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HOW TO WIN ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA; A MODEL OF RIGGING, ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND VOTE BUYING

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Abstract

Elections constitute the cornerstone of democratic governance, providing citizens with the opportunity to freely elect representatives into public office through credible, transparent, and competitive electoral processes. In Nigeria, however, the integrity of elections has been persistently undermined by a range of illicit practices, including electoral manipulation, vote rigging, voter intimidation, electoral violence, vote buying, and the abuse of state institutions and electoral processes. These practices have weakened public confidence in democratic institutions and raised concerns regarding the credibility of electoral outcomes. In many instances, election results are perceived not as reflections of the electorate's will but as products of political manipulation, predetermined arrangements, and institutional compromise, thereby giving rise to what may be described as "choice-less elections." This paper adopts the documentary research method to critically examine the manifestations and implications of electoral rigging, electoral violence, and vote buying within Nigeria's electoral system. Drawing on existing literature, policy documents, and electoral reports, the study explores how these practices undermine electoral integrity, democratic accountability, and political legitimacy. The review reveals that the persistence of electoral malpractice is closely associated with weak institutions, inadequate enforcement of electoral laws, political interference, and the commercialization of the electoral process. The paper concludes that the credibility of elections depends on the effective protection of voters, electoral officials, electoral materials, and the integrity of the collation and declaration of results. It therefore recommends strengthening democratic institutions, enforcing electoral laws without political interference, deploying appropriate electoral technologies, promoting political accountability, and enhancing civic education as essential measures for safeguarding electoral integrity and consolidating democratic governance in Nigeria.

Keywords: Elections, electoral rigging, electoral violence, vote buying, electoral integrity, democratic governance.

Introduction

Electoral malpractice, particularly electoral rigging, electoral violence, and vote buying, has become one of the most persistent threats to democratic governance across many developing democracies. Although elections are intended to provide citizens with the opportunity to freely choose their political representatives, the integrity of electoral processes is often undermined by practices that compromise transparency, fairness, and public confidence. In Nigeria, these electoral malpractices are not recent developments. Rather, they have evolved alongside the country's democratic experience and have become recurring features of electoral contests.

Historical evidence suggests that electoral manipulation predates Nigeria's independence. According to Yusuf (2016), elections conducted during the colonial era were already characterised by various forms of rigging and electoral malpractice, with the British colonial administration allegedly manipulating electoral outcomes to serve its political interests. Since independence in 1960, electoral malpractice has continued to evolve in both scale and sophistication, becoming deeply embedded within Nigeria's political culture. Yusuf (2016) further argues that politicians are increasingly judged by their ability to manipulate electoral outcomes, thereby frustrating the democratic will of the electorate and contributing to political instability, electoral violence, and recurring political crises.

The persistence of electoral malpractice has created a political environment in which electoral success is frequently perceived as dependent not only on political popularity but also on the ability to manipulate electoral processes or neutralise similar attempts by political opponents. Consequently, electoral rigging, electoral violence, and vote buying have become strategic instruments employed by some political actors to secure electoral victory. Rather than serving as isolated acts of misconduct, these practices have become intertwined with electoral competition, thereby undermining democratic legitimacy and weakening public trust in electoral institutions.

Agbu (2016) contends that understanding electoral malpractice in Nigeria requires an appreciation of the nature and character of the Nigerian state. According to the author, the country's political structure has historically exhibited weak institutional accountability, limited transparency, and a political economy shaped by ethnic fragmentation, a mono-product economy, and a distorted federal arrangement. These structural conditions have generated deep-seated distrust among competing political and ethnic interests, thereby encouraging intense struggles for political power. Supporting this position, Moru (2004) argues that Nigeria's political structure has fostered a rent-seeking and nepotistic system that rewards political patronage while discouraging merit and institutional accountability. Agbu (2016) therefore concludes that electoral competition in Nigeria has increasingly assumed the character of a zero-sum contest in which political office is viewed as an avenue for economic accumulation and political influence, making electoral manipulation an attractive strategy for political survival.

Notwithstanding these challenges, elections remain the cornerstone of democratic governance. Elections provide citizens with the constitutional opportunity to determine who governs them and constitute the primary mechanism through which political authority derives legitimacy. Awopeju

(2021) describes elections as the cardinal foundation of every democratic system, while Omotola (2022) argues that democracy cannot exist in the absence of credible elections. Consequently, any form of electoral malpractice undermines democratic governance by eroding electoral integrity, weakening public confidence in government institutions, and reducing citizens' trust in the democratic process. As Awopeju (2024) observes, when election outcomes are perceived as manipulated or unacceptable, public confidence in government and its institutions inevitably declines.

The implications of electoral malpractice extend far beyond the electoral process itself. Elections characterised by rigging, violence, and vote buying rarely reflect the genuine preferences of the electorate. Instead, they legitimise political actors who secure office through manipulation rather than popular mandate, thereby weakening democratic accountability and encouraging corruption, poor governance, and political instability. Democratic elections should therefore represent the freely expressed will of the people rather than the outcome of coercion, intimidation, or fraudulent practices designed to secure political power at all costs.

Against this background, this paper examines electoral rigging, electoral violence, and vote buying as interconnected threats to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It argues that credible elections are indispensable for democratic legitimacy and sustainable governance and that electoral processes must be protected from all forms of manipulation if they are to reflect the genuine choices of the electorate. By examining these three dimensions of electoral malpractice, the paper seeks to contribute to ongoing debates on strengthening electoral integrity and promoting democratic accountability in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on **Game Theory**, particularly the **Zero-Sum Game** perspective. Game Theory originated from early discussions on strategic decision-making, with one of its earliest documented formulations appearing in a letter written by James Waldegrave in 1713. Over time, the theory has evolved into an influential analytical framework for understanding strategic interactions among rational actors in situations where the outcome of one participant's decision depends on the decisions of others. Consequently, the theory has been widely applied in political science, international relations, political economy, strategic voting, conflict resolution, war strategy, and electoral studies to explain competitive behaviour and decision-making under conditions of uncertainty (Bhuiyan, 2016).

A central assumption of Game Theory is that individuals and groups behave rationally by selecting strategies that maximise their expected benefits while minimising potential losses. Sandler and Arce M. (2003) argue that the theory is particularly useful for analysing situations involving strategic conflict because it captures the interdependent nature of actors' decisions, where the actions of one participant inevitably influence the choices and responses of others. Within this framework, political actors continually evaluate the likely behaviour of their opponents and adjust their strategies accordingly in pursuit of their objectives.

The present study adopts the **Zero-Sum Game** variant of Game Theory, which assumes that the gains of one actor are achieved at the direct expense of another, such that the total gains and losses within the contest equal zero (Bhuiyan, 2016). Applied to electoral politics, this perspective explains the intense winner-takes-all character of political competition in which electoral victory provides access to political power, public resources, patronage networks, and influence, whereas electoral defeat often results in political exclusion and the loss of access to these benefits. Under such circumstances, elections cease to be viewed merely as democratic contests and instead become high-stakes competitions in which political actors perceive victory as essential for political survival.

The zero-sum character of Nigeria's electoral politics provides an appropriate framework for understanding the persistence of electoral rigging, electoral violence, and vote buying. Where political office is perceived as the principal gateway to economic opportunities, state resources, and political influence, political actors may become willing to adopt both legitimate and illegitimate strategies to secure electoral victory. The perceived costs of losing therefore encourage the use of electoral manipulation, voter intimidation, violence, and vote buying as rational strategies intended to maximise electoral success while preventing political opponents from gaining power. Conversely, opposition parties may equally perceive similar strategies as necessary to avoid complete political marginalisation.

This theoretical perspective also explains the highly adversarial nature of political competition in Nigeria. Political contests frequently assume the character of intense struggles in which opponents are viewed not merely as electoral competitors but as obstacles to political survival. Consequently, elections are often characterised by hostility, distrust, and the deployment of strategies aimed at weakening political rivals rather than promoting issue-based democratic competition. Such adversarial politics frequently extends beyond inter-party competition to intra-party contests, where leadership struggles and nomination processes may become equally contentious.

Oke (2022) argues that politics in Nigeria continues to reflect the logic of a zero-sum game because political actors rarely perceive one another as partners in democratic governance or as stakeholders with shared responsibilities for national development. Instead, political competition is frequently driven by the objective of acquiring and retaining power at all costs. This perception reinforces the tendency for electoral contests to be viewed as battles that must be won irrespective of the methods employed. Consequently, Game Theory, particularly the Zero-Sum Game perspective, provides a useful framework for explaining why electoral rigging, electoral violence, and vote buying have persisted within Nigeria's electoral system despite successive electoral reforms. It demonstrates how the perceived rewards of political victory and the consequences of electoral defeat continue to shape the strategic behaviour of political actors and contribute to the persistence of electoral malpractice.

Electoral Rigging as a Structural Instrument of Electoral Manipulation

Electoral rigging has remained one of the most persistent threats to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Rather than occurring as isolated incidents during polling, the literature demonstrates that

electoral manipulation has evolved into a systematic and highly organised process that permeates virtually every stage of the electoral cycle. Evidence from successive elections indicates that electoral malpractice has become increasingly sophisticated, extending beyond ballot stuffing and result falsification to include the manipulation of demographic data, voter registration, electoral technology, and result management systems. Consequently, electoral rigging should be understood not merely as an event that occurs on Election Day but as a structural strategy designed to influence electoral outcomes long before voting begins.

The long-standing nature of electoral manipulation in Nigeria is well documented. Reflecting on the 2007 general elections, the Transition Monitoring Group described the electoral exercise as fundamentally flawed, concluding that the irregularities were so extensive that the elections failed to satisfy the minimum standards expected of democratic elections (Collier & Vicente, 2009). Similar concerns continue to characterise subsequent electoral cycles, suggesting that electoral reforms have not fundamentally addressed the structural drivers of electoral malpractice.

Existing literature further demonstrates that electoral rigging has become increasingly institutionalised. Peterside (2022) argues that electoral manipulation should no longer be viewed as a collection of opportunistic or accidental infractions committed during elections. Instead, contemporary electoral malpractice is carefully planned, systematically coordinated, and strategically executed through multiple institutional and procedural mechanisms. This observation supports earlier arguments by Lawal (2007), who noted that Nigerian electoral politics has historically been characterised by rigging, political thuggery, intimidation, and violence because elections remain the principal avenue through which political power is acquired. Consequently, electoral competition has increasingly become associated with coercion, manipulation, and conflict rather than democratic choice.

One of the most significant findings emerging from the literature is that electoral rigging frequently begins long before voter registration or election campaigns commence. Several scholars argue that the manipulation of demographic statistics, particularly population census figures, constitutes one of the earliest stages of electoral manipulation. Because representation, constituency delimitation, resource allocation, and voter registration are closely linked to official population figures, political actors have historically regarded census exercises as strategic opportunities for securing future electoral advantages. Kolawole (2023) notes that both the 1962 and 2006 population censuses generated widespread controversy owing to allegations of political interference and deliberate inflation of population figures. Similar observations were made by Anyagafu (2006), who reported that the Eastern and Mid-Western Regions rejected the 1962 census results because they believed that figures allocated to the Northern Region had been deliberately inflated to secure numerical and political superiority. These controversies illustrate how demographic data can become politicised and subsequently influence electoral processes long before elections are conducted.

The literature equally identifies voter registration as another critical point of electoral manipulation. Although voter registration is intended to establish an accurate and credible register of eligible voters, available evidence suggests that political actors frequently seek to manipulate the process to create electoral advantages. Peterside (2022) argues that Nigeria's voter register has

repeatedly been characterised by multiple registrations, underage registrants, deceased persons, inaccurate polling-unit allocations, and so-called "ghost voters." According to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), a substantial proportion of registrations identified during the Continuous Voter Registration exercise were either invalid or fictitious, thereby raising serious concerns regarding the credibility of the voters' register (Peterside, 2022). Such irregularities are significant because the integrity of the electoral register directly determines the credibility of subsequent electoral outcomes.

The strategic importance attached to voter registration stems from the central role it plays in determining voting strength. As Peterside (2022) observes, political actors increasingly recognise that the composition of the voters' register influences both electoral outcomes and political bargaining power. Inflated voter registers provide opportunities for fictitious voting, facilitate the writing of fraudulent election results, and strengthen political claims regarding constituency voting strength. Akinkuotu (2022) similarly argues that manipulated voter registers create opportunities for election result fabrication because inflated registration figures enable fraudulent vote allocation while making it difficult to challenge manipulated outcomes through legal processes. Consequently, manipulation of voter registration has become an integral component of structural electoral rigging rather than a procedural irregularity.

Closely related to voter registration manipulation is the growing concern regarding the registration of underage persons and other ineligible voters? The introduction of digital voter registration systems was expected to minimize these irregularities through biometric verification and electronic accreditation. However, evidence suggests that technological innovation alone has not eliminated opportunities for manipulation. Orjinmo (2022) reports that shortly after Nigeria's digital voter register became publicly accessible ahead of the 2023 general elections, numerous records appeared to contain photographs of children who were clearly below the constitutionally prescribed voting age. Similar concerns were raised by Dada (2022), who argued that despite improvements in electoral technology, underage registration remained possible where electoral officials deliberately compromised established procedures. These findings suggest that technological innovations cannot independently guarantee electoral integrity where institutional accountability remains weak.

Another recurring theme within the literature concerns the registration of foreign nationals as eligible voters. Although the Electoral Act clearly limits voter registration to Nigerian citizens who satisfy prescribed legal requirements, evidence indicates that some political actors have allegedly facilitated the registration of foreign nationals residing in border communities to increase electoral numbers. Sodeeq (2022) reports that the Nigerian Immigration Service arrested several foreign nationals found in possession of Permanent Voter Cards shortly before the 2023 general elections. Such incidents reinforce concerns that weaknesses in voter registration systems continue to provide opportunities for electoral manipulation, particularly in border communities where cross-border movement remains difficult to regulate.

Beyond voter registration, scholars have also highlighted the manipulation of election results as one of the most visible manifestations of electoral rigging. The literature suggests that electoral

fraud increasingly extends beyond voting itself to include falsification during collation, transmission, and declaration of election results. Investigations by the Centre for Collaborative Investigative Journalism revealed several instances during the 2023 general elections where election results were reportedly recorded for polling units in which voting did not occur or where election officials failed to arrive (CCIJ, 2024). Additional irregularities reportedly included unsigned result sheets, overwritten vote totals, improperly certified election documents, and illegible result forms that nevertheless formed part of official electoral returns (CCIJ, 2024). Collectively, these findings raise significant concerns regarding the integrity of result management and suggest that manipulation may occur even after voting has concluded.

The introduction of technological innovations, particularly the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), represented one of the most significant electoral reforms in recent years. These innovations were expected to strengthen transparency by enabling real-time electronic accreditation and transmission of polling-unit results. However, the literature indicates that implementation challenges significantly undermined public confidence in these reforms during the 2023 general elections. According to the Yiaga Africa Election Observation Report (2023), substantial delays occurred in uploading presidential election results to the IReV portal despite assurances from INEC that electronic transmission would occur immediately after voting. Odimegwu (2023) similarly argues that the inability of the electronic transmission system to function as expected compelled electoral officials to rely heavily on manual collation, thereby reviving opportunities for human interference and result manipulation. These developments demonstrate that technological reforms, although potentially valuable, cannot independently eliminate electoral malpractice without corresponding institutional integrity and administrative accountability.

Electoral Violence as a Strategy for Electoral Control

The literature consistently identifies electoral violence as one of the most significant obstacles to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Although elections are intended to facilitate peaceful political competition and legitimate transfers of power, they have frequently been characterized by intimidation, coercion, physical attacks, and organized violence directed at influencing electoral outcomes. Rather than occurring as spontaneous outbreaks of disorder, electoral violence is increasingly understood as a calculated political strategy employed to shape voter behaviour, suppress political opposition, disrupt electoral administration, and secure electoral advantage (Höglund, 2009; Bekoe, 2012; International IDEA, 2023). This pattern reflects broader weaknesses in democratic institutions and electoral governance, where competition for political office often assumes existential proportions because of the enormous political and economic benefits attached to public office (LeVan & Ukata, 2024; International Crisis Group, 2023).

A recurring finding across the literature is that electoral violence extends throughout the electoral cycle rather than being confined to polling day. Scholars distinguish between pre-election, election-day, and post-election violence, each serving distinct political purposes. Pre-election violence commonly involves attacks on campaign rallies, intimidation of candidates, destruction of campaign materials, hate speech, and coercive mobilization intended to weaken political

opponents before voting commences. During elections, violence frequently manifests through ballot-box snatching, attacks on polling officials, disruption of voting, destruction of electoral materials, and intimidation of voters. Following elections, disputes over electoral outcomes often trigger protests, communal clashes, targeted attacks, and prolonged insecurity (Höglund & Jarstad, 2021; International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], 2022; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2023). This temporal pattern demonstrates that electoral violence functions as a continuous instrument of political competition rather than an isolated electoral event.

One of the dominant manifestations of electoral violence identified in the literature is voter intimidation. Intimidation encompasses both physical and psychological tactics designed to influence electoral behaviour by creating fear among voters, party agents, electoral officials, journalists, and election observers. These tactics include threats of violence, harassment, ethnic profiling, misinformation, coercion, and the strategic deployment of armed groups around polling units. Such practices undermine the constitutional right of citizens to participate freely in elections and frequently discourage electoral participation, particularly among women, older adults, and other vulnerable groups (Bardall, 2020; Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023; International IDEA, 2023). The widespread intimidation documented during Nigeria's 2023 general elections further reinforced concerns regarding declining electoral integrity and the inability of security institutions to guarantee a secure voting environment (European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2023; Roberts et al., 2025).

The literature further reveals that political thuggery has become institutionalized within Nigeria's electoral process. Political actors frequently recruit unemployed youths, criminal gangs, and local militant groups to intimidate opponents, disrupt polling activities, seize electoral materials, and create an atmosphere of insecurity capable of influencing electoral outcomes. These groups rarely operate independently but often function as proxy actors acting on behalf of political sponsors who remain insulated from direct involvement in violent acts. Consequently, electoral violence increasingly reflects organized political networks rather than isolated criminal behaviour (Onapajo, 2020; Matfess, 2023; LeVan & Ukata, 2024). The use of proxy actors enables political elites to benefit from electoral violence while maintaining plausible deniability regarding responsibility for its execution.

Physical assaults against electoral stakeholders also constitute a recurring feature of Nigerian elections. Existing evidence indicates that attacks are frequently directed towards voters, electoral officials, security personnel, journalists, and accredited election observers. Assaults often occur during attempts to disrupt polling activities, seize ballot boxes, prevent vote counting, or obstruct election monitoring. Beyond the immediate injuries sustained by victims, these attacks undermine public confidence in electoral administration and weaken perceptions of electoral fairness (IFES, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023; EU EOM, 2023). Reports from the 2023 general elections documented numerous incidents involving attacks on polling units, destruction of election materials, and assaults on electoral personnel, thereby compromising both voter participation and the credibility of election outcomes (CDD, 2023; EU EOM, 2023).

Election-related killings represent one of the most severe manifestations of electoral violence documented within the literature. Successive electoral cycles in Nigeria have witnessed fatalities involving political supporters, candidates, security personnel, electoral officials, journalists, and ordinary citizens. Such violence frequently occurs in highly competitive political environments where electoral victory provides access to state resources, political patronage, and economic opportunities. Consequently, political competition is transformed into a high-risk contest in which violence becomes a rational instrument for eliminating opposition and securing electoral advantage (Bekoe, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2023; ACLED, 2023). Beyond the immediate loss of lives, these killings generate widespread fear that discourages civic participation and weakens democratic legitimacy.

Political assassination represents an even more extreme expression of electoral violence. Although less frequent than intimidation or assault, targeted killings of political actors have profound implications for democratic governance because they eliminate political competitors while simultaneously intimidating prospective candidates and their supporters. The literature suggests that political assassinations often occur within contexts characterized by weak criminal justice systems, ineffective investigations, and limited prosecution of politically connected individuals. Such conditions reinforce a culture of impunity in which influential sponsors of violence remain protected while direct perpetrators are rarely brought to justice (Human Rights Watch, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2023; UNDP, 2023). The inability to hold organizers and financiers accountable contributes significantly to the cyclical recurrence of electoral violence in Nigeria.

Another major finding emerging from the literature concerns the relationship between electoral violence and institutional weakness. Electoral violence thrives where democratic institutions lack operational independence and where electoral offences are inadequately investigated or prosecuted. Weak law enforcement, selective policing, delayed judicial processes, and political interference collectively reduce the perceived costs associated with employing violence as an electoral strategy. Consequently, political actors increasingly calculate that the political benefits derived from violence outweigh the relatively limited risks of legal sanctions (International IDEA, 2023; LeVan & Ukata, 2024; Bratton, 2023). This institutional environment not only facilitates electoral violence but also normalizes its recurrence across successive electoral cycles.

The review also demonstrates that electoral violence disproportionately affects democratic participation. Fear generated by violent elections discourages voter turnout, particularly among women, young people, persons with disabilities, and elderly citizens who may perceive participation as exposing themselves to unnecessary personal risks. Reduced electoral participation ultimately undermines the representativeness and legitimacy of democratic outcomes because elected governments may emerge from elections in which substantial proportions of eligible voters are effectively disenfranchised through intimidation and insecurity (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020; Höglund & Jarstad, 2021; IFES, 2022). Electoral violence therefore undermines not only electoral integrity but also the broader principles of democratic inclusion and political equality.

Beyond its immediate electoral consequences, the literature identifies substantial long-term implications for governance and national development. Persistent electoral violence weakens citizens' confidence in democratic institutions, encourages political apathy, deepens ethnic and partisan divisions, discourages investment, and contributes to wider patterns of insecurity and criminality. In several instances, armed groups initially recruited for electoral purposes have subsequently evolved into organized criminal networks operating beyond electoral periods, thereby extending the consequences of political violence long after elections have concluded (Human Rights Watch, 2011; International Crisis Group, 2023; United Nations, 2022). These findings suggest that electoral violence should not be viewed solely as an electoral problem but also as a significant governance and national security challenge.

Overall, the reviewed literature demonstrates that electoral violence in Nigeria has evolved from sporadic acts of political disorder into a structured mechanism of electoral control. Through intimidation, political thuggery, assaults, targeted killings, and institutional complicity, violence continues to distort electoral competition and undermine democratic governance. Addressing this challenge requires strengthening electoral institutions, ensuring the operational independence of security agencies, prosecuting both perpetrators and sponsors of electoral violence, and promoting sustained civic education capable of reinforcing democratic norms and peaceful political participation (International IDEA, 2023; IFES, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

Vote Buying and the Commercialization of Electoral Competition

The literature identifies vote buying as one of the fastest-growing forms of electoral malpractice in Nigeria, reflecting the increasing commercialization of democratic participation. Unlike electoral violence, which relies primarily on coercion, vote buying seeks to influence electoral behaviour through financial inducements and material incentives. Existing studies demonstrate that vote buying has evolved from isolated acts of inducement into an organised electoral strategy employed before, during, and after elections to influence voter behaviour, weaken electoral integrity, and distort democratic accountability (Vicente & Wantchekon, 2009; Awofeso & Irabor, 2020; International IDEA, 2023). Consequently, elections increasingly become contests determined not only by political programmes and popular support but also by the financial capacity of political actors to mobilize and purchase electoral support.

The reviewed literature suggests that vote buying thrives because of the interaction between widespread poverty, economic inequality, and intense political competition and where large segments of the population experience unemployment, food insecurity, and economic hardship, relatively modest financial incentives may significantly influence electoral choices. This relationship does not necessarily imply that voters willingly exchange their democratic rights for monetary rewards; rather, economic vulnerability frequently reduces the capacity of citizens to resist inducements offered during elections (Bratton, 2008; Nichter, 2008; Adetula, 2015). Consequently, vote buying should be understood not merely as an ethical failure on the part of voters but also as a reflection of broader structural socioeconomic challenges confronting democratic societies.

Another prominent finding concerns the changing nature of vote-buying strategies in Nigeria. Earlier electoral cycles were characterized primarily by the distribution of cash and gift items during political campaigns. However, recent elections have witnessed increasingly sophisticated methods involving direct cash transfers, electronic payments, food distribution, household commodities, and conditional financial incentives delivered immediately before or during voting. Reports from the 2023 general elections documented widespread allegations of "see-and-buy" practices in which voters were reportedly required to display evidence of their ballot choices before receiving payment, thereby undermining the secrecy of the ballot and compromising electoral freedom (Centre for Democracy and Development [CDD], 2023; European Union Election Observation Mission [EU EOM], 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). These developments illustrate how political actors continue to adapt vote-buying techniques in response to evolving electoral regulations and technological reforms.

The literature further reveals that vote buying extends beyond ordinary voters to encompass political delegates, party officials, community leaders, and influential political intermediaries. Delegate buying during party primaries has emerged as a particularly significant concern because it enables wealthy aspirants to secure party nominations irrespective of competence, ideological commitment, or public support. Such practices weaken internal party democracy and frequently determine electoral outcomes long before general elections are conducted (Adetula, 2015; Omotola, 2010; Ovwasa, 2013). Consequently, electoral corruption often begins within political parties themselves, where nomination processes become commercial transactions rather than competitive democratic exercises.

Closely associated with vote buying is the broader system of political patronage and clientelism that characterizes electoral politics in many developing democracies? Rather than being isolated electoral offences, financial inducements frequently operate within long-standing patron-client relationships through which politicians distribute material benefits in exchange for political loyalty and electoral support. These networks are sustained by political godfathers, party financiers, business elites, and influential community actors who regard electoral investments as opportunities for future political influence and economic returns (Joseph, 1987; Agbu, 2016; Ogedi, 2024). Within this political economy, elections increasingly become investments from which sponsors expect substantial returns through access to public resources, government contracts, and political appointments.

An important theme emerging from the literature is the relationship between vote buying and electoral credibility. Financial inducements undermine the principle of political equality by granting disproportionate electoral advantages to candidates possessing greater financial resources rather than superior leadership qualities or policy programmes. Consequently, electoral competition shifts from debates over governance, development, and public policy towards contests determined largely by financial expenditure. This weakens democratic accountability because elected officials may subsequently prioritize recovering campaign expenditures and rewarding political financiers over responding to citizens' developmental needs (Nichter, 2008; International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], 2022; International IDEA, 2023). The

commercialization of elections therefore erodes the representative character of democratic governance.

The literature also demonstrates that vote buying frequently coexists with other forms of electoral malpractice, including voter intimidation, electoral violence, ballot manipulation, and abuse of incumbency. Political actors rarely rely on a single strategy; instead, multiple forms of electoral manipulation are often deployed simultaneously to maximize electoral success. Financial inducements may therefore complement intimidation where voters are simultaneously offered rewards for compliance and threatened with sanctions for political resistance. This interaction reinforces broader patterns of electoral manipulation and further weakens public confidence in democratic institutions (Höglund & Jarstad, 2021; CDD, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023).

Another significant finding concerns the limitations of legal and institutional responses to vote buying. Although Nigeria's Electoral Act criminalizes vote buying and related electoral offences, enforcement remains inconsistent. Arrests during elections rarely result in successful prosecution, while influential political actors often evade legal accountability. Weak institutional capacity, inadequate election monitoring, selective law enforcement, and political interference collectively reduce the deterrent effect of existing electoral laws (INEC, 2022; EU EOM, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). The persistence of impunity reinforces perceptions that vote buying represents a low-risk strategy capable of delivering substantial political rewards.

Overall, the reviewed literature indicates that vote buying has become deeply embedded within Nigeria's electoral process and now constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which democratic competition is commercialized. Rather than reflecting isolated acts of electoral corruption, it represents a structural manifestation of broader governance challenges, including poverty, patronage politics, weak institutions, and inadequate electoral accountability. Addressing this challenge therefore requires more than legal prohibition. Sustainable reforms must strengthen electoral law enforcement, reduce socioeconomic vulnerabilities that facilitate voter inducement, enhance civic education, improve campaign finance regulation, and promote transparent political party practices capable of restoring electoral integrity and strengthening democratic governance (International IDEA, 2023; IFES, 2022; UNDP, 2023).

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that electoral rigging, electoral violence, and vote buying remain major impediments to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The evidence reviewed indicates that these forms of electoral malpractice undermine electoral integrity, distort the will of the electorate, weaken public confidence in democratic institutions, and compromise political accountability. Their persistence reflects broader institutional weaknesses, inadequate enforcement of electoral laws, and a political culture in which electoral victory is often pursued at all costs. Strengthening Nigeria's democracy therefore requires credible, transparent, and inclusive electoral processes capable of guaranteeing that political power is determined by the freely expressed choices of citizens rather than by manipulation, coercion, or financial inducement.

Recommendations

In view of the findings of this review, strengthening electoral integrity in Nigeria requires comprehensive reforms that address both the institutional and structural drivers of electoral malpractice. The following recommendations are therefore proposed:

- Strengthen the enforcement of electoral laws by ensuring that all electoral offences are investigated and prosecuted without political interference.
- Enhance the operational independence and institutional capacity of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to improve election administration, monitoring, and accountability.
- Establish specialized electoral offences tribunals to facilitate the timely prosecution of individuals involved in electoral malpractice.
- Improve transparency in political party financing and campaign expenditure through stricter regulatory oversight and compliance mechanisms.
- Expand voter and civic education programmes to promote democratic values, discourage vote buying, and encourage active citizen participation.
- Address the socioeconomic conditions, particularly poverty and unemployment that increase voters' vulnerability to financial inducement during elections.
- Strengthen collaboration among government institutions, civil society organizations, the media, security agencies, and other electoral stakeholders to prevent, monitor, and expose electoral malpractice while promoting peaceful, credible, and issue-based electoral competition.

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