti has a small voting population² and the efficacy of vote buying among small electorate was put to test during the shadow elections among political parties in the state while selecting their flag-bearers prior to the July 14, 2018 election. Indirect mode of primaries (via selected delegates) was adopted by most parties. For instance, APC had 2,337 delegates, PDP had 2,092 delegates and Mega Party had only 432 delegates. Many of the delegates became rich overnight as they were able to be financially ‘mobilised’ a few days earlier by different aspirants. The volume of money received in this instance was a function of the manageable number of the delegates.

National Party Secretariats

The involvement of the national secretariats of the two dominant parties in the state, that is, PDP and APC was ominously significant during the two elections under review. In the 2014 election for instance, Temitope Aluko, former PDP State Secretary alleged that Senator Musiliu Obanikoro brought \$35 million cash from former President Goodluck Jonathan to Governor Ayo Fayose for his election (Oladipo, 2016). Obanikoro affirmed in his statement of oath at the EFCC office that he received N4.7billion from the Office of the National Security Adviser under the leadership of Col. Sambo Dasuki in June 2014 (Akinkuotu, 2016) out of which N1.2 billion was delivered for Ekiti election. For

² Ekiti had a population of 733,766 registered voters in 2014 and as at the last election (2018) it increased to 909, 585 voters. Compared to other states, it is one of the lowest in the country.

a state whose economy revolves around N2.5 billion (monthly), such humongous amount for an election lasting a day could rattle the economy. Similarly, it was believed that President Muhammadu Buhari-led Federal Government was eager to thwart the wish of Governor Ayodele Fayose of Ekiti State to retain the PDP’s control of the affairs of the state (Adeoye, 2018) in the 2018 election. Kayode Fayemi, who became the APC flag-bearer, was until May 2018 a cabinet member in the Buhari government. The tension created by the national secretariats of the two parties was almost palpable in the state and, indeed, the election signified a litmus test for both parties in respect of the 2019 general elections. Thus, the historic trajectory, from localized politics built on patron–client ties to centralized clientelism, provides the narrative spine of this account. Local politicians in the state have always had ties with party bigwigs at the centre.

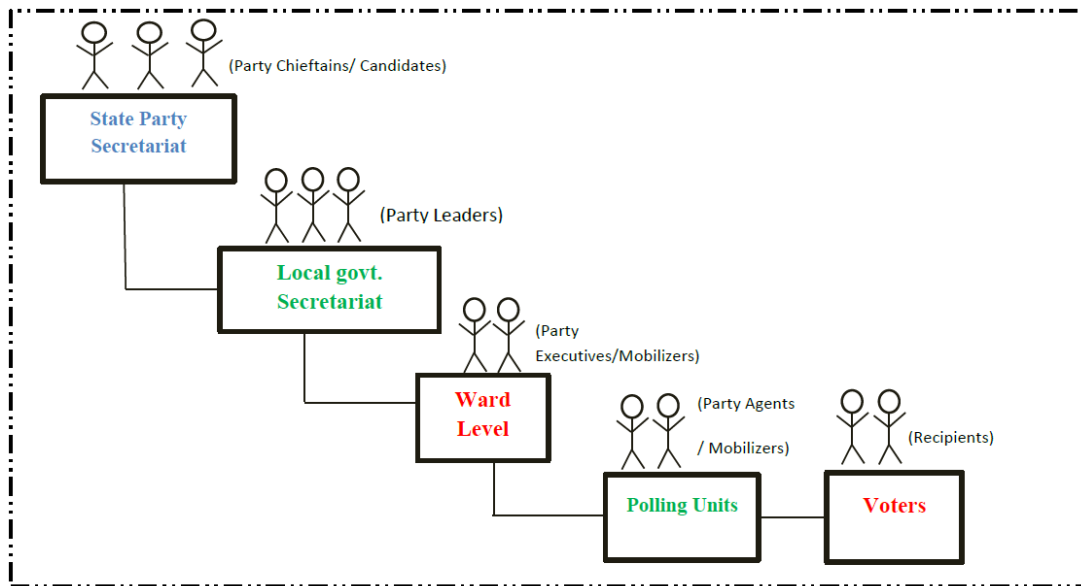


Figure 4. Levels of Financial Disbursement

Source: Mike Omilusi (2020)

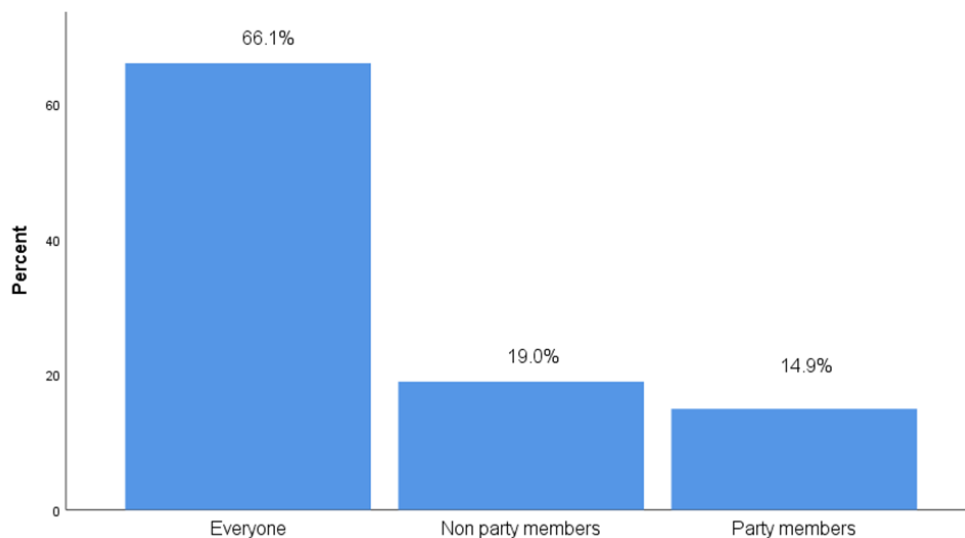


Figure 5. Targets of Vote-buying before Election Day

A question was raised regarding the set of people targeted for vote-buying before the Election Day. Figure 5 above depicts the opinion of people regarding this question. It is revealed that about 66 percent of the respondents believed that everyone is targeted before Election Day by giving cash or other eye- and mind-catching items. Just a few (about 19 percent) are of the opinion that non-party members, probably belonging to undecided voters, are the real targets in vote-buying before election day and are to be enticed in order to get their support. Also, just about 14 percent of respondents opined that it is the party’s own members alone that got the goodies.

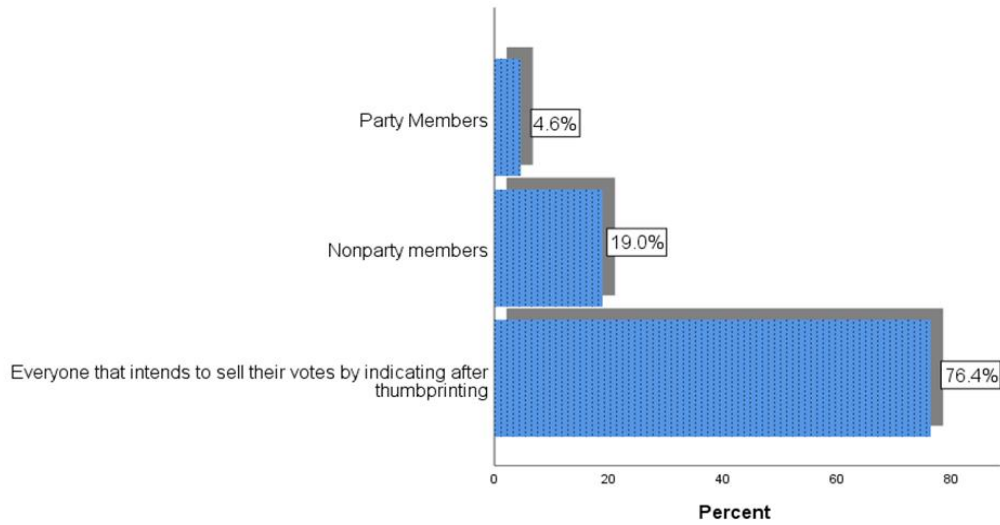


Figure 6. Targets of Vote-buying on Election Day

A similar question as above was raised regarding the set of people targeted by the politicians for vote-buying on the Election Day. Figure 6 above depicts the opinion of people regarding this question. About 76 percent of the respondents said the targets were those who intended to sell their votes by showing their thumb-printed ballots on the Election Day. About 19 percent are of the opinion that other party members are the target while just about 4 percent of the respondents opined that it was the party members alone that were the target of vote-buying while on the queue on Election Day.

Resource-Rich Individuals Outside the State

The dynamics of contemporary campaign finance gives prominence to narrow-based interest groups and individuals who are entrenched in patronage networks that stretch all the way from the local to the national levels of politics. Resource-rich people provide politicians with money in exchange for material favours that can only be dispensed by holders of public office, such as works’ contracts, regulatory decisions, subsidies and monopolies (Wade, 1985). Thus, it is not unusual for businessmen and contractors with vested interests to deploy their war-chest to support candidates during elections. Candidates for public office are often proud of the endorsements they receive from many of these moneybags and various interest groups, particularly outside the state. Much of the spending by these business groups/private individuals is often unreported as there is no mechanism to monitor it. But more significant than the aggregate amount spent in any election is where all this money comes from. Because they also have unrestricted access to government largesse, it is not uncommon for these individuals to donate money to two or three candidates with the most prospects of winning in a single election. Hence, enough cash is always available to dispense before and during elections.

Off-Cycle Elections: Contiguous States and Contagious Vote Buying Syndrome

This section x-rays the contagious effects of vote buying on identified staggered state elections in the southern part of the country; that is, Edo, Ondo, Ekiti, Kogi, Anambra, Bayelsa and Osun states. Their governorship elections are held at different times or off season owing mainly to court judgments that nullified their governorship elections at different times in the past. But does the contiguity of some of these states and their isolated election dates contribute to large scale cash-for-votes? Obviously, the off-cycle governorship elections attract much attention, financial and human resources than the other 29 states elections that are conducted during general elections. The reason is obvious: while general elections attract more than 86 million voters, having scanty international and local observers in each state and the electoral umpire stressed to its limit, an off-cycle election has the attention of all these stakeholders in abundance. Ironically, for the electorate in the off-season elections, rather than having meaningful debates around issues, the elections were hinged simply on which candidate could raise more money and which promises to distribute higher rewards to voters. Ordinarily, the presence of local and international observers ought to discourage vote trading particularly on Election Day. Rather, as evident in the two elections under review, the intensity of cash-for-votes became higher than previous elections.

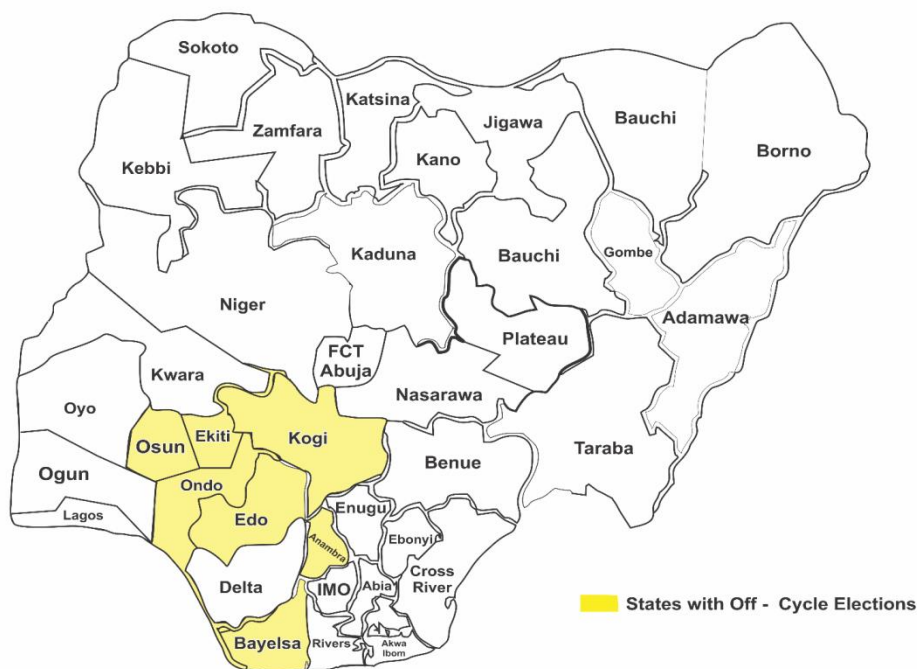


Figure 7. States in Off –Cycle Elections

Source: Mike Omilusi (2020)

The party hierarchies -from ward to national levels -and candidates mobilise financial resources for off-cycle elections. Top businessmen and party financiers show keen interest and raise funds for “logistics” ranging from the mundane to substance³. Substantial part of the funds is reserved for mobilising prospective voters, weeks before and on Election Day. It suffices to say that in Nigeria, vote buying “takes place at multiple stages of the electoral cycle and has been observed eminently

³ In some instances, financial provisions are made for weather issues, that is, to ensure it doesn’t rain on election days.

during voter registration, nomination period, campaign and election day” (Matenga, 2016). During off-cycle gubernatorial elections in Osun (July 2018) and Ekiti (September 2018) states, Nigerian election stakeholders revealed that “poverty, disillusionment with the performance of elected representatives, low civic awareness among voters, and lack of accountability contributed to the expansion of vote buying” (IRI/NDI, 2019). Similarly, the November 2019 governorship elections in Kogi and Bayelsa states again affirmed the huge allocation of financial resources to vote buying in off-season elections. In Kogi, according to YIAGA AFRICA, “voters were paid as much as N5,000 in some cases in exchange for their votes. At Aluaja, Iyano Ward in Ibaji LGA, INEC officials were given N15,000 and Security agents N50,000 to compromise the process”. The group condemned the brazen vote buying observed within the proximity of polling units. Observations during the Bayelsa State governorship election showed that vote buying and selling thrived in many parts of the state (Ese, 2019). In fact, according to YIAGA AFRICA’s *Watching The Vote Project* (See Keshi, 2019), “voter inducement was reported in at least one of every three of the 21 LGA’s in Kogi state and all LGA’s in Bayelsa State”.

Commodification of Secret Ballot in Ekiti State: Evidence from the Field

The debate in literature regarding the efficacy of secret ballots as a safeguard to vote-buying and vote-selling is predicated on the assumption that secret ballots deny vote buyers the ability to monitor the voting process and thereby control voters’ choice or enforce the vote-buying transaction (Collier & Vicente, 2012; Finan & Schechter, 2012). However, vote buying continues to be a widespread practice during election period, more predominantly a day or two before election day and when voters are about to go to polling centres to cast their votes on election day. The 2014 and 2018 Ekiti elections clearly reveal these patterns but more common and, perhaps more result-oriented is what came to be known as “see-and-buy” strategy that approves payment after authenticating the votes at polling centres. Evidence from the field depicts the massive and brazen inducement of the electorate with money to secure their votes by the candidates. Unfortunately, the influx of money means that individual votes have now become freely-exchangeable as marketable goods in an election. Other findings are explicitly analysed below.

Wrong “loyalists” in charge of fund distribution

In each of the political wards, party loyalists (mobilisers) were financially mobilised a day before the election, moving from house to house to distribute the packaged amounts to prospective voters in the neighbourhood. Of course, there is a risk attached to every business. Some trusted “loyalists” took the money and short-changed voters on voting day, accounting for how, in some polling booths, the specified amount reduced from N5, 000 to N1, 000 within two hours of voting. Some voters revealed how they were even influenced to vote for another party with more cash to dispense.

Hunger is unbearable in the land: No amount is too small; and multiple sources abound

At the time of conducting the 2018 election, workers were being owed salaries spanning five to eight months. Non-payment of several arrears of salaries and emoluments of workers and pensioners in a civil service economy accounted for why many voters could not resist the offer of cash to sell their ballots during the election. Although evidence from literature⁴ usually shows how the poor and less educated are more susceptible to vote-buying, almost every class of individuals became vulnerable during this period in Ekiti. The political candidates knew that people were in dire need of money and other material things that money could buy; therefore, cash became the enticement and reward for those voters ready to trade their ballots. At a particular polling booth, after a voter who bought the deal had confirmed the authenticity of payment, he hurriedly called his wife and two daughters on phone to partake in the “electoral largesse”, claiming that the N20, 000 earned would feed the family for weeks. Apart from election days, many of the prospective voters had also benefitted from the politicians’

⁴ For instance, using survey and experimental data from Paraguay, Finan and Schechter (2010) document higher vote-buying among the less educated, given the fact that it is more prevalent among individuals who are more willing to engage in reciprocal behaviour.

handouts across different communities, professional and tribal groups, landlords’ associations, youth and women groups among other sundry established and emergency associations. The inducements came in form of donations of cash, food and other gifts such as livestock on campaign tours. The usual targets were the more vulnerable groups such as women and jobless youths.

Voters trust in politicians is fading

Many of the respondents do not see democracy as delivering development and have strong views on how politicians have failed to fulfil electoral promises. Since almost all politicians are seen to be corrupt, voters usually go for the benevolent cash-giving politician during election. “*Aa ki i gbo kiku ojo, k’a d’omi inu agbada nu*” (that is, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush) became the guiding philosophy for many of them as they scrambled for handouts across different parties. “Poor institutional performance makes the prospect of a bag of goodies in the hand today more attractive than the promise of distributive public policy tomorrow” (Heath and Tillin, 2018). This cynical attitude arose from the general perception of unfulfilled promises; the yawning gap between the government and citizens at all levels of governance; and the lack of inclusive development and participation in decision-making. Such deceit in governance became a recurring phenomenon particularly four years before the 2018 election.

Incumbent government and opposition parties in competitive spending

Kleptocratic capture of political party structures, according to Page (2018), is a *sine qua non* of gaining power and thereby unlocking corruption opportunities across a range of other sectors. Little distinguishes Nigeria’s two main political parties—the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) party and the opposition People’s Democratic Party (PDP)—in this regard, agents from both parties openly offered money for votes in the Ekiti elections. Each spent more than the other opposition parties combined. There are many dimensions to the incidence of vote-buying in the course of the election, including the use of government payroll as means of transfer of stipends to potential voters prior to the election day. An evaluation of its exact impact on election outcomes is confounded by other variables. Two days before the 2018 election, government employees and pensioners received mobile money transactions of N3,000 - N4,000 meant to buy their allegiance. Others received theirs a few hours before voting opened.

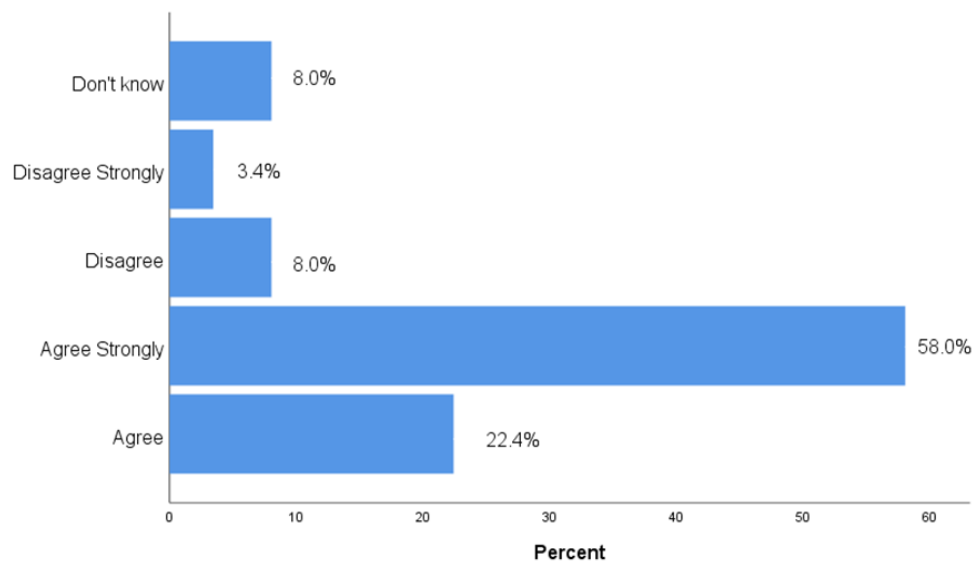


Figure 8. On whether both the ruling and opposition parties engaged in vote-buying

In Ekiti State, the idea of vote-buying, involving both ruling and opposition parties, is divided among the people. About 80 percent of the respondents, as shown in figure 8, are of the opinion that both the

ruling party and opposition parties engaged in vote-buying. Meanwhile, just very few kicked against the opinion. Just a few respondents (about 8 percent) could not confirm this.

Security men as complicity agents

Instances abound where security agencies were assisting to perfect vote-buying as well as scenes of the operatives themselves openly soliciting gratification from politicians/election mobilisers. The events in Ekiti, according to Tade (2018), showed that Nigeria’s security organs are more loyal to the government in power than they are to the country and its citizens. Obviously, the flaws of the Nigerian security system are also reflected during electioneering as demonstrated in Ekiti. Figure 9 below reflects this as about 82 percent of the respondents revealed that the security agents at polling units were unable to stop vote-buying on the day of the election.

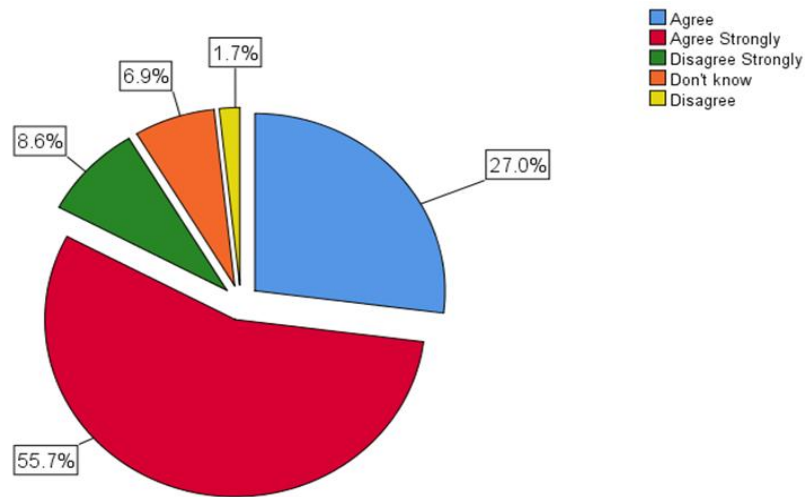


Figure 9. Security agents at polling units were unable to stop vote buying

Youth and women attract pre-election “poverty alleviation” programmes

Prior to the Election Day, scholarships, purchase of free JAMB Forms, grading of communities and farm roads, job forms and infrastructure projects (usually tagged poverty alleviation programme) in exchange for votes were offered by the incumbent government and opposition candidates targeting mostly youths and women. Distribution of “empowerment” items like hair dryers, washing machines, power-generating machines to different individuals and groups became a common practice among candidates with a view to securing support/votes on election day. The majority of the respondents in this study strongly opine that such pre-election largesse may actually be the only benefits from the politicians because the politicians usually fail to carry out their basic responsibilities after election. Figure 10 below shows the opinion of people about this. About 80 percent opined that politicians made campaign promises they had no intention of keeping, whereas just about 5 percent felt otherwise.

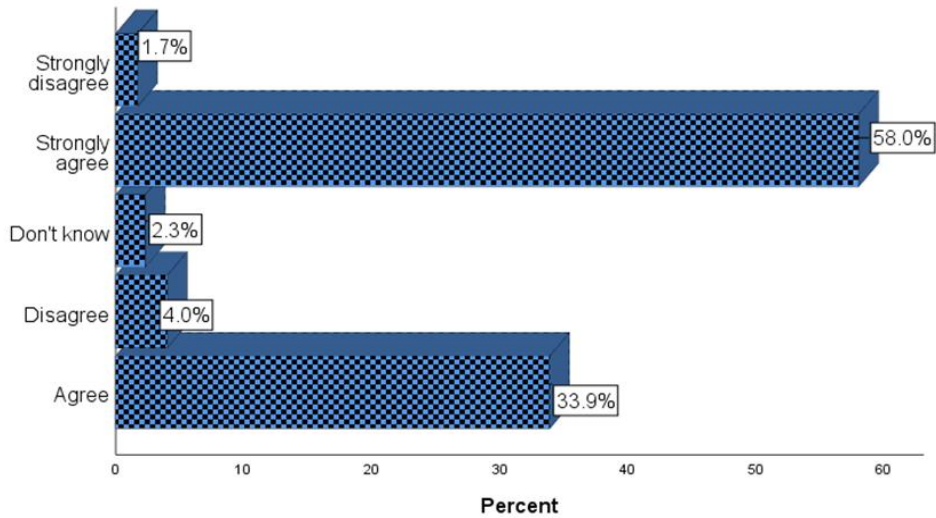


Figure 10. Politicians make campaign promises they have no intention of keeping

When the garrulous meets the gullible, cash is just a complement.

In the interviews with respondents, particularly politicians, some dismissed the “high political education” alluded to by the researcher in describing Ekiti political behaviour, affirming that the poor socio-economic conditions in the state had rubbed off such past glory. According to one of the obviously educated politicians: “When we engage prospective voters either at rallies or house-to-house campaign, discrediting the ruling party is our first weapon and next is reeling out lofty programmes our party intends to implement, having studied the political environment and what voters love to hear. And in Ekiti state where voters’ vulnerability, occasioned by poverty and gullibility, is palpable, giving them cash thereafter is just a complement”. And in a society where the opposition party is always viewed by the voters and political observers as the underdog - voters’ sympathy is readily aggregated against the ruling party. In such circumstances, as demonstrated since 2003 in Ekiti state, opposition parties have always had their way as they easily mobilise the voters against the ruling party. Thus, since the advent of this democratic dispensation, no candidate has won governorship re-election consecutively in Ekiti State.

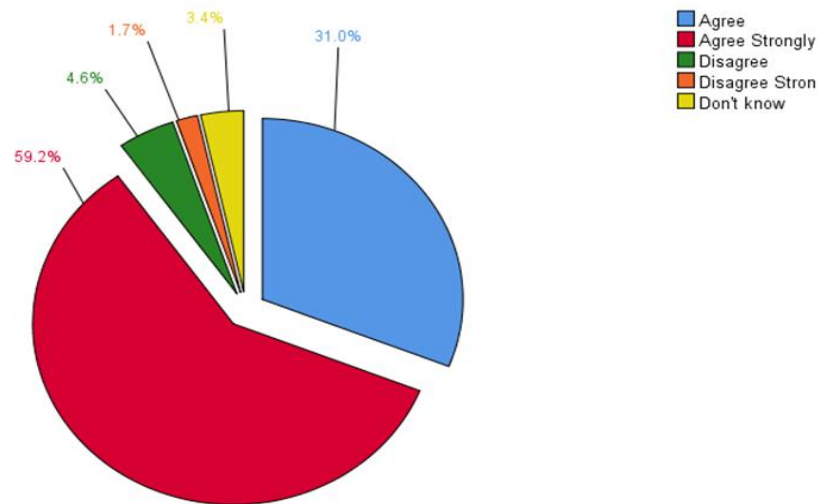


Figure 11. The prevalence of vote-buying phenomenon has robbed of the age-long integrity and "high political awareness" of Ekiti people

Figure 11 above shows the opinion of people about the consequences of the prevalence of vote-buying in Ekiti State. There is near unanimity that the vote-buying phenomenon has eroded Ekiti's reputation of integrity and "high political awareness". About 90 percent of the respondents thought this way while an insignificant 6 percent maintained that integrity and high political awareness still meant anything.

Implications of Cash-for-Vote and Remedies

Though vote buying has a discernible positive effect on voter turnout, the adverse effects could be very monumental. The argument has been that if the support of the majority can be 'earned' by spending money, the victory has nothing to do with party manifestoes, agendas or ideologies. Then, it might be extremely difficult to hold government accountable on any of its campaign promises. With this, more and more candidates are motivated not to break this vicious cycle of spending money before elections, corruption during governance and then spending money again during the next elections. The abuse of state resources, defined as undue advantages obtained by certain parties or candidates through the use of their official positions or connections to governmental institutions, to influence the outcome of elections, is a grave breach of political integrity as it gives incumbents an unfair electoral advantage.

A fundamental democratic deficit suggested by Schaffer's articulation is that vote buying "subverts the meaning of elections as instruments of collective decision-making, since it tends to replace deliberation over public issues with narrow calculations of individual interest" (Schaffer 2007: 9). Along with damaging the candidate's credibility, vote buying deters aspiring political leaders from running for office because it suggests that money, rather than ideas or experience, is how to win an election. The practice has thus ruled out younger candidates and those from less privileged backgrounds. Thus, it is believed that "money is warping the political field and that wealth is becoming more important in voters' deliberations than ethnicity or religion, let alone competency, integrity or vision" (Ejike, 2018). It obliges voters to give up some of their political rights in exchange for access to some good or service and thus limits the exercise of citizenship rights and ultimately may undermine democratic consolidation (Fox, 1994:153). Also, vote-buying endangers the validity of election results; undermines public trust in the democratic system; and negatively affects post-election politics, government accountability, and public perceptions of that accountability (Leight et al 2016). In line with this thought, Carreras and Irepoglu (2013) posit that:

Vote buying practices represent a clear violation of electoral fairness. On the one hand, vote buying distorts the spirit of democratic elections which should foster programmatic linkages between parties and voters, rather than material exchanges. On the other hand, vote buying practices create an unbalance between parties that have access to material resources (e.g. incumbent parties) and parties deprived of these resources.

Without the legitimizing power of credible elections, results are more likely to be disputed by the losing parties or candidates (Daxecker 2012). Vote buying not only distorts the outcomes of elections, but it also hurts the communities where this practice is rampant (Maruca, 2016). It might be tempting to say that at least those who sell their votes receive something from their government, but in fact, once these citizens are bought off, their broader interests are left out of the government's decision-making process, as the incentive to provide public goods to that group disappears (Maruca, 2016). Another effect of the scourge also concerns the question of accountability as citizens' role in the democratic election process. The task of holding leaders to account is one of the logics behind the voting power of the masses and relies on the trust between the electorate and elected leaders. This is compromised in election processes where vote-buying is used to secure victory at the polls with the effects that resulting leaders carry on with the aura of having fulfilled the demands of the voters by paying them off in exchange for the mandate. Or, more importantly, that they did not have to be accountable since they could always buy themselves into office in the next election. In other words, where underlying conditions are conducive to the use of vote-buying or clientelist strategies, in which targeted benefits are provided in direct exchange for political support, the winning politicians will likely use fewer public resources for, and perform worse in, delivering broad, pro-poor public services (Khemani, 2013). On a general note, democracy is being undermined by well-funded, highly organized forces whose agenda include efforts to impede and suppress voter participation, values of liberty, equality and justice.

Lastly, vote buying, Schaffer suggests, is in a number of ways more harmful to democracy than is patronage, having negative implications for democratic accountability:

If politicians get elected on the basis of short-term contracts – money for votes – they have little reason to care about the formulation of policies, the construction of programmatic parties, and practices of accountability. In the best cases, vote buying establishes a continuous obligation to provide clientelist services to constituencies. In the worst cases, it cuts the nexus of representation between voters and politicians. Once votes are paid for, politicians may feel free of any debt to their voters. In this case, purchased delegation is unconstrained delegation (Schaffer, 2007: 11).

That vote buying is so widespread raises concerns about the quality of emerging democratic institutions and the potential for elections to deliver better and more accountable government. The phenomenon of vote buying in Nigeria certainly “undermines informed choices by the electorate and diminishes the threshold of freeness and fairness of the electoral process and the overall quality of our democracy” (The Guardian, 2018). Because vote-buying is a product of deep-seated socio-economic factors, reversing the ugly trend and the monetisation of electoral processes in Nigeria is a herculean task that will require strategic remediation of its underlying causes. Cash for vote is a condemnable bane upon good governance and credible electoral conduct; so, it is encouraging that there is growing interest from governments, civil-society organizations, and multilateral agencies to devise cost-effective strategies to curb vote buying and diminish its influence on electoral outcomes (Green & Vasudevan, 2016).

The policy measures, considered fundamental in ensuring free, fair, credible and transparent elections in this study include the following:

Strict Implementation of Political Finance Regulation

Nearly all countries now regulate political finance, and many offer subsidies for political parties or candidates. Public officials and scholars often claim that these interventions are necessary for the full achievement of representative democracy and good governance, and especially for combating political corruption (Bryan & Baer 2005; United States Agency for International Development 2003). In many countries, buying votes from members of the electorate is explicitly prohibited under election law or the criminal code. Mere offers and promises are also banned, as are solicitation and acceptance. The former INEC chairman, Attahiru Jega (2019) posits that all Nigeria’s provisions concerning disclosure requirements for political actors; contribution limits for funders; spending limits for candidates and parties should be reviewed in line with global best practices. According to him, the objective is to impose limits on the campaign and general political finance spending and impose stiff penalties for non-compliance. Jega (2019) also advocated that corporate contributions to political parties and candidates should be banned while candidates and party campaign expenditure should be set at a maximum threshold, made transparent and enforced. As rightly suggested by Page (2019):

Although it is difficult to stem the flow of illicit cash into politics, it is possible for INEC and its allies to insist that campaign spending should be transparent, its sources known and should abide by existing laws. If candidates and parties refuse to open their books, their campaign war chests should be assumed to be the proceeds of corruption.

Certainly, Nigeria is not short of appropriate legal provisions. According to the National Electoral Act, 2010, Article 130:

A person who— (a) corruptly by himself or by any other person at any time after the date of an election has been announced, directly or indirectly gives or provides or pays money to or for any person for the purpose of corruptly influencing that person or any other person to vote or refrain from voting at such election, or on account of such person or any other person having voted or refrained from voting at such election; or (b) being a voter, corruptly accepts or takes money or any other inducement during any of the period stated in paragraph (a) of this section, commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of N100,000 or 12 months imprisonment or both.

While vote buying is subject to punishment, the attainment of compliance to this legal provision remains a challenge (Matenga, 2016).

Electoral Reform (Secret Balloting)

The secret ballot, and the privacy upon which it depends, is constitutive of democratic practice (Lever, 2015). During the Ekiti election, citizen observer groups as well as IRI/NDI's delegation noted deficiencies in ballot secrecy in some polling units during the process (IRI/NDI, 2019). The principle of ballot secrecy, according to Matenga (2016), requires "election legislation to ensure that secret voting is not only a right on the part of the voter but an absolute obligation". The provisions in the legal framework regulating control and security of the ballot, as well as the provisions governing the casting of a ballot at the polling station, should ensure ballot security. In many corrupt jurisdictions, the introduction of the secret ballot has put an end to vote buying, since confidentiality necessarily prevents the "buyers" from verifying that the "sellers" (that is, voters) in fact voted for the "buyer" (that is, candidate). This good intention has, unfortunately, been perverted in developing countries like Nigeria. In a "see and buy" method of vote purchase, at polling booths, as occurred in the 2014 and 2018 Ekiti elections, more fundamental reforms are required in the country's electoral system to validate the secrecy of the balloting.

Though there has been some appreciable intervention to enhance the legal framework and guard against vote buying through the Electoral Act 2002, 2006 and 2010, there is need to address some of the notable inconsistencies and potential loopholes in the Electoral Act. Secrecy and privacy in elections are essential to integrity in the electoral process. The principle of ballot secrecy requires election legislation to ensure that secret voting is not only a right on the part of the voter but an absolute obligation. The provisions in the legal framework regulating control and security of the ballot, as well as the provisions governing the casting of a ballot at the polling station, should ensure ballot security (Matenga, 2016) and as such, discourage "see and buy" form of vote-trading on election day. To enhance the voters' privacy and reduce the possibility of vote buying and voter intimidation on Election Day, additional guidance to poll workers on the configuration of the polling unit should be provided; the use of cell phones while voting should be banned while voter education campaigns and enforcement of laws against voter inducement should be practically activated.

Electronic Voting

Electronic voting is an umbrella term used to describe an array of voting methods that operate using electronic technology. There are three primary types of electronic voting, namely machine counting, computer voting and on-line or internet voting (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2001). New technologies that are being used for election purposes may seem, at first glance, to be most appropriate for developed countries. The first years of the 21st century, however, have witnessed important advances in the use of new technologies by countries with weak infrastructures (European Commission, 2006). The implementation of internet voting carries the promise of elections with more participants, of strengthened efficiency in the electoral process, and the hope of bringing voters and their representatives closer together. Motives for implementing electronic voting procedures are manifold, amongst the most important are, as noted in the Council of Europe (2004) recommendation for electronic voting: enabling mobility of voters; facilitating the participation in elections from abroad; raising voter turnout; widening access for citizens with disabilities; reducing cost; delivering voting results reliably and more quickly. E-voting is often seen as a tool for advancing democracy, building trust in electoral management, adding credibility to election results and increasing the overall efficiency of the electoral process (IDEA, 2011).

How does e-voting militate against vote buying? It is obvious, from interactions with stakeholders, that giving handouts to prospective voters before election does not guarantee compliance unless monitored at voting point. This has necessitated the "see and buy" strategy on Election Day. It, therefore, implies that if full electronic voting is implemented like in advanced democracies, vote buying in its present format and patterns in Nigeria today, will be drastically reduced. Above all, if properly implemented, "e-voting solutions can eliminate certain common avenues of fraud, speed up the processing of results, increase accessibility and make voting more convenient for citizens" (IDEA, 2011). Hence, Nigeria should brace up to commence electronic voting system like it is done in advanced democracies in which a prospective voter can cast his/her vote at any location he chooses to stay after forming opinion on the party and candidate to vote for without any physical contact with the agent or the politician who

may want to influence his/her decision with cash. This will curb incidents of “see and buy” as witnessed in the Ekiti election.

Since the successful deployment of technology is contingent on a minimum of administrative and logistical capacity, the Nigerian government should build upon the existing pre-voting biometric and entrench full e-voting system. This should be backed by a legal framework that mandates the use and implementation of alternative electronic voting methods. The use of voting to make collective decisions inevitably brings with it the possibility of vote buying. Thus, a crucial aspect of designing voting procedures is to ensure that “election outcomes reflect the will of the electorate, rather than the wallets of interest groups” (Morgan & Vardy, 2008).

Civic Education

Over decades, research points to the importance of education for being active citizens. The quality of participation of citizens is undoubtedly predicated on how much knowledge they have on the organization of election activities. Beginning in the 1960’s, research began to point towards the linkage between how civic education in particular helps citizens to acquire political knowledge, skills and attitudes (Hahn, 2010). Generally, the centrality of “civic and voter education to the conduct of free, fair and credible election, citizen participation and democracy strengthening” (Hassan and Yusuf, 2015) cannot be overemphasized.

A long-term remedy is the engagement of the civil society organisations in civic education across the board, emphasising how inappropriate and costly vote buying can be, since it would undermine the accountability of elected officials and future delivery of public goods to the community. It should be established that some NGOs election watchdog groups, public-minded corporations, religious bodies, government election bodies, and other civic educators in the country have, in the last few years, commenced a specific public awareness campaign on this issue in collaboration with international development partners.

To the extent that civic educators wish to train voters to act “correctly,” their efforts have a disciplinary component. This reality suggests a need to understand how people who are the target of educational reform experience and react to these disciplinary efforts. Whether voters spurn, absorb, ignore, or misunderstand specific educational messages will have significant implications not only for the effectiveness of the education campaign, but also for the quality of the resulting democracy (Schaffer, 2007). Continued efforts must be made by a cross section of Nigerian stakeholders to enhance citizen confidence and participation in the process while the civil society should commence voter education as soon as feasible on vote buying and other illegal practices (IRI/NDI, 2019).

Demonetising Public Offices

Any serious effort to address vote-buying must begin with a critical examination of the conditions which encourage it, the most important being the lucrative nature of Nigeria’s elective and appointive offices. Aside from the humongous salaries out of proportion to what is earned in the productive sectors and far above what civil servants earn, some of the offices offer multiple remuneration and pension schemes for serving public officers who previously served and pensioned in other capacities. The beneficiaries are high net worth individuals, such as cabinet ministers, governors, senators, and top military officials, who arrogated to themselves outlandish perks – some of which they enjoy for life. For instance, those in the executives are making stupendous wealth at the expense of the nation and the jumbo pay of those in the legislature is killing the economy (Makinde, 2019). Government officials, male and female, are known to surround themselves with aides and special assistants, and personal assistants to aides, and personal assistants to special assistants, and special assistants to personal assistants, each of them suckling from the national treasury. Some government officials employ scores of their relatives, creating for them roles that never existed before (Nwaubani, 2015). All this is in contrast to the poor salaries and abysmal standard of living of the average Nigerian who is hostage to abject poverty, disease, hunger and insecurity.

The most concrete evidence that many Nigerian public office holders do not aim to serve (as public servant) but to loot the commonwealth must be the emoluments that governors and others draw from state treasuries for a mere four to eight years of public “service.” These allowances, which are similar

in nature across the various states, range from vehicle renewal and maintenance, housing allowance and salaries, medical benefits for themselves and families; that is after years of siphoning away State funds with impunity. A January 2017 report calculated that ‘‘over N37.36 billion was expended on servicing 47 former governors in 21 of the nation’s states as pension payments and provision of houses, staff, and motor vehicles replaceable between three and four years’ (The Guardian, 2019). The excessive benefits for political office holders have been blamed for the violence, rigging and desperation to win or retain offices (Makinde, 2019). Given that effective institutions, sound financial management and integrity in public office make for better public services, the cost of governance should be urgently addressed in Nigeria, not only to have enough for capital projects but to make public offices less attractive to avaricious people. As well-functioning government institutions matter for business investment decisions, trust in them is a necessary ingredient to spur economic growth (Dasgupta, 2009; Algan & Cuha, 2013).

Above all, it should be emphasised that the problem in Nigeria has not always been absence of laws and regulations to countervail deleterious conducts, but the looseness of enforcement in such a way that what is sauce for the goose is not always sauce for the gander. While stiff punishment for rigging may be a solution, it would have meaning only if the enabling legal/judicial system is such that justice is served all the time. Law must apply to culprits, irrespective of political affiliation, social status or ethnic/religious bearing. Such measures require the cooperation of all stakeholders, including the government, the electoral commission, the political parties, the candidates, the electorate, the civil society and even the press.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to build on the growing literature examining politicians and citizens’ involvement in vote buying by empirically investigating the phenomenon in Ekiti State, Nigeria. The prevalence of vote buying -where candidates and intermediaries distribute commodities or money to citizens in exchange for their votes - has prominently featured in off-season elections in Nigeria. The national political environment that encourages greater public spending and vote trading among citizens, was glaringly obvious during the two elections. The situation underscores concern about the nation’s diminishing electoral integrity, uncertain future, and the prospect of credible elections as key drivers of democratic accountability.

As established in this study, while vote buying can increase political participation in many poverty-stricken African countries, the phenomenon can endanger government accountability and democracy, not only because it is an unlawful activity under well-specified electoral regulations; but also because of its brazen display, creating a norm that contradicts the core voter/swing voter dichotomy in literature. As a matter of fact, the age-long puzzle of why parties attempt to buy votes when the ballot is secret as people could simply accept campaign handouts and then vote as they wished was resolved by the efficacy of ‘‘see and buy’’ method in the two off-season elections in Ekiti State. Given that political power is perceived as a sure means to gaining state resources for personal enrichment, pulled out all the stops to bribe voters and the disenchanting citizens anticipate electioneering period for financial incentives.

It is sometimes argued that successful elections are part of a learning process in a wider process of democratization and development (Lindberg 2006). There is a widely, indeed almost universally, shared view amongst scholars, civil society activists, decision-makers and the general public that the purchase of votes in mass elections is morally impermissible and should be legally banned (Sandel: 2000; Satz: 2010). There is a consensus that the issuance of various gifts to the electorates during election campaigns influences the voter’s decision and elections outcome. Broadly speaking, vote buying hinders the political participation and competition needed for democracy just as it obstructs the democratic process by interfering with the rights of citizens to freely decide who represents their interests. This study has provided useful insights into how democratic systems can innovatively address such threats given that the Ekiti scenario displays significant differences from the context in which much of the literature on vote buying was developed. It affirmed that having flawed electoral process/democratic processes, such as cash-for-vote during elections, may perilously entrench commodification norm in the polity and strongly undermine good governance in the homogenous state.

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