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THE IMPACT OF VOTE BUYING ON CANDIDATE CREDIBILITY: INSIGHTS FROM BAYELSA STATE'S 2023 ELECTIONS

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Abstract: The research focused on vote buying in Nigeria and how it affected the election of credible candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State. Vote buying involves offering money to voters to influence them to vote for a specific candidate, thereby affecting the election outcome. This practice has become a widespread phenomenon, turning into a large-scale business as political parties and candidates compete to secure election victory at all cost. This trend poses a challenge in electing credible candidates who lack the financial resources to engage in vote buying. The study utilized a survey research design, thus the primary data was obtained through questionnaires and oral interviews. A total of 5000 questionnaires were distributed to voters and stakeholders in selected communities from the eight local governments areas in Bayelsa State and 3200 were retrieved from the respondents. The data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed using the arithmetic mean. The findings identified the high level of poverty among the voting population and the failure of security agents to apprehend vote buyers and sellers as primary factors driving vote buying in Bayelsa State. The study recommended various measures, including implementing policies to reduce poverty and enacting laws to restrict the amount of physical cash individuals can bring to polling units during elections.

Keywords: Democracy, Election, Vote Buying, Credible Candidates.

Introduction

Ensuring a free, fair and transparent election process is crucial for upholding the principles of democracy. Elections serve as the mechanism through which voters select their preferred candidates for different political positions within a democratic system. As expressed by Thomas Rye, "democratic government is 'government by the consent of the governed' and elections give practical meaning to this notion of 'consent' by allowing people to choose among competing candidates and parties and to decide who will occupy public office" (The Guardian, 2022). This emphasizes the significance of the credibility and transparency of the electoral process in sustaining a democratic government.

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Since the return of civil rule in 1999, Nigeria's electoral process has been bedeviled with the problem of vote buying. Vote buying involves offering financial or material incentives to potential voters to influence them in favour of specific candidates. Political parties and politicians who are the main actors of vote buying in Nigeria use cash to sway voters to cast their ballots in order to improve the chances of their preferred candidate winning the election.

Vote buying is now prevalent in all elections in Nigeria, with political parties competing with each other by offering substantial sums of money to voters to influence election results. The proclivity by politicians to buy vote at all cost has led to a significant expansion of the vote-buying market, making it lucrative for voters who are willing to sell their on Election Day. It is now widely acknowledged in Nigeria that many voters who turn out on Election Day are primarily motivated by the monetary incentive they will receive for casting their votes.

The blatant display of money to influence voters during elections led many political and social analysts to characterize Nigeria's democracy as a "cash and carry democracy," (Ogbomah & Okoko, 2024). Vote buying is now a common feature of Nigeria's electoral process. It is the new method adopted by political parties and politicians to rig elections rather than the orthodox ways of snatching and stuffing ballot boxes. This disturbing trend has had a damaging impact on Nigeria's democracy and the integrity of its electoral process and the election results. The implication is that politicians who have the money easily find their way into elective position. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate the impact of vote buying on the election of credible candidates in Bayelsa State's electoral process.

Statement of the Problem

The issue of vote buying has become widespread in Nigeria's political landscape since democracy 1999 when the military government handed power to democratically elected government. Vote buying is posing serious challenges to conducting free, fair, and transparent elections in Nigeria. Despite the Electoral Act prohibiting the buying and selling of votes, the practice has become deeply entrenched, undermining the integrity of the electoral process in Nigeria. The inability of security agents to arrest and prosecute both buyers and sellers of votes has further emboldened politicians to continue with this illegal activity.

The Naira redesign policy of 2023, initiated by the Central Bank of Nigeria, was aimed at addressing issues such as vote buying in the 2023 general elections and related crimes like money laundering in the country. However, despite the policy resulting in a shortage of cash in the country, politicians still found ways to buy votes through electronic transfers of money to voters' accounts. For example, during the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State, both the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressives Congress (APC) were involved in vote buying through electronic money transfers at polling units (Ogbomah & Okoko, 2024). Furthermore, in some local governments, voters were influenced with items such as wrappers and foodstuffs before the elections.

The prevalence of vote buying raises concerns about the credibility of Nigeria's electoral process and candidates elected into various political offices. There is no doubt that vote buying influences the outcome of election results in Nigeria which also denies credible candidates who could not buy vote from winning election.

Thus, the study seeks to investigate how vote buying hindered the chances of credible candidates from winning the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions.

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- (i) What are the factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa State?
- (ii) How did vote buying affect the chances of electing credible candidates from winning the 2023 National and State Assembly Election?
- (iii) How can vote buying be curtailed in Bayelsa State elections?

Objectives of the Study

The study aimed at achieving the following objectives:

- (i) identify the factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa State.
- (ii) examine how vote buying affected the chances of electing credible candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa Central Senatorial District.
- (iii) examine how vote buying can be curtailed in Bayelsa State elections.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW/THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Democracy

The origin of democracy can be traced back to ancient Greece, precisely to the city-state of Athens. According to Thucydides, an ancient historian, democracy in Athens grew in the 5th century BCE, following several political reforms by statesmen such as Cleisthenes and Pericles (Hornblower, 2014). These reforms were aimed at giving more political power to the ordinary citizens by allowing them to actively participate in decision-making processes and governance.

The Athenian democracy was characterized by direct participation of citizens in decision-making process through assemblies and trials, as well as the selection of government officials through lotteries (Ober, 2008). This early form of democracy laid the foundation for the evolution of democratic principles and institutions that continue to shape contemporary political systems all over the world.

Accordingly, the word democracy is made of two Greek words *demos* 'people' and *kratos* 'rule'. This means democracy represent a form of government in which the political power of a state is entrusted on the people. In other words, the people have the ultimate say concerning who govern the then and how they should be governed. Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address of 1863 defined democracy as a government of the people, by the people and for the people. This classical definition of democracy has been accepted as the pivot for any democratic system of government universally

Heywood, (2013) averred that democracy is a form of government in which power is vested in the hands of the people, either directly or through elected representatives. Heywood added that one of the key features of a democratic system is the concept of majority rule, with a focus on protecting the rights of minority groups and ensuring the participation of all citizens in decision-making processes. He stated further that democracy can take various forms, such as direct democracy, representative democracy, and deliberative democracy, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Direct democracy allows citizens to participate directly in decision-making through processes like referendums and initiatives, while representative democracy involves the election of officials to represent the interests of the people. Deliberative democracy, on the other hand, stresses the importance of informed and inclusive discussion in decision-making processes. Robert Dahl one of the foremost political scientist defines democracy as a political system that embodies the principles of "contest for power, inclusiveness, and the citizens' right to express their preferences about the rules that govern them" (Dahl, 1971). Election thus provides the platform through which candidates contest for various political offices in any

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democratic system. Election also gives the citizens the right to express their preferences by choosing those who will govern them periodically.

Democracy from the foregoing is a form of government that allows the masses to participate in the decision making process.

Election

Election plays a significant role in democratic societies as it allows citizens to choose their representatives and participate in decision-making processes (Follesdal, 2012). Additionally, election can impact the distribution of power within a country and have far-reaching consequences for its citizens (Hague & Harrop, 2013). When citizens elect credible leaders, there is a tendency for good policies that will positively impact the lives of the citizens to be implemented. Conversely, when credible leaders are not elected, the policies that emanate from such leaders may have a negative impact on the lives of the people. Thus, the conduct of a credible election largely determines the quality of leaders to be elected by the citizens.

Smith and Johnson (2010), opined that election is a fundamental aspect of democratic societies, which allows citizens to participate in the governance of their country. In essence, election serve as a mechanism for the peaceful transfer of political power and a means for holding public officials accountable to the populace for the actions and inactions.

Mughal, (2019) averred that election is "a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office". In a similar vein, Miller (2018) stated that in a democratic context, elections serve as a mechanism for the expression of popular will and the peaceful transfer of power. This implies that during election, the masses exercise their democratic power vested on them by the constitution in ensuring peaceful transfer of political power from one elected government to another without any chaos.

Elections can take various forms, including presidential elections, parliamentary elections, and local elections, each with its own set of rules and procedures (Smith, 2020).

The foregoing shows that elections play a fundamental role in determining the dynamics of governance and political representation, serving as a basis of democratic societies. Elections are a fundamental feature of democratic societies which allows citizens to participate in the selection of their leaders and representatives into public office. It is election that gives sovereignty to the people to decide who govern them.

Vote Buying

Vote-buying is a fundamental problem facing Nigeria's democracy in recent times. Despite the criminalization of vote-buying by the Nigerian Electoral Act of 2022, vote-buying has become institutionalized and accepted by both politicians and voters. The popular acceptance by voters to sell their votes to the highest bidder and the willingness of politicians to buy vote at all cost has further expanded the vote-buying market to federal, state and local government elections in Nigeria.

The National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) defined vote-buying as the act of offering money, goods or other favours in exchange for the vote of a voter in an election. NBS described vote buying as another form of corruption that is widespread in Nigeria (Uthman, 2024).

According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), "vote buying undermines the integrity of the electoral process and denies citizens their right to freely choose their leaders" (IFES, n.d.). When voters collect money to vote against their conscience, it denies them the right to choose their leaders into various public offices.

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Smith (2010) opined that vote-buying is the practice of exchanging money, goods, or services for votes in an election. He added that vote-buying weakens the democratic process by distorting the expression of the people's will.

Chhibber and Verma (2017) noted that vote-buying not only distorts the principle of democratic representation, but it also perpetuates a cycle of corruption and undermines the legitimacy of elected officials. Similarly, Brown (2020) averred that the prevalence of vote-buying poses a serious threat to the integrity of democratic elections. Vote buying thus is a practice of offering or giving money, gifts, or other incentives to voters in exchange for their vote. Vote-buying usually occurs before or during election when prospective voters cast their ballot on Election Day. Vote-buying deprives the public of the freedom to elect candidate of their choice and also silences the voice of the underprivileged in the electoral process. Even worse, the prevalence of vote buying has created obstacles for deserving candidates to participate and succeed in elections in Bayelsa State and Nigeria as a whole. This is primarily due to voters' inclination to exchange their votes for monetary gain rather than voting based on their beliefs. The readiness of voters to trade their votes to the highest bidder has resulted in the normalization of vote buying in Bayelsa State and Nigeria general.

Some Contributing Factors to Vote Buying in Nigeria and Bayelsa State.

Ogbomah and Okoko (2023) highlighted several factors contribute to vote buying in Bayelsa State. Some of the factors are:

- (i) **Poverty:** The prevalence of poverty in Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large is a contributing factor to the persistence of vote buying. Poverty, characterized by the lack of basic life necessities, has been exacerbated by the country's rising inflation, compelling many Nigerians to sell their votes during elections. The high level of poverty in Nigeria and Bayelsa State has led voters to prioritize selling their votes over voting their preferred candidates, a fact that politicians are keenly aware of.
- (ii) **Ignorance:** Ignorance plays a significant role in voters selling their votes. Many voters are unaware of the repercussions of this action, such as the loss of their ability to hold leaders accountable for poor performance. When electoral victory is bought rather than earned, it often results in the misappropriation of state resources for personal gain, contributing to the pervasive issue of bad governance in the country.
- (iii) The failure of security agents to apprehend and prosecute vote trading is another factor perpetuating vote buying in Bayelsa State. The disheartening reality is that vote buying often occurs under the watchful eyes of seemingly helpless security agents, who at times even partake in the illicit activity by accepting bribes. This complicity enables politicians to openly purchase votes, further entrenching the practice.
- (iv) The intense desperation of politicians to secure electoral victory at any cost is yet another driving force behind vote buying in Bayelsa State. With traditional methods of electoral fraud such as ballot box stuffing becoming increasingly difficult due to the introduction of the Bimodal Voters Accreditation System (BVAS) machine by INEC, vote buying has emerged as the preferred alternative for securing electoral success. Politicians and their allies allocate substantial funds from state coffers to entice voters and corrupt security agents during elections.
- (v) **Poor Voters Education:** The lack of comprehensive voter education regarding the illegality and consequences of selling votes perpetuates this issue. Many voters view vote selling as a norm without realizing that it constitutes a criminal offense punishable by law. Comprehensive voter education is essential to addressing this misperception and combating the practice of vote buying in Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large.

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Theoretical Framework

The study utilized the General Incentive Model developed by Clark and Wilson (1961). According to Clark and Wilson, if members of an organization are aware of the incentives offered by the organization, there will be greater cooperation between the organization and its employees. They suggest that the level of cooperation an organization receives from its members is dependent on the incentives provided to the workers. Clark and Wilson emphasize that organizations striving for optimal performance must offer both tangible and intangible incentives to their employees to maximize performance (Oduntan, *et. al.*, 2023).

Applying Clark and Wilson's incentive model from a corporate organization to Nigeria's political system, the incentives provided by candidates and their parties during elections influence voters' behaviour to sell their votes. When voters are aware of the benefits associated with voting for a candidate they willingly cast their votes to receive the benefit. Due to the monetary benefits associated with voting for a particular candidate, poor and less educated voters are more inclined to sell their votes, regardless of the amount offered.

The significance of the theory to the study lies in the fact that voters, when aware of the incentives for voting for a particular candidate or party, cast their votes willingly to reap the benefits. It is the incentives tied to voting for a candidate that have contributed to the prevalence of vote buying in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general.

Method of the Study

The survey research design approach was used in this study, employing questionnaires and oral interviews to collect primary data from registered votes and stakeholders that constitute the population of the study. To ensure that only voters and stakeholders who understand the aim of the study were included in the sample, the purposive sampling technique was adopted.

The study focused on the 1,250,102 registered voters in the eight local government areas in Bayelsa State. Out of 5,000 questionnaires distributed to voters and stakeholders, 3,200 were retrieved. Additionally, oral interviews were conducted with voters and stakeholders in the eight local governments. The information obtained from the interviews was used to substantiate the findings from the data collected from the questionnaires. The data obtained from the questionnaires was analyzed using the arithmetic mean.

Findings and Discussion

Table 1: The factors behind vote buying in Bayelsa?

S/N	Items statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD(1)	Total	\bar{x}	Decision
1	High rate of poverty among voters.	1571	1301	171	157	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(6,284)	(3,903)	(342)	(157)	10,686	3.3	Agreed
2	The desperation by politicians to win election.	1389	1467	199	145	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(5,556)	(4,401)	(398)	(145)	10,500	3.2	Agreed
3	Lack of proper voters' education.	1481	1301	261	157	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(5,924)	(3,903)	(522)	(157)	10,506	3.2	Agreed
4	Failure by security agents to arrest vote-buyers and sellers	1588	1339	143	131	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(6,352)	(4,017)	(286)	(131)	10,786	3.3	Agreed
	Arithmetic Weighted Mean						3.2	
	Criterion Mean						2.50	

Source: Authors field data, 2023.

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The data presented in Table 1 indicates that the arithmetic weighted mean of 3.2 is greater (>) than the criterion mean of (2.50). The findings shows that poverty is a significant factor contributing to vote buying in Bayelsa State elections. Additionally, lack of adequate voter's education and the failure of security agents at polling units to apprehend and prosecute those involved in vote buying are also identified as key reasons behind the prevalence of this issue in Bayelsa State elections.

The research findings align with numerous interviews conducted on the factors contributing to vote buying in Bayelsa State elections. For instance, Mr. Fineboy an indigene of Agudama-Epie community in Yenagoa local government, highlighted the failure of security agents to apprehend vote buyers as a key factor driving vote-buying. He stressed that if security agents could arrest those who buy votes during elections, the practice of vote buying would cease. Additionally, a Compound Chief also in Agudama-Epie community, Yenagoa Local Government, who chose to remain anonymous, identified poverty and lack of voter education as reasons for the increasing prevalence of vote buying. He emphasized the need for comprehensive voter education to combat the menace of vote buying in future elections.

Emmanuel, a 22-year-old voter from Unit 22 in Agudama-Epie, Yenagoa Local Government, reported that he received a transfer of N3,000 to his bank account after voting in the National and State Assembly election. He mentioned that he used the N3,000 to buy Glo Data. Similarly, Deborah, a student at a higher institution in Bayelsa State residing in Sagbama, stated that the money she received after voting was used for her transportation back to school.

In Ogbia Local Government, almost all the voters interviewed confirmed that they received money after voting for either the People Democratic Party (PDP) or the All Progressive Congress (APC), the dominant political parties in the state. They stated that voters were paid between N10, 000 to N20, 000. The voters mentioned that they used the money to meet their immediate needs. Mr. Goodness, a non-indigene residing in Elebele Community in Ogbia Local Government, blamed security agents and politicians for the widespread practice of vote buying. He stated that even with the presence of security personnel, politicians are giving money to voters to vote for their candidates. He added that the high level of poverty is also a contributing factor to vote buying, as most voters who accept money do so because they are poor.

Instances of vote buying were also recorded in Nembe, Sagbama, Ekeremor, Southern Ijaw, and Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government. Most of the voters interviewed affirmed receiving money after voting. A voter in Keremor town who identified himself as Lucky stated that the election is the only time for the masses to receive money from politicians because after election, voters will not see politicians again, thereby justifying the selling of their votes.

Additionally, a PDP stakeholder in Sagbama Local Government who chose to remain anonymous noted that even though Sagbama town is a stronghold of the PDP, voters were still given money to ensure that the local government delivers all the candidates of the People Democratic Party in the 2023 National and State Assembly. He mentioned that money was also given to party stakeholders in all eight Local Governments in the state to ensure the total victory of the party. Odi town in Kolokuma/Opokuma Local Government also witnessed widespread vote-buying. Mr. Friday who voted in the National and State Assembly election stated that the APC and PDP paid voters to vote for their candidates in Odi town. Mr. Friday added that there was a competition between the APC and PDP stakeholders in Odi which gave voters the opportunity to vote for the highest bidder

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candidate. Mr. Friday cited poverty and the failure of security personnel to arrest both buyers and sellers of votes as the primary reasons for this illegal act.

The results of the survey and the interviews indicate that poverty is the primary reason behind the prevalence of vote buying in Bayelsa State elections. Many of the voters interviewed mentioned that they accepted money in order to address their immediate needs. To these individuals, the money received from voting to meet their basic needs holds more significance than voting for their preferred candidates. This helps to explain the increase in vote buying in Bayelsa State.

Most voters tend to prefer receiving N5,000 or N10,000 offered to them by politicians to address their immediate needs rather than waiting for promises from candidates. For these financially disadvantaged voters, it is preferable to accept N5,000 or N10,000 rather than wait for promises of construction roads, health centers, schools, etc. which they may not witness if the politicians ultimately win the election.

Also, the determination of politicians to secure victory in elections at any expense, coupled with the failure of law enforcement to arrest both those buying and selling votes, contributes significantly to the prevalence of vote-buying in Bayelsa State elections.

Table 2 The negative effects of vote buying in the 2023 National and State Assembly Elections?

S/N	Item statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD(1)	Total	\bar{x}	Decision
1	Vote buying influences voters from voting their preferred candidates	1562	1304	174	160	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(6,248)	(3,912)	(348)	(160)	10,668	3.3	Agreed
2	Vote buying influences the outcome of election results.	1396	1464	193	147	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(5,584)	(4,392)	(386)	(147)	10,509	3.2	Agreed
3	Vote buying hinders the chances of electing credible candidates.	1519	1344	182	155	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(6,076)	(4,032)	(364)	(155)	10,627	3.3	Agreed
4	Vote-buying corrupt the electoral process.	1426	1467	162	145	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(5,704)	(4,401)	(324)	(145)	10,574	3.3	Agreed
	Arithmetic Weighted Mean						3.3	
	Criterion Mean						2.50	

Source: Authors field data, 2023

The data in Table 2 indicates that the arithmetic weighted mean of 3.3 is greater than the criterion mean of 2.50. Thus, the findings suggest that vote-buying influences voters to cast their votes for candidates they may not have preferred otherwise. The results also indicate that vote-buying significantly impacts the outcome of election results. Furthermore, the findings reveal that vote buying undermines the electoral process and hinders the chances of credible candidates from winning elections in Bayelsa State.

The results from the questionnaire is in tandem with several interviews conducted with voters and stakeholders on the negative impact of vote-buying on the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State. For instance, Mr. Samson from Amassoma town in Southern Ijaw Local Government mentioned that many voters who initially wanted to vote for their preferred candidate in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections changed their minds when money was given to them, and they ended up voting for a different candidate due to monetary inducements. Similarly, Francis, a student of the Niger Delta University in Amassoma, also mentioned

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that both the APC and the PDP were enticing voters with money in the polling unit where he voted. He stated that some of his friends who went to vote for their preferred candidates in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections changed their minds because of the money offered to them and voted for a different candidate. Additionally, a chief in Agudama-Epie community in Yenagoa Local Government, who chose to remain anonymous, mentioned that vote-buying has destroyed the integrity of Nigeria’s elections. He stated that with the current trend of vote-buying, only candidates who have the money to buy votes can win elections in Bayelsa State. He added that vote-buying corrupts the electoral system, as election results no longer reflect the will of the people but the will of those who buy votes at all costs.

Mr. Godspower, a businessman in Sagbama town in Sagbama Local Government, also stated that election results no longer reflect the will of voters in Bayelsa State but the will of politicians who induce voters with money. He mentioned that in the wards and polling units where there are APC stakeholders in Sagbama town, vote-buying is very intense, and voters make a huge amount of money during elections. He mentioned that the party that pays the highest amount ends up winning the polling units, as voters are only interested in selling their votes.

In a similar vein, Mr. Fred from Elebele community in Ogbia Local Government mentioned that vote-buying has destroyed elections in Bayelsa State. He stated that the outcome of the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in most Local Governments in Bayelsa depends on how much politicians paid to buy votes.

The findings from the questionnaire and numerous interviews conducted with voters and stakeholders clearly indicate that vote-buying influences voters to vote for candidates they may not have preferred otherwise. Vote buying also influences the outcome of election results, corrupts the electoral process, thereby hindering the chances of credible candidates from winning the elections.

When politicians openly display money for voters to see, some voters are swayed to accept the money and vote against their conscience. This was the case in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State, as the two major political parties in the state, the People Democratic Party (PDP) and the All Progressive Congress (APC), induced voters with money to influence the outcome of the election results. These actions from these political parties and their cohorts undoubtedly affected the chances of candidates from other political parties from winning the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State.

Table 3 How vote buying be curtailed in Bayelsa State elections?

S/N	Item statement	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD(1)	Total	\bar{x}	Decision
1	Adequate voter’s education before election.	1589	1312	153	146	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(6,356)	(3,936)	(306)	(146)	10,744	3.3	Agreed
2	Prosecution of vote sellers and buyers.	1460	1490	128	122	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(5,840)	(4,470)	(256)	(122)	10,688	3.2	Agreed
3	Ban of huge physical cash in polling units	1636	1359	106	99	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(6,544)	(4,077)	(212)	(99)	10,932	3.4	Agreed
4	Reduction of poverty level in the country.	1587	1339	143	132	3,200		
	Weight of Responses	(6,348)	(4,017)	(286)	(132)	10,783	3.3	Agreed
	Arithmetic Weighted Mean						3.3	
	Criterion Mean						2.50	

Source: Authors field data, 2023

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The data presented in Table 3 shows that the arithmetic weighted mean of 3.3 is greater than the criterion mean of 2.50. This suggests that adequate voter education and prosecuting individuals involved in the buying and selling of votes at polling units could effectively reduce vote buying in Bayelsa State elections. Additionally, it is evident that prohibiting politicians and voters from bringing large amounts of physical cash in polling units and addressing poverty in the country could reduce vote buying in Bayelsa State elections.

These findings are consistent with numerous interviews conducted with voters and stakeholders in Bayelsa State regarding measures to combat vote buying. For instance, a community chief in Agudama-Epie, Yenagoa Local Government, who preferred to remain anonymous, emphasized the need for sincere efforts by security agents to ensure free and fair elections at polling units. He highlighted the prevalence of voters being influenced with money in the presence of security agents, who are responsible for apprehending both buyers and sellers of votes. He also stressed the importance of educating voters about the consequences of selling their votes, suggesting that educated voters would be less likely to engage in such practices.

Similarly, Francis, a student at the Niger Delta University in Amassoma, emphasized the government's role in alleviating poverty to address vote buying. He expressed that an improved economy and better living conditions would reduce the incentive for individuals to accept money in exchange for their votes. He further pointed out that as long as poverty and unemployment persist, vote buying will continue, implying that the government needs to address these issues to combat vote buying effectively. He also criticized Nigerian politicians for perpetuating poverty to leverage it for electoral gains.

Furthermore, Mr. Godspower, a businessman in Sagbama town, Sagbama Local Government, emphasized the importance of arresting and prosecuting vote buyers and sellers, as well as educating voters about the negative consequences of selling their votes. He emphasized the pivotal role of security agents in curbing vote buying at polling units and suggested that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should prohibit politicians from bringing physical cash to polling units.

The results from the questionnaire and interviews with various individuals on ways to reduce vote buying in Bayelsa State elections indicate that adequate voter education, prohibition of large amounts of physical cash at polling stations, and alleviation of poverty in the country can reduce vote buying. Many of those interviewed recommended prohibiting politicians from bringing large amounts of physical cash to polling units during elections.

Voters and stakeholders interviewed also suggested aggressive voter education as a way of addressing the menace of vote buying during election. They emphasized the importance of informing voters about the repercussions of selling their votes during elections.

Conclusion

Vote buying has emerged as a significant menace to Nigeria's democracy since the return of democratic rule in 1999. It's gradually becoming ingrained, benefitting both the buyers and the sellers of votes. This disturbing trend has led some political analysts to label Nigeria's democracy as a system where the candidate who bids the highest for votes ends up winning the election. The issue has reared its head in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State. Both the ruling People Democratic Party (PDP) and the major opposition party, the All Progressive Congress (APC), openly engaged in vote buying during these elections. In some polling units, cash was directly given to voters, while in others, money was transferred to voters' bank accounts via mobile phones due to a shortage of physical cash caused by the CBN naira redesign policy. The widespread occurrence

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of vote buying in the 2023 National and State Assembly elections in Bayelsa State can be attributed to the high levels of poverty, lack of proper voter's education among the voting population and the failure of security agents to apprehend vote buyers and sellers during election. This open display of vote buying undoubtedly affected the prospects of credible candidates winning the elections in Bayelsa State, as they were unable to engage in buying votes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

- (i) **Poverty Reduction:** The study identifies poverty as a major factor contributing to widespread vote buying in Bayelsa State. The Federal Government should implement policies and programmes to address the high level of unemployment and poverty in the country. This will help reduce the prevalence of vote buying in Bayelsa State and Nigeria as a whole.
- (ii) **Voter Education:** The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Civil Society Organizations, Religious Organizations, etc. should educate voters about the negative implications of selling their votes during elections. This will help to reduce vote buying in future elections in Bayelsa State and Nigeria in general.
- (iii) **Prosecution of Vote Buyers and Sellers:** Security agents in the polling units should be sincere and live up to their responsibilities by apprehending and prosecuting all individuals involved in buying and selling votes. This will act as a deterrent to politicians and voters involved in vote buying and selling.
- (iv) **Legislation Against Bringing Physical Cash to Polling Unit:** As a follow-up to the electoral laws which prohibit buying and selling of votes, the National Assembly should make a law to ban bringing of physical cash above N10,000 to polling units during elections. Any politicians or voter found with physical cash above N10,000 at the polling unit should be arrested and prosecuted in accordance with the law.

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