INTERROGATING THE DRIVERS OF VOTE BUYING IN THE NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA: THE 2015-2025 ELECTORAL CYCLES

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ABSTRACT

Without-gainsaying vote buying has persistently remained a challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria, particularly in the North-Central region, where socio-economic vulnerabilities, political patronage, and weak institutional enforcement facilitate electoral manipulation. This paper examined the exterminating factors driving vote buying in North-Central Nigeria from 2015 to 2025, focusing on socio-political, economic, and institutional dynamics that sustain the practice and undermine free and fair elections. Anchored on the Political Economy of Elections and Institutional Theory, the paper drew insights from secondary data sources, including electoral reports, scholarly literature, media analyses, civil society assessments, and official documents from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). These sources provided a framework for understanding the structural and contextual factors that perpetuate vote buying and compromise electoral integrity. Findings revealed that poverty, low civic literacy, political godfatherism, monetization of politics, weak enforcement of electoral laws, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms were the primary drivers of vote buying. The paper further discovered that political parties, traditional authorities, and community actors sometimes colluded to perpetuate transactional voting, while the absence of effective sanctions against perpetrators reinforced the problem. These factors collectively weakened the electoral

process, reduced public confidence, and hindered democratic consolidation in the region. The paper concludes that vote buying in North-Central Nigeria is driven by a combination of socio-economic, political, and institutional factors, requiring multidimensional interventions beyond electoral management bodies. This paper contributes to electoral governance scholarship by identifying the root causes of vote buying and highlighting their implications for democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The paper recommends robust civic education, strict enforcement of electoral laws, poverty alleviation programs, political party reforms, and community-based accountability mechanisms to curb vote buying.

Keywords: Vote Buying; Electoral Integrity; Political Economy; North-Central Nigeria; Democratic Consolidation.

Introduction

Democracy, as a normative framework of governance, emphasizes the active and unhindered participation of the citizenry in the political process. Its cardinal principle rests upon the right of citizens to choose their leaders through regular, credible, and transparent elections (Elaigwu, 2019). For a democratic system to achieve consolidation, it requires an informed and autonomous citizenry capable of voicing interests and holding public officials accountable (National Democratic Institute, 2018). While Nigeria's democratic model mirrors the presidential system of the United States where sovereignty is theoretically vested in the people and governance is predicated on majority rule (Noah, 2016) the empirical reality of the Fourth Republic suggests a widening chasm between democratic ideals and electoral practice. Periodic elections, while indispensable to democratic transitions, only confer legitimacy when conducted under conditions that meet global standards of political equality and accountability (Inokoba & Kumokor, 2011; Hillary, 2024; Vande, 2020).

The trajectory of Nigeria's electoral landscape, particularly between 2015 and 2023, illustrates a troubling transition from ideological contestation to a deeply entrenched "cash-and-carry" model. Historically, vote buying in Nigeria is not a new phenomenon; its systemic roots can be traced back to the 1992 Social Democratic Party (SDP) primaries (Onuoha & Okafor, 2020). However, as technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) were introduced to curb traditional forms of fraud like ballot-box snatching, the political elite pivoted toward the direct marketization of the ballot. In the 2015 general elections, national voter turnout stood at 43.6%, but this figure plummeted to 34.75% in 2019 and reached a record low of 26.72% in 2023. This decline in participation often correlates with an increase in transactional voting, where the "value" of a citizen is reduced to a one-time financial exchange at the polling unit (Adigun, 2019; Dauda et al., 2019; Hillary, 2024).

Conceptually, vote buying is situated within the frameworks of Clientelism and Social Exchange Theory, where the vote is treated as a commodity rather than a civic right (Ovwasa, 2013; Shehu, 2025). In this "political market," voters—often pushed by systemic economic

desperation—trade their ballots for immediate material gains, colloquially termed "stomach infrastructure" (Baidoo et al., 2018; Olaniyan, 2020). Nichter (2008) describes this as a form of brokerage where local agents monitor and reward voter compliance. By the 2023 electoral cycle, this evolved into an ex-post payment model, where digital proof of a cast vote (often captured via hidden mobile phones) was exchanged for financial transfers, with prices in the North-Central region ranging from ₦5,000 to ₦15,000 per voter depending on the competitive "desperation index" of the candidates (Adeleke, 2024; Olorunmola, 2016).

The North-Central geopolitical zone comprising states like Kogi, Benue, Nasarawa, Kwara, Plateau, and Niger presents a unique laboratory for studying these drivers. The region is characterized by high poverty levels; according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), the North-Central has a Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) average of approximately 63.3%, with states like Nasarawa and Kogi recording significantly high deprivation levels. This economic vulnerability is exacerbated by recurring communal conflicts and displacement, which weaken the social fabric and make the electorate susceptible to elite manipulation (Ibrahim &Danjuma, 2024; Babatunde et al., 2025). In states like Kwara, the "Otoge" movement of 2019 demonstrated a temporary shift toward ideological voting, yet subsequent cycles in 2023 showed a resurgence of financial inducement as a primary tool for securing legitimacy (Michael et al., 2025).

Ultimately, democratic consolidation requires that democratic norms become "the only game in town" (Noah, 2004). However, vote buying acts as a corrosive agent that severs the social contract. When elections are purchased, the resulting government faces a "crisis of integrity" (Chukwuemeka, 2026). This leads to systemic resource mismanagement, political apathy, and institutional decay, as security agencies and INEC find their enforcement mechanisms neutralized by the sheer volume of illicit funds (Ojo&Onuoha, n.d.; Madueke, 2024). This paper interrogates the socio-economic and institutional drivers of vote buying in the North-Central zone from 2015 to 2023, aiming to provide a comprehensive framework for restoring electoral integrity as a prerequisite for sustainable development.

Statement of the Problem

While elections are the bedrock of leadership recruitment, Nigeria’s electoral integrity is compromised by a systemic transition toward a "cash-and-carry" marketplace. Despite technological reforms like BVAS and the 2022 Electoral Act, vote buying reached unprecedented sophistication during the 2025 cycles. A critical research gap exists concerning the North-Central zone, where unique socio-economic vulnerabilities and the influence of traditional or religious institutions drive transactional voting. Furthermore, existing scholarship lacks a longitudinal analysis of the 2015–2025 decade to explain why institutional safeguards consistently fail. This paper addresses these gaps by interrogating the nexus between ballot commodification and institutional fragility in Middle-Belt Nigeria. By identifying the specific

drivers of vote buying and analyzing the failure of legal reforms, the research seeks to proffer actionable measures to restore electoral integrity.

Conceptual Review

This section adopts a narrative and thematic review of literature, drawing mainly from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, reports, and policy documents on vote buying, democratic consolidation, and electoral behavior in Nigeria and comparable democracies. The review is organized around the core concepts that frame the paper, namely vote buying, democratic consolidation, and the strategic forms through which electoral inducement operates in Nigerian elections. Particular attention is given to the socio-economic, institutional, and behavioral factors that sustain transactional politics in North-Central Nigeria. The review also interrogates how poverty, unemployment, weak enforcement of electoral laws, low civic awareness, and patron-client relations shape voter compliance. By synthesizing these strands of scholarship, the section establishes the intellectual foundation for understanding vote buying not merely as isolated electoral misconduct, but as a systemic feature of democratic weakness and elite manipulation in the Nigerian political context.

Vote Buying

Vote buying is conceptualized as a direct exchange of private material benefits for political support, a practice that undermines the normative foundations of democracy (Etzioni-Halevy, 1989). Scholars such as Carreras and Irepoglu (2013) define it as the provision of benefits by political elites to propel electoral support, while Nichter (2014) views it as a "market transaction" governed by the logic of demand and supply. In emerging democracies like Nigeria, this phenomenon has transitioned from crude electoral fraud to a sophisticated "cash-and-carry" model where the ballot is treated as a commodity (Ovwasa, 2013; Ojo, 2022).

The drivers of vote buying are primarily rooted in structural materialism. In Nigeria, acute livelihood crises marked by a poverty rate affecting approximately 133 million people (NBS, 2022) create a "stomach infrastructure" culture. Here, voters in the North-Central zone, facing unemployment and destitution, become susceptible to inducements such as cash, food items (rice, salt), and clothing (Baidoo et al., 2018). Beyond cash, Lindberg and Morrison (2017) highlight the role of patron-clientelistic networks where personal loyalty is traded for personalized favors. This transactional relationship severs the social contract, as elected officials feel beholden to their financiers rather than the electorate. Furthermore, vote buying is not limited to the electorate; it extends to the legislature, where law-makers trade votes for executive lobbying (Okeke et al., 2014). Ultimately, compliance with vote buying is influenced by the level of civic literacy and the type of ballot system in operation.

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is the process by which a new democracy matures so that it is unlikely to revert to authoritarianism (Diamond, 1999). It is famously described by Linz and

Stepan (1996) as the state where democracy becomes the "only game in town," meaning all significant political actors accept democratic norms as the sole legitimate framework for power. This involves the stabilization of five interconnected arenas: a lively civil society, an autonomous political society, the rule of law, a usable state bureaucracy, and an institutionalized economic society.

In the Nigerian context, consolidation is often viewed as "imperfect" due to structural deficiencies like prebendalism and the personalization of power (Ibeanu, 2007; Omotola, 2007). While Nigeria has maintained over 24 years of uninterrupted civilian rule, scholars argue that democratization has stalled at the level of formal procedures without substantive institutional reforms (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). The persistence of vote buying and electoral fraud suggests that democratic values have not been deeply internalized. Consolidation requires not just periodic elections, but the "deepening" of democratic norms where institutions function independently and leaders are held accountable (Aiyede, 2023). In North-Central Nigeria, socio-economic factors like poverty and insecurity remain significant hurdles to this maturity, as they facilitate the manipulation of the electoral process.

Approaches to Vote Buying in Nigeria

The practice of vote buying in Nigeria is characterized by two primary strategic approaches based on the direction of trust and the timing of the transaction. Payment-for-Vote (Buyer-Driven): In this model, the transaction occurs before or during the election. The political agent provides cash or goods (ranging from ₦1,000 to ₦5,000) based on the trust that the voter will fulfill their end of the bargain (Onuoha&Ojo, 2018). This approach is prevalent in rural North-Central communities where low surveillance and high material deprivation exist. Buyers often demand proof of capability, such as the presentation of a Permanent Voter's Card (PVC).Vote-for-Payment (Seller-Driven): This model rests on the trust the voter places in the buyer to pay after the vote is cast. To mitigate the risk of defection, agents employ "proof mechanisms" such as "snap and show," where voters use mobile phones to photograph their thumb printed ballots (YIAGA Africa, 2019; Olorunmola, 2023). This approach grew in sophistication during the 2019 and 2023 elections as a response to increased electoral awareness and suspicion. Both models are underpinned by economic vulnerability and weak institutional enforcement. Despite the criminalization of these acts under the Electoral Act 2022, enforcement remains a challenge due to logistical and political barriers. These approaches transform elections from a platform for civic preference into a commercial auction, where the highest bidder secures victory, thereby eroding democratic legitimacy and fostering a culture of unaccountability (Vande, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this research is the General Incentive Model

The General Incentive Model, developed by Clark & Wilson (1961). They posit that if we know the kinds of incentives that an organisation may give to induce members' greater cooperation,

then something can be learnt about the incentive system a political party uses to sustain members' participation in its activities. They pointed out that the internal and external events of organisations may be explained by understanding their incentive systems. They stated that all organisations in good standing must provide "tangible or intangible incentives" to their members to induce optimal contribution (Clark & Wilson, 1961:130).

In the use of incentives to buy votes from the electorates, politicians, party agents and party monitoring sects often use monetary and non-monetary incentives to influence the behaviour of voters. These incentives are usually targeted at the poor or less educated class of opposition backers, not to turn out and vote which is referred to as "negative vote buying, swing voters and a party's main supporters to turn out and vote which are also referred to in this model as 'turnout buying'" (Cox & McCubbins, 1986). While negative vote buying reduces votes for the opposition party, turnout buying increases votes for the party buying votes.

Vote buying incentives provide goods which are short-term, private, and have a high degree of certainty (Desposato, 2007). In view of this, poor voters assign higher values to vote buying where uncertainty of the compensation for their vote is low (Desposato, 2007). Two main purposes are intended to be achieved during the distribution of these vote buying incentives: One, to ensure positive or participatory vote buying and two, to achieve negative turnout. The poor and less educated among the electorates is often the target during the distribution of vote buying incentives. This is attributed to the fact that gifts have more force among the poor. Hence, parties will buy the votes of the poor before trying to buy those of the wealthy (Stokes, 2005). The poor who finds a naira note on the street, for example, will be made happier by finding it than will, a wealthy person. This is due to diminishing marginal utility of income. Bratton (2008), for instance, reports that during Nigeria's 2007 elections the most common amount of money offered to voters was the United States' dollar. These economic mechanisms are likely to make poor voters the prime targets of vote buying by political parties who want to maximize their (re)election chances. It follows that the same outlay of resources by the party will buy more votes among poor than among wealthy voters.

Summarily, vote-buying cannot be undermined of being a greater motivation to the poor to vote than the enticement of public goods, as the poor are oftentimes relegated in the distribution of public goods. Desposato (2007, p. 104) says "poor voters, on average, should have higher utility for immediate private goods than for delayed public goods." Moreover, unless a voter has an alternative source of income and simply did not need the incentive, it is unlikely that poor voters will therefore be able to resist vote-buying incentives.

Assumptions of the General Incentive Model in Context of Vote Buying

Political Participation is Driven by Incentives, the assumption is that individuals engage in political processes including voting primarily when they are motivated by incentives, whether material (monetary), purposive (ideological), or solidary (communal or emotional). Application: In the context of Nigeria, especially the North-Central zone, vote buying is a strategic

deployment of material incentives to induce voter participation in favor of specific candidates or parties. Poor economic conditions, low political awareness, and disenchantment with public service delivery mean that many voters are more responsive to immediate, tangible rewards than to abstract democratic ideals. This supports H1, which argues that poverty and unemployment are key drivers of vote buying.

Organizations (including political parties) tailor incentives to maximize support Assumption: Political actors distribute resources or benefits selectively to ensure optimal participation from individuals or groups who are most likely to respond to such stimuli. Nigerian political parties often target economically marginalized voters in rural or semi-urban communities, using vote buying as a calculated investment to secure electoral victory. The voter is viewed as a rational actor whose choices are influenced by perceived short-term personal gain. This can be linked to the research objective which explains how socio-economic and political factors intersect in facilitating vote buying in North-Central Nigeria.

A key criticism of the General Incentive Model is that it tends to overstate rational choice and material calculation while underplaying coercion, fear, ethnic loyalty, political apathy, and structural inequality as independent drivers of voter behavior. In the Nigerian context, vote buying is not always a voluntary exchange; in some cases, it is reinforced by intimidation, clientelist obligation, or the absence of meaningful electoral alternatives. The theory also assumes that incentives are distributed in relatively stable organizational settings, whereas vote buying in practice is often informal, secretive, and shaped by weak institutions and legal impunity. As a result, the model explains the transactional logic of electoral inducement, but it does not fully capture the broader environment of corruption, insecurity, and institutional fragility that enables it.

Despite these limitations, the theory remains highly relevant to this paper because it explains why political actors in North-Central Nigeria deploy cash and material inducements to influence voting behavior. It helps to show how poverty, unemployment, and low civic trust make voters more responsive to short-term incentives than to abstract democratic appeals. The theory also fits the paper's concern with how parties, agents, and financiers strategically target vulnerable voters to maximize electoral returns. In this sense, the General Incentive Model provides a useful lens for examining both the causes and consequences of vote buying in the North-Central zone between 2015 and 2025.

Methodology

This paper adopts the ex-post facto approaches, the ex-post facto element is necessary because the paper examines events (the 2015, 2019, and 2023 general elections) that have already occurred, where the variables cannot be manipulated by the researcher. It also allows for the systematic collection of data from a representative sample of the population to describe patterns of political behaviour regarding vote buying. By combining quantitative data (questionnaire) with qualitative insights (interview), the researcher achieves triangulation,

ensuring that the findings are robust and that the complexities of democratic consolidation in Nigeria are adequately captured (Perter, 2025).

The samples of this paper are in different categories, categories of the electorate for questionnaire administration and the categories of political party executives and selected observer groups and INEC officials that were interviewed. Given the very large population of Nigerian electorates, it was impractical to paper all registered voters. To determine an appropriate sample size, the paper adopted the Krejcie& Morgan (1970) table of sample size determination for finite populations:

The formula is stated as:

$$S = \frac{X^2 NP\,(1-P)}{d^2(N-1) + X^2\,P\,(1-P)}$$

Where:

- X^2 = Chi-Square value for 1 degree of freedom at the .05 confidence level (3.841).
- N = The total population size (15,363,731)
- P = Population proportion (0.5, assumed for maximum sample size variability)
- d = Degree of accuracy/margin of error (.05)

Calculation: Substituting the values into the formula:

$$S = \frac{3.841 \times 15{,}363{,}731 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}{(0.05)^2 \times (15{,}363{,}731) + 3.841 \times 0.5 \times (1-0.5)}$$

$$S = \frac{14{,}752{,}822.69}{38{,}410.28525} = 384$$

$$S \approx 423$$

According to the Krejcie & Morgan table, for any population exceeding 1,000,000, the recommended minimum sample size is 384. However, to ensure greater representation and account for design effect and possible non-response, the sample was increased to 423 respondents. The questionnaire was distributed proportionately across the three states in North Central Nigeria, within each state respondents were purposively selected, and within each state, respondents were drawn from three Local Government Areas (LGAs) and four wards (urban and rural). This stratified sampling approach ensured equitable representation and captured the diversity of opinions necessary to assess vote buying impact on democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

The allocated questionnaire for the three states Benue, Kogi, and Nasarawa is calculated based on their individual registered voter populations relative to the overall North Central population (15,363,731).

Data Presentation and Analysis

This paper presents data collected from the electorate spanning three states in the north central. The states are Benue, Kogi, and Nasarawa, some INEC staff, selected election observers and selected political party executives from the three main selected political parties under this research in Nigeria, namely APC, LP and PDP across the region using questionnaire and Interview. These political parties, APC, LP and PDP, were selected mainly because the parties featured prominently during the election years. A total of four hundred and twenty-three (423) copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the respondents across board, one hundred and seventy (170) for Benue, one hundred and nine (109) for Kogi, and one hundred and forty-four (144) for Nasarawa. These figures are drawn from the overall population of electorate who are registered to vote in each of the state using the proportionate sampling technique.

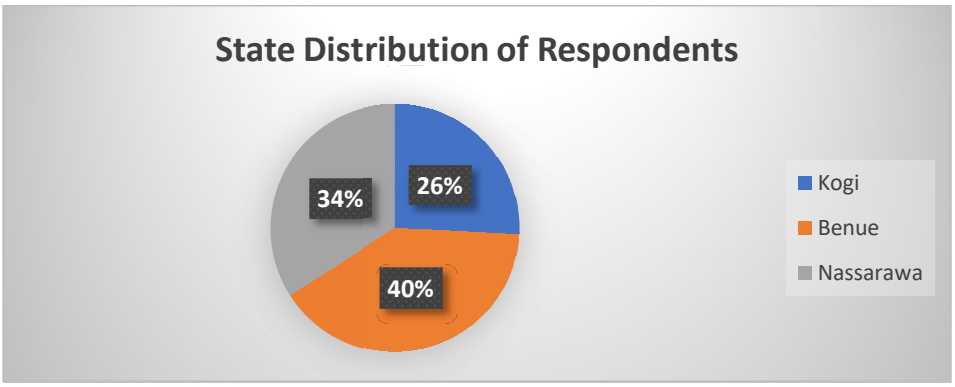
However, four hundred and fourteen (414) valid copies of the questionnaire were retrieved and used for data analysis. That is, out of the four hundred and twenty-three (423) ditto questionnaire copies administered by the researcher, only four hundred and fourteen (414) was considered overall as valid, after the retrieved questionnaire was counted and sorted. Thus, the 414 valid respondents constitute 97% response rate which is sufficient for the paper.

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

The section begins with the demographic analysis of questionnaire respondents, ranging from states of the respondents to occupation of the sampled population. The point of demographic analysis here is to depict clearly the composition of the state, gender and occupation of the respondents that were sampled as relate to their relevance to the research paper.

Table 4.1: State of Respondents State of Origin

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Kogi	107	25.8	25.8	25.8
	Benue	166	40.1	40.1	65.9
	Nassarawa	141	34.1	34.1	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	100.0	



Source: Field Survey, 2026

From the table, respondents from Benue formed the largest group with 166 (40.1%), followed by respondents from Nasarawa with 141 (34.1%), while Kogi had 107 (25.8%) respondents. This distribution shows that the respondents were fairly spread across the three states selected for the paper, with Benue contributing the highest proportion of the sample. This spread enhances the regional balance of the paperand supports comparative analysis across the North-Central states.

Table 4.2: Sex Distribution of Respondents

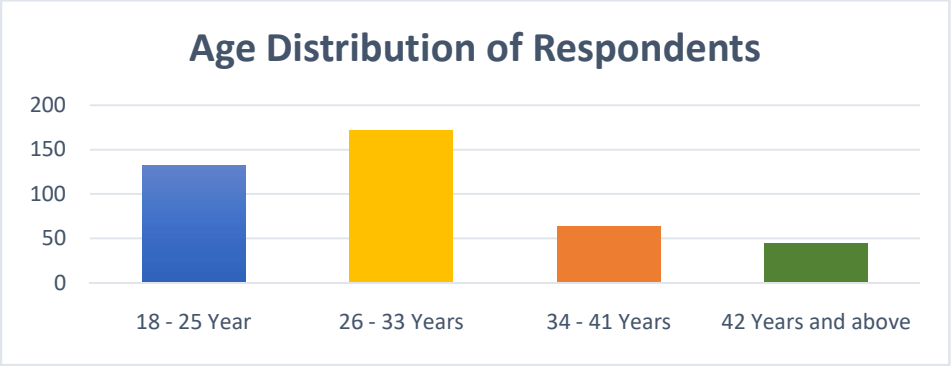
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	248	59.9	59.9	59.9
	Female	166	40.1	40.1	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The sex distribution shows that male respondents were 248 (59.9%), while female respondents were 166 (40.1%). This indicates that males constituted a larger proportion of the sample than females. The dominance of male respondents may reflect higher male participation in political activities and public affairs in the paperarea, although the female representation is sufficiently significant to provide balanced views.

Table 4.3: Age Distribution of Respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	18 - 25 Year	133	32.1	32.1	32.1
	26 - 33 Years	172	41.5	41.5	73.7
	34 - 41 Years	64	15.5	15.5	89.1
	42 Years and above	45	10.9	10.9	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	100.0	

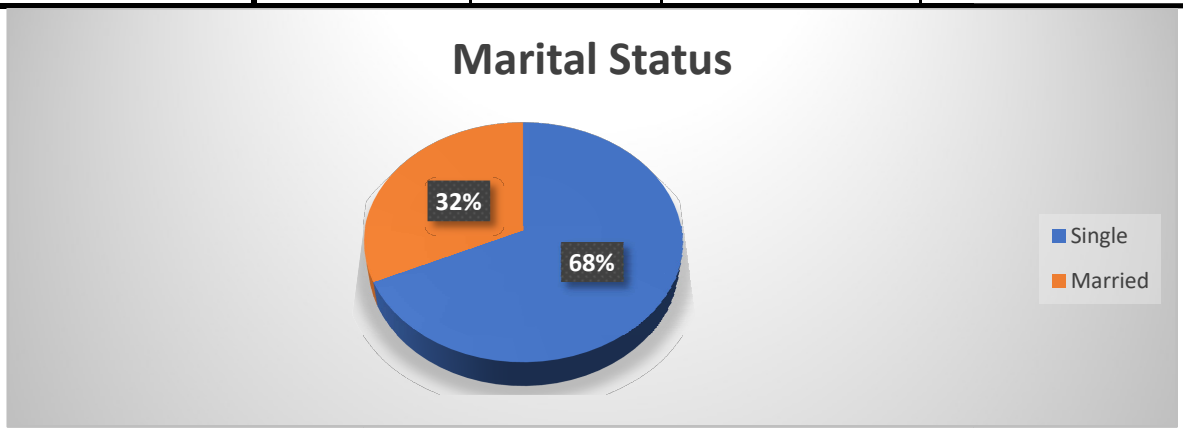


Source: Field Survey, 2026

The age distribution reveals that respondents within the 26–33 years bracket formed the largest group with 172 (41.5%), followed by those aged 18–25 years with 133 (32.1%). Respondents aged 34–41 years accounted for 64 (15.5%), while those aged 42 years and above were 45 (10.9%). This shows that the paperlargely captured young and active adults who are likely to be politically aware and directly involved in electoral participation. Their dominance is relevant to the paper because younger voters are often among the most targeted groups in vote-buying arrangements.

4.4 Marital Status of the respondents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Single	282	68.1	68.1	68.1
	Married	132	31.9	31.9	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	100.0	



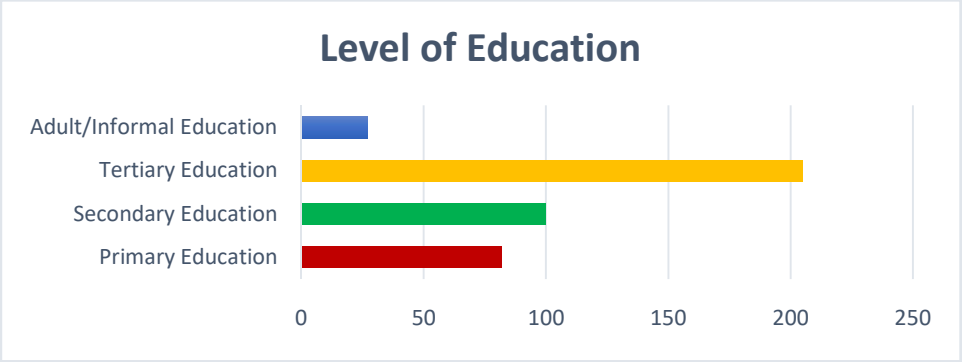
Source: Field Survey, 2026

The marital status distribution shows that 282 (68.1%) of the respondents were single, while 132 (31.9%) were married. This suggests that the sample was dominated by unmarried respondents. The implication is that many of the respondents may be young adults, which is

consistent with the age distribution. This group is particularly important to the paper because younger and single voters may be more vulnerable to electoral inducements due to economic pressure and limited family responsibility.

Table 4.5 **Level of Education**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Primary Education	82	19.8	19.8	19.8
	Secondary Education	100	24.2	24.2	44.0
	Tertiary Education	205	49.5	49.5	93.5
	Adult/Informal Education	27	6.5	6.5	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	100.0	

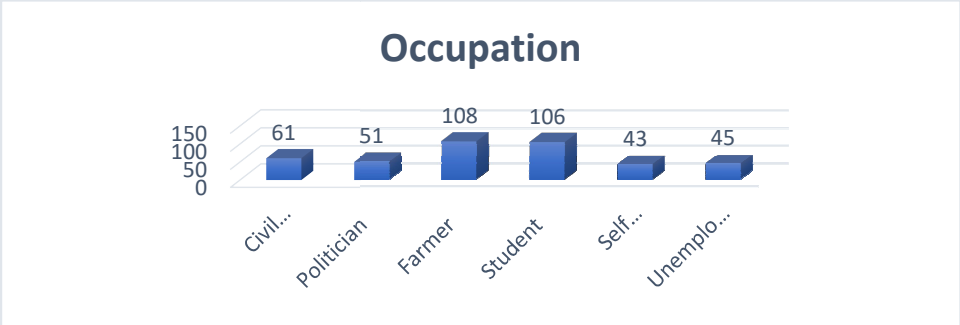


Source: Field Survey, 2026

The educational distribution indicates that 205 (49.5%) respondents had tertiary education, followed by 100 (24.2%) with secondary education and 82 (19.8%) with primary education. Those with adult/informal education were 27 (6.5%). This means that nearly half of the respondents had attained tertiary education, suggesting a relatively literate sample. Such a profile is useful for the paper because educational attainment may influence political awareness, understanding of electoral malpractice, and attitudes toward vote buying.

Table 4.6 **Occupation of respondents**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Civil Servant	61	14.7	14.7	14.7
	Politician	51	12.3	12.3	27.1
	Farmer	108	26.1	26.1	53.1
	Student	106	25.6	25.6	78.7
	Self Employed/NGO	43	10.4	10.4	89.1
	Unemployed	45	10.9	10.9	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	100.0	

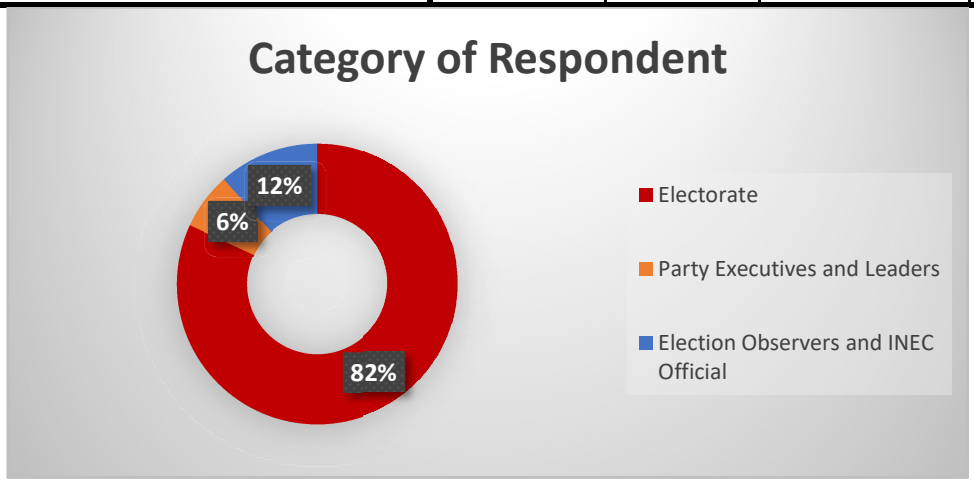


Source: Field Survey, 2026

The occupation profile shows that farmers constituted the largest category with 108 (26.1%), closely followed by students with 106 (25.6%). Civil servants accounted for 61 (14.7%), politicians 51 (12.3%), self-employed/NGO workers 43 (10.4%), and the unemployed 45 (10.9%). The dominance of farmers and students suggests that the papercaptured both rural and youthful populations, two categories that are often highly relevant in discussions of vote buying due to economic vulnerability and political mobilization.

Table 4.7 **Categories of Respondent;**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Electorate	339	81.9	81.9	81.9
	Party Executives and Leaders	27	6.5	6.5	88.4
	Election Observers and INEC Official	48	11.6	11.6	100.0
	Total	414	100.0	100.0	



Source: Field Survey, 2026

The categories of respondents show that electorates formed the majority with 339 (81.9%), followed by election observers and INEC officials with 48 (11.6%), while party executives and

leaders accounted for 27 (6.5%). This distribution is appropriate for the paperbecause the electorate is the primary target of vote-buying strategies, while the other categories provide supplementary perspectives on the conduct and enforcement of elections. The spread across categories gives the paperboth grassroots and institutional insights.

Table 4.8 factors drive vote buying in North-Central, Nigeria.

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total	Average	Remark
There was prevalence of Vote Buying during the 2015, 2019 and 2023 in North Central Nigeria	2	7	10	152	243	1869	4.514	Agreed
Vote buying thrives due to poverty and economic vulnerability of the electorate	0	3	24	102	285	1911	4.616	Agreed
The winner-takes-all nature of Nigerian politics encourages candidates to engage in vote buying	3	8	30	177	196	1797	4.341	Agreed
Political godfathers sponsor campaigns to maintain control over elected officials	0	0	22	118	274	1908	4.609	Agreed
Voters expect immediate material or monetary rewards from candidates during elections	3	13	45	169	184	1760	4.251	Agreed

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4.2.20 presents the summary of the principal drivers of vote-buying in North Central Nigeria. All the items posted mean scores above the benchmark of 4.00, confirming broad agreement that the phenomenon is structurally rooted rather than incidental. Poverty and economic vulnerability recorded the highest mean (4.616), followed closely by political godfatherism (4.609), the prevalence of vote-buying across the election years (4.514), and the winner-takes-all logic of politics (4.341). The overall pattern supports a supply-and-demand interpretation in which elite competition meets mass vulnerability.

Table 4.2.21 impact on democratic consolidation in the North-Central, Nigeria

Item	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total	Average	Remark
Vote buying undermines the credibility and fairness of elections	3	11	21	84	295	1899	4.587	Agreed
Voters often trade their electoral rights for short-term financial gains	0	6	19	143	246	1871	4.519	Agreed
Vote buying weakens political accountability and quality representation	0	0	8	102	304	1952	4.715	Agreed

Politicians who spend heavily on vote buying tend to discourages issue-based campaigns and constructive political debates and recover costs through corrupt governance	0	0	13	139	262	1905	4.601	Agreed
The monetization of electoral processes dilutes the relevance of political manifestoes and lose of Citizens trust in the democratic process when vote buying becomes pervasive.	0	0	22	138	254	1888	4.560	Agreed

Source: Field Survey, 2026

Table 4.2.21 captures the perceived impact of vote-buying on democratic consolidation in North Central Nigeria. The highest mean score appears on the item that vote-buying weakens political accountability and quality representation (4.715), followed by the erosion of issue-based campaigns and trust in governance. The consistently high averages across all indicators show that respondents view vote-buying as a de-democratizing practice that undermines electoral fairness, weakens representation and hollows out substantive political competition.

Discussion of Major Findings

The thrust of this paper is to examine the phenomenon of vote buying in North Central Nigeria and proffer the eliminative measures to vote buying.Against this backdrop, this research objective. This discussion is segmented based on the thematic order of the paper's objective.

i. The findings from this paper indicate that vote buying is a pervasive and deeply entrenched phenomenon in North Central Nigeria. As shown in Table 4.1, an overwhelming majority of 402 (93.3%) respondents agreed that vote buying was prevalent during the 2015, 2019, and 2023 electoral cycles. This confirms that the commodification of the ballot has become a standard feature of the region's political landscape. This finding is validated by Onuoha and Ojewale (2022), who observed that Nigerian elections have increasingly become "auctions" rather than democratic selections, where the highest bidder often secures the mandate.

This paperestablished that this prevalence is driven by a complex interplay of economic and structural factors. Table 4.2 reveals that 402 (93.7%) of respondents attribute the thrive of vote buying to the poverty and economic vulnerability of the electorate. This is in consonance with the "stomach infrastructure" thesis proposed by Shaba et al. (2018), which suggests that immediate pecuniary gains often override long-term developmental considerations. Furthermore, the "poverty trap" theory suggests that in economically depressed regions, the marginal utility of a small cash bribe is higher than the perceived future benefit of a policy promise (Collier, 2007). Table 4.7 reinforces this, showing that 402 (93.9%) of respondents believe voters trade their rights for short-term financial gains due to economic desperation.

Structurally, the winner-takes-all nature of Nigerian politics (88.3% agreement) and the influence of political godfathers (94.4% agreement) act as catalysts. As Sakariyau, Aliu, and Adamu (2015) argued, the desperate need for electoral victory at all costs encourages candidates to view vote buying as an essential political investment. This aligns with Joseph's (1987) theory of prebendalism, where state offices are viewed as "prebends" to be captured for the benefit of the officeholder and their ethnic or political clients. This creates a transactional culture where voters expect immediate material rewards (85.2% agreement), effectively turning elections into a marketplace.

ii. The paperfound that the monetization of the electoral process has a corrosive effect on the quality of democracy. (93.3%) of respondents ascertain that vote buying undermines the credibility and fairness of elections. Scholarly speaking, this suggests that the legitimacy of the democratic mandate is compromised when outcomes are determined by the highest bidder rather than the most competent candidate. Again, as Schaffer (2007) posits, vote buying distorts the signalling function of elections, making it impossible for the government to know the true preferences of the citizens.

Furthermore, the research reveals a significant deficit in accountability. (97.6%) of respondents believe vote buying weakens political accountability and quality representation. This aligns with the views of Adamu, Ocheni, and Ibrahim (2016), who asserted that money in politics makes performance in office secondary to the ability to "purchase" votes. This leads to a "vicious cycle of corruption" (96.1% agreement), where politicians recoup their electoral "investments" through corrupt governance and rent-seeking behavior. Kaufmann (2005) describes this as "state capture," where private interests significantly influence a state's decision-making processes to their own advantage through illicit political investments.

Conclusion

Vote buying has moved beyond being a mere electoral malpractice to becoming an institutionalized feature of Nigeria's political landscape, not just particularly in the North-Central zone but the country as a whole. This phenomenon represents a significant barrier to democratic consolidation, as it subverts the fundamental principle of popular sovereignty where the power to govern resides with the people.

The findings confirm that the commercialization of elections has created a market-driven political system where the highest bidder often emerges victorious, rather than the most competent or popular candidate. This "cash-and-carry democracy" fosters a cycle of bad governance; once in power, officials who purchased their seats often prioritize recouping their "investments" through the mismanagement of public resources, further impoverishing the electorate and making them even more susceptible to vote buying in future cycles.

Furthermore, the paperconcludes that the deepening of democracy characterized by the resilience of civil, legal, and economic institutions is stalled in Nigeria. The normalization of

transactional politics, supported by the complicity of both formal and informal institutions, reflects Schedler's (2002) "menu of manipulation," where democratic appearances are maintained while the core values of accountability and legitimacy are hollowed out.

Ultimately, unless the socioeconomic root causes (poverty and unemployment) are addressed alongside a radical "judicialization of electoral ethics" that ensures swift and severe punishment for both buyers and sellers, Nigeria's democracy will remain fragile and prone to authoritarian regression or institutional decay.

Recommendations

From the forgoing analysis to address the pervasive challenge of vote buying and foster genuine democratic consolidation in Nigeria, drawing from the data analysed in chapter four and discussion of findings in chapter five, it is imperative that the recommendation should address the lacunas and loopholes raised. Thus, the following evidence-based recommendations are proposed:

i. To neutralize the primary driver of vote buying poverty and economic vulnerability, the federal and state governments must decouple social welfare from political patronage. North-Central states like Benue, Kogi, and Nasarawa must establish digitized, independent social safety nets that insulate vulnerable populations, particularly farmers and youth, from short-term financial inducements. Alongside economic insulation, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must strictly enforce campaign finance laws to curb the influence of political godfathers (mean score: 4.609). By tracking illicit financial flows and aggressively auditing campaign spending, the state can actively restrict the volume of dark money used to fund grassroots ballot marketization. This dual approach addresses the structural dependency that transforms desperate, low-income citizens into prime targets for transactional politics, thereby laying a foundational step toward rebuilding the integrity of the social contract.

ii. The evolution of vote buying into an ex-post vote-for-payment model relies on digital proof mechanisms at polling units. To break this transaction cycle, INEC must transition from passive policy statements to strict physical enforcement of absolute voter privacy. Polling units must be systematically restructured to guarantee complete optical isolation within the voting cubicle, rendering it impossible to use hidden mobile devices. Security agencies must rigorously enforce the ban on smartphones inside the cubicle, treating any attempt to photograph a thumbprinted ballot as a severe electoral offense. Confiscating communication devices at the point of voting dismantles the "snap-and-show" mechanism that buyers rely on to verify compliance. Deprived of verifiable proof, the trust network between political brokers and voters collapses, rendering the strategic deployment of material incentives unviable.

iii. Addressing the winner-takes-all nature of Nigerian politics requires systemic constitutional reform to lower the stakes of electoral competition. Transitioning toward a system of proportional representation would ensure governance opportunities are shared equitably based on vote percentages, directly reducing the elite desperation that drives aggressive vote buying. Furthermore, to combat institutional fragility and systemic impunity, the National Assembly must establish an autonomous Electoral Offenses Commission and Tribunal. Stripping prosecution powers from a compromised administrative framework and vesting them in an independent body ensures swift legal consequences for party executives, voters, and complicit security agents. Legal accountability, combined with a reduction in the ultimate prize of state capture, will finally compel political actors to pivot away from transactional practices and toward sustainable, issue-based democratic consolidation.

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