

Vote Buying and Electoral Credibility in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Rivers State, Nigeria: A Study of Emohua Local Government Area

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Annotation: This study critically examined the negative impact of vote buying on electoral credibility, during the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State, Nigeria. Using Emohua local government area as a case study, this study made an attempt at identifying the factors that were responsible for the upsurge in the activities of vote buying in the periods under study, as well as their attendant consequences. The 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State, Nigeria, were characterised by massive irregularities in the form of reckless acts of voter-inducement, as well as other aspects of rampant electoral malpractices, hence, the quest for this study. This study was guided by three research questions and three objectives. The study was anchored on the theory of Economic Determinism by Karl Marx. The study used the survey design method. Data for this study were generated through the primary and secondary sources. While the primary source involved the use of questionnaires, the secondary source involved the use of textbooks, journals and internet materials. At the end of the study, it was revealed that high rate of poverty, the systemic tolerance and adoption of money politics and the lack of stringent laws and penalties against vote buying constituted the factors that gave rise to the activities of vote buying, thus, compromising the integrity and credibility of the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State, Nigeria. Consequently, the situation gave rise to series of post-election litigations and widespread criticisms of the entire electoral process. The study therefore recommended among other things, the application of stringent laws and penalties against the perpetrators of vote buying, so as to achieve an appreciable degree of credibility in future elections.

Keywords: Election, Integrity, Politics, Political Parties, Corruption.

Introduction

In any democratic society where the enthronement of good governance constitutes one of the cardinal objectives for its existence, a good, sound and uncompromised electoral system is unavoidably pivotal. Hence, a fair, just and corrupt-free electoral process will always ensure the occupation of various elective political positions by individuals who have the consent of the majority of the electorate. Ultimately, that would go a long way in ensuring that occupiers of political positions comprise individuals in whom the masses trust to lead or represent them in the path of good governance. When elections into political positions do not reflect the decision of

majority of voters, such situations would always amount to a suppression of the will of the majority of the electorate and a deliberate imposition of unpopular candidates on the people. Hence, the emergence of unpopular candidates in any electoral contest is usually an indication of a compromised electoral process. Consequently, the realisation of good governance, defined in terms of quality representation and delivery of valuable social services to the people might be frustrated (Akinwale, 2019 & Bagudu, 2021).

According to Dode (2010), vote-buying constitutes an infamous strategy, employed by politicians to compromise the electoral processes, thereby frustrating the actualisation of credibility of outcome of elections. Thus, Dode (2010), informs that vote-buying usually assumes the form of using money or other material benefits to induce prospective voters to vote against their conscience and initial convictions during elections. In their separate opinion, Daramola (2018) reveals that in the Nigerian situation, vote-buying goes beyond the mere act of using money to buy the conscience and choices of prospective voters. According to Daramola (2018), in the Nigerian context, the dubious act of bribing electoral officers to alter the genuine will of the majority of the electorate through result falsifications, vote manipulations and connivance with thugs to intimidate voters during elections is more pronounced. To this end, Efebeh (2015), stresses that the indiscriminate act of voter inducement and other forms of electoral fraud have over time, characterised the conduct of general elections in Nigeria since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. Thus, according to Efebeh (2015), such has serially sabotaged the realisation of credible elections in Nigeria.

The conduct of the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers state, as well as its aftermath was characterised by obvious irregularities and post-election dissatisfactions and protests. Hence, the unsatisfactory characterisation of the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers state might be a demonstration of the extent of doubts and lack of trust in the credibility of the elections. Accordingly, Naku (2023), observed that the activities of vote-buying were majorly responsible for the lack of public confidence in the credible outcome of election results in Rivers State.

The indiscriminate and rampant distribution of cash by politicians to political party supporters during political campaign rallies during the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers state evidently characterised the conduct of the two election epochs. Aside that, there were in existence, the indiscriminate recruitment and hiring of political thugs for the purposes of perpetrating the crimes of ballot box snatching, intimidation/harassment of prospective voters and other related electoral violence.

Beyond the above, the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers state were characterised with undue enlistment of the support of traditional rulers, community youth leaders, community market associations leaders, religious organisations, etc. through cash donations and other forms of incentives. Similarly, the unlawful bribing of electoral commission officers and law enforcement agents to aid the perpetration of rigging and other forms of electoral malpractices constitute some of the ills witnessed during the conduct of the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State.

Therefore, it is in the light of the issues captured above that this study is poised to investigate the impact of vote-buying on electoral credibility in the aftermath of the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State, using experiences in Emohua local government as a case study.

Methodology

This study adopted the survey research design. The decision by the researcher to adopt the survey design method was informed by the fact that this study combines both the use of qualitative

review of documented studies and quantitative presentation of data as empirically generated from field work. The population for this study consists of the entire population of Emohua local government area. The current population of Emohua local government area stands at 201,901 (National Population Commission, 2023). 420 questionnaires were distributed among the target respondents from the 14 political wards that make up Emohua local government area. The fourteen political wards include: Egbeda, Elele Alimini, Emohua 1, Emohua 11, Ibaa, Obelle, Odegu 1, Odegu 11, Ogbakiri 1, Ogbakiri 11, Omudioga/Akpadu, Rumuekpe, Rundele, and Ubimini. Also, the use of textbooks, newspapers, journal publications and relevant materials from the internet constituted the secondary source of data for this study. The data containing questionnaire items responses were presented in a four-points Likert scale, which is structured in the form of: SA=Strongly Agree; A= Agree; SA= Strongly Disagree, and D= Disagree. The results of the findings were analysed in percentages.

Conceptual Clarifications

Vote Buying: Vote buying is a compound word which represents an applied or continuously applied strategy to woo would-be voters in any formally organised electoral contest to cast votes against their choice, conscience, principles, personal ideologies and convictions (Dimkpa, 2021). In a related contribution, Cookey (2022) informs that vote buying in politics represents an alluring aroma which politicians deliberately weaponize to attract prospective voters to their camp. In a similar opinion by Daramola (2018), desperate politicians utilize the practice of vote buying to actualize their dubious intent of manipulating the entire electoral process and thereby achieving their selfish and dubious political motives. According to Bagudu (2021), vote buying, in general terms, denotes all tendencies, actions or activities which consist in attempts, aimed at influencing the choice or decisions of prospective voters, either before or during elections. The term vote buying, in contemporary times, fundamentally involves desperate but illegitimate measures employed by politicians to secure electoral victory by resorting to buying off the processes that would lead to their eventual success. As such, seekers of elective positions no longer depend exclusively on marketing their candidacy to prospective voters by projecting their potential leadership traits and ideologies, rather they in most part, rely on the use of money and other material enticements to influence the choice of prospective voters (Mohammed & Ayeni, 2018).

According to Ekpo and Olawole (2016), vote buying is simply a dubious and expedient electioneering campaign means that thrives in a political system where money politics is permissible. In a similar definition, Echem (2020) summarily impress that politicians take advantage of the existing system where the influence of money has submerged all other aspects of moral principles and ethical standards to use pecuniary means to gain popularity and relevance. Corroboratively, Akinwale (2020) asserts that vote buying is an unwholesome process where politicians make a dubious investment on their political future by using monetary means to secure wins in elections, hence, having the certainty that they would make huge returns on their investment in the aftermath of their victory. Such, according to Dubem (2023), is what they hope to achieve by means of embezzling public fund.

In the opinion of Okoro (2021), vote buying in the Nigerian perspective assumes various forms and patterns. Hence, Edozie (2023), argues that vote buying, in the Nigerian context does not only consist in the use of money by politicians to induce voters to vote against their conscience and initial choices. According to Bekwelem (2022), vote buying in Nigeria involves all other indiscriminate and unscrupulous means of manipulating the electoral processes which include:

- a) The indiscriminate recruitment and hiring of political thugs for the purposes of perpetrating the crimes of ballot box snatching, intimidation/harassment of prospective voters and other related electoral violence.
- b) Undue enlistment of the support of traditional rulers, community youth leaders, community market associations leaders, religious organisations, etc. through cash donations and other forms of incentives.
- c) The unlawful bribing of electoral commission officers and law enforcement agents to aid the perpetration of rigging and other forms of electoral malpractices.

Central to the various perspectives by different scholars on the definition of the concept of vote buying is the idea that vote buying involves a common resort to elective position seekers to gain undue advantages or victory in elections by infiltrating the electoral processes with pecuniary inducements.

Election

The concept of election from its fundamental implication involves the process of making choices for the occupation of vacant elective positions through voting. In any democratic dispensation, qualified citizens are given the constitutional right to choose their leaders and other representatives in government through the normal voting process (Akujuru, 2015). Elections constitute an objectively proven instrument through which a person or persons are selected from a pool of interests to occupy positions of authority. Positions of authority in this context exist in various fora in the society, villages, communities, regions, organisations and the different strata in them, academic institutions and governmental institutions (Anyanwu, 2019). According to Dimkpa (2021), an election is simply a mechanism through which periodic changes are effected in the administration of any group, be it a society, state, nation or organisation. Similar to the above definition, Cookey (2022) is of the opinion that election constitutes an instrument by which the administration of any formal group is significantly improved, by filling competent individuals in positions of authority. Furthermore, Simba (2011) is of the view that election is a legitimate process by which better and popular choices are made with regards to the crop of qualified individuals who should assume the positions of authority in any society, state or organisation

According to Okoro (2021), election presupposes a mechanism for making popular decisions on the selection of a person or persons to occupy political positions or other positions of authority in a society through the voting process. In a different perspective, Bagudu (2021) argues that the meaning of election is not exclusively limited to the selection of individuals to fill vacant positions of authority or responsibility, rather, the meaning of election extends to a formal way of conducting polls to determine the opinion of citizens about a trending public policy. By this definition, Bagudu (2021), suggests that the term, 'election' can conveniently be viewed as a referendum-the latter which refers to opinion poll to ascertain the level of acceptability of any public policy.

Electoral Credibility

Electoral credibility is a term which implies that the conduct of elections must be characterised by a high level of transparency, fairness, accountability, probity and inclusiveness (Efebeh, 2015). According to Idris (2013), the outcome of elections should invariably be a reflection of all the virtues and principles of a fairly conducted elections. In corroboration to the view as espoused by Idris (2013), Itoro (2018) stressed that electoral credibility is supposed to be a reflection of the exhibition of a high level of moral rectitude and chastity by all stakeholders in any electoral context. Similarly, Ihunwo (2022) informs that electoral credibility is supposed to be a proof that

the aftermath of elections signifies the absence of electoral malpractices by stakeholders in an election. By implication, to say that an election is credible is to establish that its outcome is a direct representation of the actual result that must be devoid of manipulations or distortion of the deserving ethics of electioneering. The near absence of brazen irregularities in any election goes a long way to bestow on the exercise, the status of integrity, when subjected to post-elections appraisal (Okebukola, 2016).

According to Idris (2013), electoral credibility is realised in a condition where the declared winner in any electoral contest actually secured the highest number of votes. However, this definition by Idris (2013) has been criticised on the grounds that it is narrow, limited and restrictive in scope. For instance, Efebeh (2015) informs that an appreciable level of elimination of rigging or manipulation of election results is just an aspect of electoral credibility. Thus, Efebeh (2015) went further to impress that an election that has the eventual winner as the candidate who secured the true majority of votes cast can still not be referred to as credible if the other processes that preceded the actual voting exercise were marred with irregularities and flaws.

A comprehensive definition of the term, 'electoral credibility' was provided by Bagudu (2021). According to their definition:

An election can only be said to have attained the status of credibility when the entire processes are observed in the environment of fairness; when seekers of elective positions comply strictly with electoral laws relating to political campaigns, especially with regards to laws prohibiting indiscriminate financial inducement of prospective voters; when eligible prospective voters are duly registered; when the total number of votes cast in the election correspond with the number of accredited voters; when ballot papers and boxes are not tampered with; when collation, sorting, counting, posting and announcement of election results are transparently done; when the election results declared by the electoral body, reflect the true votes cast in that election. It is only when the above criteria are strictly observed that an election can be deemed credible. (p. 78)

The above definition evidently encompasses all other shades of definitions provided above by other scholars. It is therefore in the light of the various contributions of scholars and authors that this study is conveniently stating that electoral credibility presupposes a situation where an election can only be adjudged to be credible when the processes meet the standard of transparency, fairness and inclusiveness.

Democracy

The term, democracy, right from its inception in the 5th century, has been defined by several authors and scholars from diverse shades of opinions, perspectives, historical experiences and ideological standpoint. According to Simba (2011), democracy is a systemic pattern in which the narratives of respect for human rights, right to vote and be voted for, periodic elections, competition for assumption of political positions, right to belong to political parties of choice, transparent decision-making mechanism, rule of law and the existence of a viable civil society, characterise the socio-political life and existence of a society. To Biezen (2003), Democracy is a governing principle which denotes equity, fairness and respect for the rule of law, as against the deployment of absolute exercise of power in the administration of the society. By implication, both definitions by Biezen and Dicey on the concept of democracy, precludes the use of absolute force or coercive tendencies in the administration of the affairs of any corporate group, institution or society.

Furthermore, Dode (2010) affirms that democracy is a systemic principle which emphasises collective participation of members of an institution or group in processes ranging from decision-making to implementation. According to Anyanwu (2019), democracy in practice, abhors the indiscriminate subversion of the collective will and voice of the people in an election. In a similar position, Daramola (2018) posits that democracy is a system of government that guarantees that the rule of law strictly guides the various processes through which the decision of the majority of voters are upheld in an organised general election. Also, according to Mohammed and Ayeni (2018), democracy is a system which fundamentally emphasises the lawful supremacy of the will of the majority of the people in a society, especially in relation to the right to choose their representatives in government, through an election.

From the above standpoint therefore, it is convenient to submit that democracy is a system of government that does not only provide a platform for majority of the people, in a politically organised society to determine, through the voting process, their representatives in government. It also entails a practice that guarantees the security of the constitutional rights, privileges and freedom of people, in a political environment that is devoid of threats, coercion and intimidation.

The Nexus Between Vote Buying and Electoral Credibility

There exists, a strong correlation between the concepts of vote buying and electoral credibility. The activities of vote buying always produce an overbearing effect on electoral credibility in any given politically organised society. According to Anyanwu (2019), the monetisation of the electoral processes reduces the quality of elections, thereby making the outcome a reflection of financial inducement, other than ethical standards. In their separate contribution, Bagudu (2021) informs that vote buying has the capacity to distract voters from taking keen consideration of the quality of ideologies that political parties represent and also the value of the various ideals that each aspiring political office holders possess. Also, Daramola (2018) is of the opinion that “vote buying blurs the visual ability of prospective voters, such that they cannot see the obvious incompetence of most political office seekers” (p. 19). A comprehensive analysis of the link between vote buying and electoral credibility, provided by Mohammed and Ayeni (2018), states thus:

Vote buying, being an integral of money politics constitutes a blithering predicament to the body politic. The unwholesome act, consciously but unlawfully introduced by desperate politicians, whereby the latter use all sorts of means to buy their way to electoral victory has always proven to compromise and reduce the potency of core democratic ideals. The fundamental essence of democracy is to provide a platform where the masses can, in an environment of fairness and transparency, choose leaders who have the competence and will to administer the dividends of democracy that are predicated on good governance. But, in a situation where the processes for electing political office holders are violated by financial interests, the obtainment of quality leadership might be a far cry. (p. 318)

According to Anyanwu (2019), vote buying in Nigeria has been chiefly responsible for producing a flurry of incompetent and unperforming political office holders since the democratic dispensation of 1999. Hence, such situations have over time, accounted for leadership crisis and failures, indicated by general poor performances of political leaders with regards to providing sufficient social services to the people, as well as the hike in the spate of social instability, indicated in the continuous rise in cases of insecurity.

The Nature of Vote Buying in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Rivers State.

According to Dimkpa (2021), vote buying in the 2019 general elections in Rivers State was mostly characterised by acts, associated with recklessness in the distribution of cash among party faithful in political campaign and rally venues, financial empowerment and motivation of members of militant sects who were used as thugs during elections, bribing of INEC officials and law enforcement agents and etc. A study carried out by Echem (2020), on the impact of financial inducement in the 2019 general elections in Rivers state indicates that prior to the 2019 governorship election in Rivers State, a political rally organised by the PDP for Ward 16, comprising Ozuoba, Ogbogoro, Rumuokwachi, Rumuokparali and Rumualogu, in Obio-Akpor local government area, witnessed the conveyance of sacks, purportedly containing lots of cash, to the Ozuoba community hall, during a rally. Supposedly, that could have been meant for distribution to party supporters. Furthermore, Echem's study revealed that prior to the 2019 presidential election in Rivers state, a political campaign rally organised by the APC at Elechi Amadi Polytechnic field in Ward 13 of Obio-Akpor local government area saw the desperate scrambling for indiscriminately spread cash at the venue of the campaign rally.

Again, a study carried out by Elendu (2021), on the strategies of vote buying in electioneering campaigns revealed that party stalwarts in both APC and PDP during the 2019 presidential and governorship elections in Rivers state were involved in the insidious act of patronising Divisional Police Officers (D.P.O.s) of various police divisions, as well as Heads of different security outfits within the state, with huge sums of money. According to Elendu (2021), such was meant to bribe the heads of the various security agencies in the state to compromise the ethics and integrity of their profession by allowing their men to provide cover and connivance with ballot box snatchers during elections. Particularly, the study by Elendu (2021), further revealed that in some polling units at Gokana local government of Rivers State, which include, Beeke Square Beeke 1, Bodo City Secondary School Giogo Koo, Community Primary School Biara, Gion Kaakiri 1, and Community Primary School, Bomu, Vidada, a group of soldiers, supposedly acting under the influence of financial inducement were seen harassing and intimidating voters, party agents and INEC officials, as well as getting involved in the snatching and carting away of ballot boxes and other election materials.

According to Naku (2023), more than six persons were arrested by men of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), over allegations of involvement in activities of vote buying on the eve of the 2023 presidential elections. The various arrests were made at different wards and locations across the state. Again, on the eve of the 2023 presidential election, Hon. Chinyere Igwe, a member of the Federal House of Representatives, who was also seeking re-election was arrested by men of the Nigerian Police, in possession of foreign cash, in the tune of \$500, 000. It was reported that the said foreign currency was found in the boot of the vehicle in which the federal lawmaker was driving, during a routine stop-and-search exercise by the Nigerian police. It was largely presumed that the huge amount of cash was purposed for vote buying activities (Edozie, 2023).

In the build-up to the 2023 general elections in Rivers state, a different but expediently strategised pattern of vote buying was demonstrated, with the incumbent governor, Chief Nyesom Wike, employing up to 100, 000 youths as Special Assistants to the governor. Much as the governor had impressively premised his action on motives, bordering around youth empowerment initiative, insinuations from opinion poll, as well as diverse views by analysts have suggested that the ulterior motive behind such massive but unusual hiring of Special Advisers was not unconnected with the governor's ambition to secure popular votes for the gubernatorial flagbearer of the P.D.P- the latter

whom he wished to be his successor. To justify the insinuations and inferences from the public space, it was revealed that the 100 thousand appointed Special Assistants to the governor were given, as their job description, to mobilize and deliver majority votes for the PDP in the various wards and polling units they represent, during the governorship election. Hence, it was alleged that among the major criteria for qualification for appointment into that position was the possession by an applicant, of a duly registered PDP membership card. Thus, by all intents and purposes, and by all indications, Gov. Wike's appointment of the outrageously high population of Special Assistants, coupled with the politically-inclined job description attached to the appointment is a campaign strategy, aimed at buying the votes of majority of prospective voters in Rivers state (Elumoye, 2022).

Furthermore, it was generally conceived by members of the public in Rivers state as a veiled act of vote buying, the sudden unveiling of plans by the state government under Governor Nyesom Wike, to employ 10,000 people into the state civil service and also promote existing civil servants, less than three months to the governorship election. It sparked surprises, suspicions, concern and agitations in the minds of the people over the real intention of a governor who, in his close to eight years of being the governor of Rivers state never showed any administrative commitment to extend a welfarist gesture to the masses, through employment opportunities and promotion of government workers, now suddenly realises the need, just very close to the polls. As such, it was summarily interpreted by the majority of the masses in Rivers state to entail a decoy scheme, introduced by the Gov. Wike, to woo prospective eligible voters into casting their votes for the PDP governorship candidate- the latter who from the onset, has been his preferred and subsequently anointed candidate (Chukwu, 2023).

A Critical Assessment of the Factors Responsible for Vote Buying in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Rivers State.

Unarguably, the high rise, as well as the rampancy of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers must have been rooted in some fundamental causes. According to Echem (2020), poverty in Rivers State has over time, being weaponized by politicians with a view to making the majority of the masses-the latter who comprise the larger population of prospective electorate, vulnerable to vote buying. Hence, Echem (2020), informs that the prevalent rate of poverty in Rivers State which in their opinion is being instrumentalized by the political class to buy the voting conscience and preferences of prospective voters and also, compromise the various electoral processes is symptomised in the following forms:

- a) High rate of unemployment and joblessness among indigenes and residents in Rivers State.
- b) Poor level of industrialisation and income-generating avenues in the state.
- c) Low level of income among the majority of the working population in the state, indicated in the form of poor salaries, allowances and wages which are largely considered insignificant and insufficient when compared to the ever-rising inflation rate in Nigeria's economy.
- d) Poor level of meaningful engagement of youths in terms of skill acquisition, vocational education and other forms of empowerment programmes to enable the youths to become, on the average, financially self-sufficient and thereby, reducing their level of proneness to liabilities on the corporate peaceful existence of the state.
- e) Lack of adequate commitment, on the part of the leadership of the Rivers State government to commit sufficient resources, (financial, human and material) to promote massive job creation

and poverty reduction through industrialisation projects and proper institutionalisation of social welfare administration.

- f) Widespread level of hunger, lack, despondency and desperation among indigenes and residents of Rivers State.

To further corroborate the position of Echem (2020), as espoused above, Digbara (2021) posits that:

In the case of Rivers State, instead of investing meaningfully in local industrialization and other aspects of job-creating endeavours, as well as in human capital development- the latter which consists fundamentally in developing the innate potentialities of humans to be economically self-dependent, the Rivers state government focuses on expending the huge fortunes of the state on sponsoring militia groups and empowering hand-picked individuals-the latter who comprise mostly their cronies, allies and political associates. It is expected that these set of individuals will help them in securing and consolidating on their political mandate during elections. (p. 64)

The above review of the contributions by authors, is succinctly descriptive of the alleged impact of poverty as one of the factors that contributed to the growth of the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State.

In their separate view, Dimkpa (2021) attributes the cause of the escalation of the activities of vote buying during the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State to the undue influence of money politics that has over time, characterised the existence, nature and functional status of Nigeria's political system. Incidentally according to Dimkpa (2021), over the years, efforts at curbing the menace of vote buying in Nigeria's politics have usually not achieved the expected results, hence, the systemic tolerance and practice of money politics provides some sort of shield for the thriving of the activities of vote buying. In the words of Anyanwu (2019), "vote buying, being a scourge in Nigeria's electioneering politics has continued to hold sway due to the extent to which the political system in Nigeria dignifies and sustains money politics" (p. 44). The likely nexus between money politics and vote buying as it pertains its impact on the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State was aptly captured by Bekwelem (2022), thus:

Since the nature of Nigeria's politics systemically encourages an intensive financial extortion and exploitation of seekers of political positions, in the case of Rivers State, politicians desperately resort to buying their way into electoral victories, with a view to recovering, and to a deeper extent, making huge gains from what they invested in such ambitions. Invariably, an individual who can go to the level of selling their plots of land or other valuable assets, just to procure the form for House of Representatives or House of Assembly positions, can equally afford to buy votes. In usual cases also, the sale of properties is triggered by the desperation to secure the party's ticket for participation in the general elections. To this end, such an individual will leave no stone unturned in ensuring that they bribe their way to victory during the final stage of elections. (p. 49)

The table below shows the cost of sale of Interest and Nomination forms for various elective positions by the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the All-Progressive Congress (APC). Thus:

PDP	APC
PRESIDENTIAL- N40 MILLION	PRESIDENTIAL- N100 MILLION
GOVERNORSHIP- N21 MILLION	GOVERNORSHIP- N50 MILLION
SENATE- N3.5 MILLION	SENATE- N20 MILLION
HOUSE OF REP- N2.5 MILLION	HOUSE OF REP- N10 MILLION
STATE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY- N600 THOUSAND	STATE HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY— N2MILLION.

Source: Uwugiaren & Akinwale (2022)

Accordingly, Dimkpa (2021) observes that, apart from the outrageously high rate for the obtainment of both the Expression of Interest and Nomination forms from political parties, various political party executives still devise other illicit means to extort huge amount of money from seekers of political positions. Such, according to Dimkpa (2021) is not a far-fetched reason for the rampant cases of involvement in vote buying by politicians.

In their separate contribution, Echem (2020) is of the opinion that the absence or lack of adequate adherence to the tenets of a strong ideological base that should guide the functionality of Nigeria's political system contributed to the factor that promoted the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State. Hence, Echem (2020) explained that expectations to win electioneering contest between rival political parties and individuals should be based on the superiority of ideas, belief systems and charisma. In their view, Digbara (2021) stresses that since the supremacy of political ideologies and the charismatic disposition of election candidates no longer constitute the attributes that promote the popularity of political positions seekers, the resort to vote buying and other forms of voter-inducement now become the most potent alternative during elections. Similarly, Bekwelem (2022) argues that one of the causes of vote buying during the 2019 general elections in Rivers State is traceable to the fact that during political campaigns, political parties no longer base their winning strategies on past records of competence and attitudinal integrity of candidates vying for elective positions. In its stead, according to Bekwelem (2022), the means by which candidates can win popular votes during elections becomes determined by the extent to which such candidates can spend huge amount of money. Such, according to Bekwelem (2022), no longer takes into account, whether or not, the candidate(s), possess the requisite competence, capacity or integrity to occupy political positions.

Furthermore, Echem (2020) informs that the lack of adequate institutional capacity to effectively pass and implement stringent regulations against the perpetrators of the activities of vote buying in the past elections in Rivers State, summarily explains its repeat in the 2019 general elections. To further buttress their position, Echem (2020) maintains that even the judiciary-the latter which is constitutionally saddled with the mandate to interpret the aspects of electoral laws which condemn acts of vote buying and hence, pronounce adequate punishments on offenders, over time, have proved incapacitated. Hence, according to Cooney (2022):

A repeat of the reckless activities of vote buying and other forms of electoral fraud were rampantly witnessed during the 2019 general elections in Rivers State. The simple explanation for such development could be culled from the obvious fact that offenders in previous elections were either not arrested or even when arrested, were not prosecuted accordingly. In most cases, the bulk of perpetrators comprise politicians- the main seekers of political positions who could, by way of bribery, forestall prosecution by the Police. Even when such is petitioned by opposition

candidates, the judiciary has most times, failed to adjudicate fairly and competently.
(p. 12)

The above excerpt comprehensively captures the impact of the ineffectiveness of enabling laws as one of the factors which contributed to the upsurge in the activities of vote buying during the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State.

A Critical Appraisal of the Impact of Vote Buying on Electoral Credibility in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Rivers State.

A lot of scholars, authors of academic write ups, as well as social critics and commentators have severally raised concerns and shared views about the myriad of negative impacts of the activities of vote buying on electoral credibility, in the aftermath of the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State. Authors like Digbara (2021); Cookey (2022) and Dubem (2023), have separately informed that the outcome of the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers was characterised by widespread criticisms, public protests, civic tension and security uncertainties, unhealthy inter-party brawls, as well as series of post-election legal battles. These, undoubtedly, constitute responses to the high level of dissatisfaction with the entire electoral processes, ranging from the pattern of conduct of party primaries, the conduct of the general elections, to the eventual outcome of election results. According to Cookey (2022), the various protests, criticisms and the corresponding post-election litigations attest to the varying degree of doubts about the credibility of election results. In the opinion of Dubem (2023), such demonstrates a high extent of doubt and lack of trust, on the integrity of the entire electoral processes.

In the aftermath of the 2019 general elections in Rivers State, the Chairman of the election petitions tribunal sitting in Port Harcourt, Justice Malami Dogondaji informed that the tribunal had received a total of six post-election petitions. According to the Chairman, the state governorship, House of Assembly and Senatorial elections attracted one petition each. Also, the Chairman had informed that three petitions were filed in respect of the House of Representatives election in the state (Itodo, 2019). Analytically, Bekwelem (2022) gathers that the bulk of the post-election legal matters contains litigations which prayers seek judicial intervention and adjudication on cases associated with the impact of vote buying on the conduct of elections. Most of such litigations according to Bekwelem (2022) encompass verifiable charges of financial inducement to manipulate or rig election results in favour of some candidates, against the will of the majority of the electorate. In their separate view, Dimkpa (2021) informs that majority of the post-election petitions that characterised the aftermath of the 2019 general elections in Rivers State include charges brought to the court of law by litigants, challenging the activities of paid thugs and law enforcement agents who disrupt voting exercise by either harassing/intimidating voters or carting away of ballot boxes and other election materials.

Again, the aftermath of the 2023 presidential election in Rivers State witnessed an unprecedented and widespread criticisms, condemnation and outright rejection of the result of Rivers State votes as announced by the State Returning Officer. According to the report by a civil rights organisation, Yiaga Africa, the presidential election results as declared by INEC in which APC received 231,591; LP, 175,071 and PDP, 88,468, was allegedly manipulated in favour of the presidential candidate of the APC. The civil right group based its argument on the post-election opinion poll it randomly conducted in Rivers State which revealed that up to 92% of the respondents claimed that the officially declared presidential result was not a true reflection of the actual votes cast on the election day. The majority of the respondents had claimed that majority of the votes cast were allegedly for the presidential candidate of the LP. The civil right organisation, Yiaga Africa also

claimed that the post-election opinion poll result was consistent with the pre-election opinion poll it conducted, in which the LP presidential candidate was projected to win in Rivers State by 88.7%. The civil right group's report further revealed that majority of the interviewed respondents had accused electoral officers and law enforcement agents of receiving bribe to change actual votes (Olokor, 2023).

More so, among the consequences of vote buying on electoral credibility in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State is the fact that it resulted in unhealthy scuffle and rivalry among political parties. Following the declaration of the governorship election results in which the PDP flagbearer emerged the winner, the announcement did not go down well with the opposition political parties. Consequent upon the expressed doubts by opposition political parties about the credibility of the declared gubernatorial election results, specifically, the governorship candidate had approached the State secretariat of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), to gain access into, and verify the materials used for the conduct of the governorship election. However, while on their way to INEC office, the APC governorship candidate and the APC state chairman were brutally attacked by thugs believed to be members of the PDP-the latter who were believed to have been hired to violently combat any attempt, aimed at uncovering the source of the alleged electoral fraud (Ihemnacho, 2023).

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the theory of Economic Determinism by Karl Marx. The theory of economic determinism was propounded on the philosophy which presumes that there is a fundamental link between the economy of the state and the existing social structure. Hence, the theory of economic determinism by Karl Marx originally presupposes that it is the economic status of a society that regulates the social relations in such a society. By implication, the overall means of survival of humans; their physical, mental, psychological, physiological, social well-being and their mode of inter-personal relations, all depend on the extent of a society's economic stability and the degree of its impact on humans. Basically, the theory of economic determinism by Karl Marx is primarily suggestive of the fact that humans in a society engage in economic activities and also endeavour to maximize the efforts they put into such activities with a view to satisfying the myriad of socio-physiological needs (Mukherjee & Ramaswamy, 2011).

According to Itoro (2018), the theory of economic determinism as propounded by Karl Marx, has a foundational relationship with the fundamental motives which necessitated the formation and characteristic existence of a state. Thus, the essence of state creation and existence was borne out of the desire by humans to realise their ambition of living a meaningful life, devoid of lack and poverty. Therefore, according to Itoro (2018), the pursuit of various interests by humans in a society is informed by the desire to be economically well-off. Accordingly, Mukherjee and Ramaswamy (2011), analytically captured the philosophical attributes of the theory of economic determinism by Karl Marx and they include:

- a) The fact that the economic capacity of every society constitutes the bedrock upon which such society exists and functions.
- b) The fact that the economic status of any given society determines the well-being or otherwise of the majority of the people in such society.
- c) The fact that the economic interest of the members of such a society provides the fundamental basis for social relations and other forms of inter-personal relationship.

- d) The fact that there is the inevitability of tussles, struggles and clash of class interests as humans in a society co-exist to pursue their diverse economic interests.
- e) The fact that the greater majority of recorded class conflicts, uprisings and social upheavals around the world have been motivated by economic interest.
- f) The fact that the political leadership class, as well as the elites most times deliberately frustrate the economic well-being of the masses, with a view to instigating social crisis.
- g) The fact that the political leadership class and the elites, in an era of economic meltdown can buy their way to privileges and comfort, at the expense of the majority of the masses.

The Relationship and Relevance of the theory of Economic Determinism to this study

The central thrust of the theory of economic determinism by Karl Marx is primarily pitched around the philosophy that the economy of a state is responsible for the determination of social actions and relations. Therefore, the theory in principle, is ideologically related to this study, hence, the latter's main objective is anchored on the assessment of the influence of vote buying on the conduct and outcome of elections in Rivers State. By implication, the act of using money to induce prospective voters or influence the entire electoral processes clearly denotes the fact that the economy drives and determines social actions and activities in a society.

Data Presentation/Analysis

What Factors gave rise to the Activities of Vote Buying in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Emohua Local Government of Rivers State and its Impact on Electoral Credibility?

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Total SA/A	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Total SD/D	Grand total
High rate of poverty was responsible for the rise in the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area.	150 43%	165 47%	315 90%	20 6%	15 4%	35 10%	350 100%
The prevailing culture of money politics gave rise to the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area.	106 30%	104 30%	210 60%	69 20%	71 20%	140 40%	350 100%
Poor ideological base in Nigeria's political system gave rise to the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area.	141 40% ^x	106 30%	240 70%	50 14%	55 16%	105 30%	350 100%
The absence of stringent punishment for perpetrators of vote buying in previous general elections gave rise to the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area	125 36%	100 27%	225 63%	80 23%	45 14%	125 37%	350 100%

Source: fieldwork, 2023

The table above illustrates the reactions of respondents on the factors that gave rise to the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State, shows that 315 respondents which represents 90% of the total population are of the opinion that high rate of poverty was responsible for the rise in the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in the area under study. However, 35 respondents, representing 10% disagreed. Also, 60% of the respondents are of the view that the culture of money politics, prevalent in Rivers State was responsible for the rise in the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area. But, 40% of the respondents disagreed with this opinion. Again, 70% of the respondents are of the opinion that poor ideological base of political parties in Rivers State contributed to the rise in the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area. But, 30% of the respondents were in disagreement. Lastly, 63% of the respondents are of the view that the lack of stringent penalties against vote buying in previous elections in Rivers State was responsible for the rise in the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area, while 37% of the respondents disagreed with the view.

What are the Consequences of Vote Buying on Electoral Credibility in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Emohua Local Government of Rivers state?

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Total SA/A	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Total SD/D	Grand total
The activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government resulted in widespread criticisms of the entire electoral process	190 54.2%	110 31.4%	310 85%	15 4%	25 11%	40 15%	350 100%
The activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government resulted in series of post-election court cases	200 57%	108 31%	308 88%	21 6%	21 6%	42 12%	350 100%
Vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area led to violent inter-party crisis.	113 32%	90 26%	203 58%	97 28%	50 14%	147 42%	350 100%

Source: fieldwork, 2023

Under research question 2, the table above indicates that 85% of the respondents are of the opinion that the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government, Rivers State, resulted in widespread criticism of the entire electoral process, while 15% of the respondents disagreed with this position. Also, 88% of the respondents informed that the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area, Rivers State resulted in series of post-election litigations, while 12% are not in agreement. Again, 58% of the respondents are of the opinion that the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government, Rivers State led to violent inter-party crisis, while 42% of the respondents are not in agreement.

What strategies should be adopted to curb the activities of vote buying, such that electoral credibility can be achieved in subsequent general elections in Rivers state?

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Total SA/A	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Total SD/D	Grand total
Minimum reduction in the level of poverty can help curb the activities of vote buying in future elections in Rivers State.	126 36%	130 37%	256 73%	47 13%	47 13%	94 27%	350 100%
There should be maximum intolerance for the culture of money politics in Rivers State	150 43%	100 27%	250 70%	40 11%	60 17.1%	100 30%	350 100%
There should be political will to implement stringent laws against the activities of vote buying in Rivers State	150 43%	100 27%	250 70%	50 14.2%	50 14.2%	100 30%	350 100%

Source: fieldwork, 2023

under research question 3, 73% of the respondents are of the view that minimum reduction in the level of poverty in Rivers State will help in curbing the activities of vote buying in future elections in Rivers State, while 27% of the respondents countered the view. Also, 70% of the respondents are of the opinion that there should be a maximum level of intolerance for money politics in Rivers State. But, 30% of the respondents did not share in this opinion. Lastly, 70% of the respondents are of the opinion that there should be political will on the part of the executive arm of government of Rivers State to implement stringent laws against the perpetrators of vote buying while 30% of the respondents are not in support of the view.

Discussion of Findings

Factors that gave Rise to the Activities of Vote-Buying in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Emohua Local Government Area, Rivers State.

This study, based on the views by majority of the respondents as represented and analysed in table 4.1.2, establishes as a finding that, high rate of poverty, prevalent culture of money politics, poor ideological base and the absence of stringent laws against vote buying, constituted the factors that gave rise to the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government of Rivers State. The same findings in Emohua local government depicts similarity of experiences in other local governments in Rivers State. In addition, the opinion of the majority of respondents in this study is in conformity with the position of the various literature reviewed in this study, to ascertain the factors that gave rise to the activities of vote buying in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Rivers State.

The Consequences of Vote Buying on Electoral Credibility in the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Emohua Local Government of Rivers State.

It is a finding in this study that inter-party crisis, series of post-election litigations and widespread criticisms of the entire electoral process constituted the consequences of vote buying on electoral credibility in the 2019 and 2023 general elections in Emohua local government area of Rivers State. This finding was based on the position of the majority of respondents as represented and analysed in table 4.1.3. Also, the opinion of the majority of the respondents in the field of study conforms with the position of the scholarly works of authors reviewed in this study, on the consequences of vote buying on electoral credibility.

Strategies that Should be Adopted to Curb the Activities of Vote Buying, such that Electoral Credibility can be Achieved in Subsequent General Elections in Rivers State.

According to the opinion of majority of the respondents as captured in table 4.1.4, minimum reduction in the level of poverty, systemic intolerance for money politics and the political will to implement stringent laws against the activities of vote buying are some of the strategies that can be adopted to curb the activities of vote buying so that electoral credibility can be achieved in subsequent general elections in Rivers State. The position of the majority of the respondents on this aspect of the research question, corroborates the various views tendered by different authors in the course of reviewing relevant literature. Specifically, Ogun (2022) is of the opinion that the onus should be on INEC to spelt out the various precise punishment for vote buying to the appropriate quarters for onward implementation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study, on the basis of the several relevant literature reviewed, as well as the authentic information generated from the field of study, reliably gathered that in Rivers State, the realisation of credible elections have always been a far cry, owing to the inordinate introduction of various forms of vote buying in the state's electioneering processes. Hence, this situation in Rivers State reflects sameness of experiences in the general Nigerian state. The prevalence of the activities of vote buying during general elections in Rivers State in particular and Nigeria in general has often led to the emergence of unpopular electoral candidates, whose victory at the polls usually do not reflect the will of majority of the electorate during any general election. Invariably, such a development has always had a far-reaching consequence on the stability of the polity as post-election era would always be characterised by incessant litigations, widespread public criticisms and protests. This condition, undoubtedly, slows down the pace of socio-economic growth and development of a society.

Therefore, this study has suggested viable means of improving on the already deteriorating situation with regards to our electoral system in Rivers State in particular and Nigeria at large. The said suggestions are meant to be workable strategies that would curb the activities of vote buying, such that the overall Nigerian state would achieve maximum degree of credibility in subsequent elections.

Recommendations

The activities of vote buying during general elections in Rivers State and Nigeria in general can be minimally curbed through deliberate systemic measures to reduce poverty. This can be achieved through state-assisted creation of industries and other sustainable economic empowerment schemes for youths and other working age adults. When majority of the citizenry are not economically handicapped, their vulnerability to be used by politicians as instruments of vote buying will be significantly minimized.

The over-monetisation of politicking and political activities by political parties has over time, led to a situation where politicians strive to recover the huge amount of money, invested to secure political positions through engagement in acts of vote buying. Therefore, there should be an enabling law, enshrined in the electoral law that should discourage emphasis on money politics in our political system.

There should be stringent laws against the activities of vote buying, as well as the political will to implement them. Specifically, section 1, subsection 21 of the 2022 Electoral Act in clear terms, forbids acts or indulgences, associated with either selling, buying or using money or other

materially-inducing means to influence the outcome of elections. Therefore, it becomes incumbent on the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) to recommend to the appropriate law enforcement agencies, the various penalties for vote buying like payment of fines, imprisonment or outright life ban to contest elections. In fact, the latter which entails banning politicians involved in acts of vote buying becomes very imperative, given the growing spate of the activities of vote buying in Rivers State in particular, and Nigeria in general.

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