

Money Politics, Vote Trading and Democratic Governance in Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper explores the phenomenon of vote trading and use of money to entice the electorates in Nigeria's democracy process and the implications on the future of democratic governance in the world's most populous black nation. Vote trading has been in existence in Nigeria's electoral system since independence. Although it is seen globally as an illegal act, the trend in the Nigerian case is overwhelming with political parties and their agents going all out to buy the conscience of the electorates to their favour during elections. The electoral body in Nigeria which has been responsible for monitoring and regulating the expenses of candidates and political parties during elections has also not been completely impartial in such obligations. The Electoral Act of 2010 clearly states the rules guiding campaign expenses and during the campaign of the 2019 general elections, the electoral body publicly informed all political parties about the spending limit for campaigns into public offices but this was majorly a mere public announcement as nothing concrete was done to curb the spending of these political parties and candidates who found other means to beat the electoral body to it. Vote trading is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the Nigerian electoral Process with negative consequences on the nation's Democratic governance.

Keywords: Vote Trading, Electoral Act, Democratic Governance, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Vote trading is simply the practice of exchanging money or other resources for votes during elections. It is a situation of manipulating voter's behaviour by enticing them with money or other materials- foods, clothes etc. in order to direct their voting pattern in favour of a particular political party and/or candidate during election. It is the act of selling and buying votes in an electoral process. Lippert-Rasmussen (2011) observed that there are different dimensions to the phenomenon. There are views to the effect that Vote Buying/selling is contradictory to good democratic governance, while others are of the opinion that the practice is a one of the ways of responding to election promises, which is healthy for democracy. However, vote trading (the act of buying / selling votes) is an open form of bribery that substantially corrupts the Nigerian electoral system (Uchenna-Emezue, 2015). The point is that, any reward or favor whether it is financial or material, given to anyone in a bid to induce the person to vote for a particular candidate is considered as Vote trading.

Although the Buying/Selling of vote in the electoral process is considered to be illegal globally, the trend has been on the increase in Nigeria since the 4th republic in 1999. Nigeria has experienced six democratic elections from 1999 till date, the vote buying/selling phenomenon pervades Nigerian elections (Onapajo, Francis, and Okeke-Uzodike, 2015). In fact, all elections held in Nigeria since the 4th republic has been characterized by electoral irregularities (Danjibo and Oladeji, 2007). In most situations, it is the case of the incumbent diverting funds meant for public use to run election campaigns and use these funds to buy the conscience of the electorates for their selfish interests; with consequences on the provision of adequate infrastructure and other developmental project for the people (Ajisebiyawo, 2016).

Studies have shown that a mix of illiteracy, unemployment, old age, early-stage democratization, poverty and a winner-take-all electoral system has contributed to trading the vote for electoral success and the overwhelming use of money in the Nigerian democratic process (Danjibo & Oladeji, 2007; Kennedy, 2010; Onapajo *et al.*, 2015; Owen, 2013).

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This act, among other factors has brought about poor public service delivery in Nigeria (Omotosho, 2014) and has adversely affected good governance.

This paper explores how a better understanding of the effects of voting trading or commercial voting could be discerned and also reveals the negative implications of this practice on effective and enduring democratic governance in Nigeria. The paper is also a major instructional material for developing countries to see the dangers in money politics and how it affects development with a view to kicking against the act and placing more importance on free and fair elections, and to thereby hold the leaders accountable for their actions in public office.

Incidence of Vote Trading in Nigeria's Politics

Vote buying and selling also known as commercial politics and money politics is one phenomenon that is gradually taking the center stage in Nigeria's electoral process. In the past, it has been done in secret with political party agents using tricks such as concealing naira notes inside food items and sharing same to prospective voters few days to the election and in some cases, on the day of the election itself. In most cases, it is the incumbent government that engages in such acts because the money used for this purpose was withdrawn from public funds or sponsored by government contractors who recycle money meant for public infrastructural development to fund political campaigns to ensure that their preferred candidate gets into public office for their own selfish interest. A result of this is that in most instances, the wrong candidate gets to win the election and instead of paving way for development activities while in office, he/she will be focused on recovering monies spent during the election. By the time these monies are recovered, it is time to campaign for the next election and the process is recycled again and again.

In contradiction, money itself has become a factor. Cash seems to have become the main focus in the political process in Nigerian politics; it is, sadly now playing an increasing critical role. It even appears to be so dominant in the electoral process, so much that the word 'money politics' with a derogatory connotation, has crept into the country's political lexicon. It is now a critical variable when evaluating the level of political corruption in the country (Davies, 2006). Put differently, (Ojo, 2008) is of the opinion that money politics is synonymous to vote buying and selling. It is viewed beyond monetary exchange and transaction. Distribution of items such as food stuffs, T shirt, Face caps etc. covering and displaying the pictures of contestants during campaign is another form of vote buying and selling. This practice has become a norm in Nigeria's politics and in a situation where the candidate fails to comply; withdrawal of support from their sponsors and in some cases, electorates, is usually the consequence.

The Imo State governorship election held in 2007 had serious allegations of vote buying and selling during the electoral process. Money were said to have been exchanged for voter's card in polling units, bribery of INEC officials was also reported as the election was marred with irregularities. The same occurrence was reported in Calabar, Edo, and Ogun state where voters and electoral officials were said to have been induced to manipulate the electoral process in favor of party candidates. In Osun State, It was reported that INEC allowed multiple voting, while Oyo state witness bribing of INEC officials, party agents and observer member of Civil Liberty Organization (CLO) by stalwart of the ruling party in Ward 10, unit 11 of Egbeda Local Government Area (Danjibo and Oladeji, 2007). According to a report, there was sharing of money in Benue state during the gubernatorial election. States such as Nasarawa, Kwara, Lagos, Borno and Sokoto were reported of different cases of vote buying and selling (Jide, 2007).

In vote trading transactions in Nigeria, voters are usually offered money (68 percent of all reported attempts in 2007), commodities (such as food or clothing, 26 percent) or jobs (6 percent). In the 2007 Nigerian elections, the most common inducement was 500 naira. But the median price of a vote payment rose between 2003 and 2007, from 1750 naira to 2250 naira, largely because the proportion of large payments (10,000 naira or more per vote) increased over time (Micheal, 2008).

Although the 2011 election was applauded by both local and international observers as free and fair as compared to the previous ones held, the trend of commercial voting is still a course for concern. For example, almost 2,000 groups were formed during the 2011 Presidential Good luck Jonathan with billions of naira being disbursed to fund their individual campaign strategies (Olusola, 2010). It was believed that the 2011 general election was one of the most expensive political campaigns in Nigeria's history.

During the party's primaries, campaigns and elections, huge amount of money was shared by the public office aspirants in a bid to outdo one another. Besides the legitimate spending on hiring campaign offices and staff, procuring office equipment and vehicles, running jungles and adverts, printing billboards and posters; there were illegal expenses such as bribery of election officials to manipulate election figures, hiring of political thugs to instigate trouble at polling centers as well as outright vote buying (Jide, 2011).

The culture of vote trading (that is vote buying and selling) has eaten deep into the fabric of Nigeria's politics and society. It has become a welcome praxis which Nigerian politicians and electorates see as 'game

changer' to influence the outcome of an election. This is one of the main reasons why the gubernatorial elections held in both Kogi and Bayelsa states on the 16th November, 2019 were marred by the menacing danger of vote trading, ballot snatching, intimidation and assaults on journalists, despite the heavy security deployment in the two states.

Causes and Effects of Vote Trading

So many reasons can be adduced as being catalyst for the incidence of money politics and vote-buying in Nigeria. Some of these catalysts include ignorance, on the part of the electorate, apathy, and poverty as well as, deceit by the politicians. There is also attitudinal problem on the part of the people involved in both buying and selling. Nigerians towards politics is not right, because most politicians view it as a call to investment from which huge profit is expected and not as call to serve humanity. The electorates on their part see politics especially during election, as an opportunity to sell their votes to represent their own share of the national cake since they do not have access to where the national cake is being shared.

Vote buying and selling did not just start from nowhere. According to Davies (2006), the inability of the political parties and their candidates to come up with proper manifestoes on how they intend to develop the community, the inability of the electorates to scrutinize the aspirants and inadequate voter's education gave room for vote buying and selling to thrive. Instead of candidates and their political parties to come out with clear manifestoes that the public can scrutinize, they come up with meaningless slogans and speeches are made.

On the issue of inadequate voter's education, a lot of voters do not have sufficient information about their candidate of choice. Instead of the electorates to conduct investigations on their candidates, they rely on hear-say or choose a candidate based on sentiments. This, in most cases, gives room for vote buying as they are willing and ready to collect whatever the candidate gives in return for their votes. Most of these politicians are also aware of voter's lack of information and they prey on this like bees.

Poverty and illiteracy are also major factors that are letting vote buying become the order of the day. Poor people are very vulnerable, and due to the low level of political awareness in Nigeria, it becomes easy to intimidate and manipulate these people. In fact, the larger part of the country's population falls within the lower class and lower middle class. These people are easily enticed with money and material gains in exchange for their mandates and in some cases, voter's cards. Although economic depression can be attributed to this, illiteracy cannot be overlooked.

Political cynicism among the voters is also another factor that allows for commercial politics to thrive. The fact that most electorates are of the opinion that politicians are incurably corrupt, collecting money during political campaign is seen as a way the citizens collect their share of the loot. The argument is that politicians do not fulfill electoral promises and the electorates see vote buying as a means to pay them back in their own coin

Apart from the aforementioned factors that served as catalyst to this ugly practice the ominous axis politics in Nigeria has been threading due to the preposterous incidence of money politics and vote trading. With a view to drive a point, Davies (2006) identified seven predisposing factors which captured almost completely the reason for the very high incidence of money politics and the trading of the votes in Nigeria. The factors as identified by Davies (2006) are reproduced below as follows:

a. The inability of many political parties and the contestants to put in place comprehensive and comprehensible manifestoes for scrutiny by the voters. Instead of clear-cut manifestoes that would enable the electorate to make a rational political choice, meaningless slogans, demagogic and rabble-rousing speeches are made.

Such speeches either overestimate or underestimate the political perception of the voters, but are rarely educative and convincing. Many voters seem to be unimpressed by all the tricks the Parties and the candidates employ, hence the need to bribe them for their votes.

b. Political cynicism on the part of the voters who believe that political office holder are incurably corrupt, self-seeking and incompetent, that politics is a dirty and dishonorable enterprise, that the whole political process is a fraud and a betrayal of the public trust. This cynical view of politics is further accentuated by unfulfilled promises made by winners of past elections. Thus, asking for a pay-off, another way by which the people receive their own share of the national cake. On the other hand, the candidates who gave money to voters probably believe that they are investing against electoral failure.

c. Focusing on personalities rather than on issues. By the mode of their campaign, most candidates draw the attention of the electorate away from the political parties to themselves. The consequence of this is that the political parties and their message become less important to the electorate. The candidates then take the centre stage and would therefore need to spend more money than their parties could afford in order to mobilize support for themselves.

d. The peoples' perception greatly reinforced by obscene display of opulence by public office holders

and ostentatious living of many politicians that every elected or appointed public officer is amassing wealth from the public treasury. This seems to have strengthened the resolve of many voters to sell their votes to the highest bidder.

e. The penchant of politicians to strive to win elections, even at the party primary level, at all cost, makes desperate contestants to engage in all sort of malpractices including offering financial and material inducements to voters. Working on the poverty of the people, Nigerian politicians have been known to distribute food stuff and other consumable materials to voters shortly before the elections and sometime on Election Day, contrary to the provision of the extant electoral law that prohibits such practice. Instances abound too, when candidates threw some money into the air during campaign rallies, making people to scramble for it and getting injured in the process.

f. The noticeable weakness in a party whip, characteristics of party politics in presidential system, when elected members exercise considerable degree of freedom when voting on legislative proposals. Such freedom makes the legislators to be more susceptible to receive gratifications from the private interest groups. The interest groups employ what Shank calls “legalized bribery”. They make large donations to some spurious private or community programmes in which the target legislators are interested, and give expensive gifts to the legislators or sponsor their overseas travel etc. all in the name of public relations to secure the votes of the legislators in the legislature.

g. The absence of any legislation that puts any ceiling on financial contributions to political parties and candidates by groups or individual (Davies, 2006).

In the vein of the immediate foregoing, it is important to note that the Nigerian constitution is not completely silent on party finances, but its provisions in respect of the finances of political parties relate only to their source of funds and other assets. For example, section 225(3) of the 1999 constitution merely prohibits any political party to (a) retain any funds or assets remitted or sent to it from outside Nigeria. The requirement that political parties prepare and submit audited account to the electoral body is only intended to ensure transparency and accountability. No law exists as of now, that puts any limit to the amount candidates can spend in elections while the National Assembly is yet to issue guidelines to regulate the activities of lobbyist and other political action groups who operate, formally or informally, buying the votes of legislators for their causes in the legislature.

The connection between money and politics is very powerful, but modern democracies have exposed its implication on democratic virtues. The role of money in any political arrangement cannot be

underscored; its abuse in Nigerian polity is indeed amazing too. Starting with the 2003 civilian-civilian transition programme, money played dominant role in canvassing for votes. Apart from the general elections that witnessed high level of buying and selling of votes, the National Assembly became arena of trading. In vote-buying transactions in Nigeria, voters are usually offered money (68 percent of all reported attempts in 2007), commodities (such as food or clothing, 26 percent) or jobs (6 percent). In the latest and previous Nigerian elections, the modal (i.e., most common) inducement was 500 naira, or about US\$4. But the median price of a vote payment rose between 2003 and 2007, from 1750 naira to 2250 naira, largely because the proportion of large payments (10,000 naira or more per vote) increased over time (Micheal, 2008) political underdevelopment (Asobie, 2007).

Again, spending money beyond what is ordinarily required to defray legitimate campaign expenses by directly or indirectly bribing voters is definitely an electoral malpractice and the favourable electoral results emanating from that would not represent the true wishes of voters i.e. their actual political preference minus the intervention of money. Also according to Milbrath (1965:24), “people of integrity and those who genuinely want to serve the people but have no money to buy votes may lose out in the electoral contest, while bad candidates with abundant financial resources or those with corrupt tendencies may get elected.” When this happens, the immoral and condemnable use of money to buy votes is then celebrated to high heavens, as a good and effective weapon, in electoral battles by successful contestants. Money Politics and vote-buying has also made election results to have little or nothing to do with the performance in office of politicians. Precisely because performance is not a critical factor in electoral outcome, the incentive to perform is very weak. And because vote-buying is very effective in achieving electoral victory the resort to it is very high.

Consequently, elected public office holders who spent huge sums of money to secure victory at the polls would usually have a greater propensity to pursue their private business and financial interest and sometimes those of their corporate sponsors or mentors and financiers, euphemistically referred to in Nigeria as political god-fathers. In this situation, public interest takes the back seat in the calculation, thus degrading the responsibilities of the elected officials to the people. It is for this reason that the Nigeria National Orientation Agency, a public enlightenment body sponsored a radio and television jingle during political campaigns and rallies by which it warned the electorate to be wary of politicians who want to buy their votes because according to the jingle, anyone who uses “wuru-wuru” (crooked, illicit means) to get elected could certainly render “wuru-wuru” service to the people (Davies, 2006) Another negative impact of money politics and vote-

buying on good governance is that the winner in the elections when he occupies a public office that gives him access to public fund becomes more prone to corruption. For instance, if he is a legislator, he becomes more prone to receiving gratifications to promote and support the private interest of his sponsors. There is now a popular feeling, indeed thinking, among a coterie of Nigerian politicians, that political contest is a high risk investment opportunity. The higher the risk the greater the returns. This type of thinking has been corroborated by a former president of the Nigerian Senate when he affirmed in an interview that because votes are not free, politicians considered electoral contest for seats in the National Assembly as an investment and that many of them invest their fortunes, incurred debts and even sold their houses to contest and get elected (Sunday Punch June, 5, 2005).

The unequivocal message that was being sent by the former president of senate is that if huge sums of money have been invested to contest election then it is inevitable for the investor to strive to recover his money or part of it through different ways. It therefore logically follows that:

If the investor with the political investments motives wins and is eventually entrusted with power, it is quite logical for people to assume that the pay back is likely to come from public funds (The Guardian Editorial, July 19, 2006).

The effects of these are evident in the slow pace of development experienced in the country. It is a known fact that vote buying is detrimental to the democratic future of Nigeria and one of the major effects is that lack of level playing ground will be sacrificed for intimidation and imposition which tell on the legitimacy of the democracy. Commercial voting also denies the electorates of their freedom to be transparent and to vote in the interest of the masses. According to Danjibo and Oladeji (2007), vote buying make politicians to see themselves as investing in a greater political harvest, thereby encouraging the entrenchment of corruption in the polity which erodes the very basis of democratic governance. Where a politician has invested a lot of money on campaigns before getting into political office, it is only rational that he recoups his investment as much as possible hence to move to loot public funds. Where that is the case, accountability and transparency known to be hallmark of good governance and democracy becomes compromised to the detriment of the system (Ojo, 2008).

Money politics has also discouraged average well-meaning Nigerians from aspiring for political offices. Campaigns have become so expensive that in most cases, the most important criteria for aspiring to hold public offices is the ability to buy the conscience of the masses. The political parties also encourage this

practice by making the price of nomination forms too expensive that only the elites can afford them. In a case where the form is being purchased for a candidate, such candidate becomes indebted to those who bought him/her the form.

In addition to above mentioned effects, vote buying as severely damaged the image of Nigeria's political system to the international community. At some point, Nigeria was ranked as one of the most corrupted countries in the world and the country's current ranking is said to be 144 out 180 (Transparency International ,2018). This has discouraged a lot of businesses and countries from transacting with Nigeria with most of them setting up their offices in South Africa and/or the Middle East. Lastly, if care is not taken, money politics may lead to another military coup. In a case where the dividends of democracy is not felt, the military may use that as an excuse to cease power from the government in a bid to regularize the country. Although military intervention is never encouraged and is definitely not the solution to this problem, a change in attitude of Nigerian politicians will set the future of Nigeria's democracy on the right path.

Strategies for Curbing Vote Trading

The nature and effects of vote trading on the Nigerian democratic system suggests that strategies be put in place to immediately address or at least reduce this phenomenon in the politics of the state. Some of the suggestions that suffice are highlighted thus: First, continuous general enlightenment and education of the electorate is fundamental to curbing the menace. Vote trading is a punishable offense backed by the Nigerian constitution. The Electoral Act, 2010 in Article 130, states that "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"(The Punch Newspaper, 2018).But in spite of this clearly written in the constitution, the trend is steadily been on the increase. If the electorates are properly educated about this section in the constitution, it will greatly reduce the escalating trend of vote trading. Also, section 89 of the Electoral Act 2010, deals with the annual statement of assets as well as the party's statements of expenditure. The electoral body in Nigeria (INEC) is mandated to publish the report in three national dailies. Another section of the constitution which is of interest to campaign finance experts is Section 92 of the

Electoral Act; sub section 3 which states that “election expenses of a political party shall be submitted to the commission in a separate audited return within six months after an election and such return shall be signed by the party’s auditors and counter signed by the chairman of the party and be supported by a sworn affidavit by the signatories as to the correctness of its contents” (Jide, 2011). If this is proper adherence to these provisions will go a long way in curbing vote trading and the unconstitutional and illegal use of money in Nigeria’s politics.

Financing of election campaigns is another area that deserved proper regulation. Although during the 2019 general elections, the INEC had capped campaign spending, these political parties and their candidates devised other means to outspend regulated campaign budgets because INEC seemed to be more interested in the voting procession of the Election Day more than focusing on how much each political party spent on their individual campaigns. The electoral body must ensure compliance of the electoral act and all its rules, and must be ready to enforce disciplinary action on any defaulter without baize. The major difference between electoral authoritarianism and democracy builds upon the common affirmation that democracy requires elections, but not just any kind of elections. The idea of democratic self – government is incompatible with electoral flaws. In an electoral democracy which is the aspiration of Nigerians and Nigeria, a free and fair election is indeed a sine qua non. No polity can be adjudged democratic if elections do not pass through the litmus test of credibility. Last, corruption should be fought to a stand-still in Nigeria because vote trading is form of corruption which if not curbed, will continue to endanger the future of democratic governance in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

This paper has analysed the prevalence of vote trading and its causes and effects on the future of Nigeria’s democracy. It exposed the rising trend in trading of votes to induce the Nigerian voters during election and the illegal use of money far beyond and above the constitutional limit in the politics of Nigeria. Citing cases from Lagos, Calabar, Ekiti, Imo, Edo, Kogi, Bayelsa states, etc., the paper does not only highlight how vote trading and the money politics have eaten deeply into the politics of the Nigerian state but has also emphasized on the implications of these unholy practices on democratic governance in Nigeria.

Lack of comprehensive and comprehensible manifestoes for voters to decide from, focus on personalities rather than on issues, peoples’ perception on politics and wealth in Nigeria (largely reinforced by obscene display of opulence by public office holders and ostentatious living of many politicians), the desire of some Nigerian politicians to strive to win elections at all cost, Political cynicism on the part of the voter ,The

absence or lack of the political will to enforce legislation that puts any ceiling on financial contributions to political parties and candidates by groups or individual, are some of the fundamental factors responsible for vote trading in Nigeria. However, Continuous public enlightenments and voters’ education, adherence to constitutional provisions on regulation regarding money spending for election and the concerted effort at fighting corruption, are some of the strategies for reducing if not completely eradicating this menace in the politics of the Nigerian state.

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