



Do electorates actually vote for the politicians who offer them money to buy their votes?

Insights into Reciprocity, Clientelism & Vote-Selling Behaviour from Nigeria's 2023 Elections

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How was this work conceptualised?

Perhaps, you have heard the statement over and over again - "Scratch my back and I scratch your back". It is a common phrase that depicts direct reciprocity of favours, kindness, trust and responsibilities that is typically embedded in the fabric of human relations. During elections, this type of transactional relationship plays out between politicians and the electorates through clientelism. Clientelism is defined as transactions between politicians and citizens whereby material favours are offered in exchange for political support at the polls¹. It involves giving material goods in return for electoral support, where the criterion of

distribution used by the patron is simply: Did you/Will you support me?² Materials to be exchanged sometimes include money, which is offered in exchange for electorates' votes via vote trading. While the politicians offer gifts and money to buy electorates votes, it is unclear whether these electorates cast their vote in favour of the politicians. Although relevant studies have been conducted elsewhere,^{3,4,5} there is, a dearth of literature around the reciprocity norms of vote-trading in Nigeria. This work was conceptualized as part of an RCT design, testing Behavioural Insights interventions to address vote-selling behaviour in Nigeria under a MacArthur Foundation - supported project titled "Using Behaviour Change Approaches to Influence

Why is this important?

Buying and selling of votes constitute a major threat to the integrity of elections and they act contrary to principles of democracy in that they alter the true choice and agency of citizens to make an informed decision on who to vote for⁶. Vote buying and selling introduce bias, which makes the outcome of elections a false reflection of the choices of the citizens, and directly brings to question the legitimacy of elected leaders. Finally, vote-buying incentivizes corruption in the public sector as politicians devise strategies to recoup resources exchanged⁷. This study was conducted at a time when the Central Bank of Nigeria implemented a Naira Re-design and cashless policy, involving limitations on amount of cash accessible to citizens. The policy was also an attempt to reduce vote-buying during the imminent elections. Therefore, we were interested in knowing the effect of the policy on vote-trading behaviours, particularly the reciprocity norms of electorates. More importantly, we sought to answer a major question:

“What proportion of electorates vote for the politicians who offer them money or gifts in exchange for their votes?”

How did we ask our questions before and after our interventions?

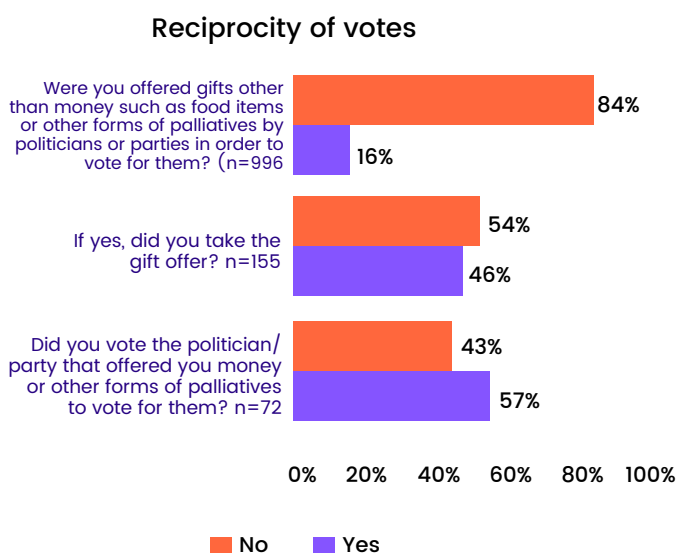
In the build up to the 2023 presidential and governorship elections, we conducted a baseline intercept survey in Lagos and Nasarawa States, asking questions on the voting intentions of citizens. This included their intention to vote, to sell their vote and whether they would reciprocate politicians’ material favours (including money and gifts) by voting for them. The findings from the baseline survey were used to design a behavioural

insights-driven intervention to address vote-selling in selected communities.

After the elections, we followed up with a telephone-based endline survey to find out from those who were offered money and gifts, if they actually reciprocated by voting in favour of the politicians. We interviewed 996 respondents at endline. In addition to the baseline and endline surveys, we conducted 15 in-depth qualitative interviews to explore the context of vote-selling. The results in this brief are from the endline survey and post-election in-depth interviews.

What did we find out?

About 16% of citizens surveyed at the end line were offered gifts by the politicians. An estimated 46% of those offered gifts accepted the politicians’ offers. Out of those who accepted, 43% did not reciprocate with votes in favour of the politicians.



Citizens from our in-depth interviews reported mixed opinions as some declined while others accepted politician’s offer of monetary and non-monetary gifts. However, both categories asserted their voting choice was not determined by the offers. Some who accepted offers reportedly did so due to the insistence of the politicians and social expectations to keep their relationship and maintain peace. They however did not reciprocate the vote.

“Yes they brought to me noodles, they brought to me Maggi, they brought to Indomie, and other items...”

Male, Nasarawa, Vote-Seller

“Based on the relationship, if you didn't even collect someone will be angry with you, you understand right? So it's better to collect and vote your choice, it gives more peace of mind”

Male, Nasarawa, Vote-Seller

There is sufficient evidence from behavioural ethics⁸ that non-monetary exchange for corrupt and unethical conducts reduces the guilt on the corrupt actor than monetary exchange. This non-monetary reciprocity might also be a way for politicians to rationalize misconduct and avoid violating the electoral law which criminalizes vote-buying. Almost half of those who were offered non-monetary gifts by politicians accepted it. Interestingly, a sizable proportion (43%) of those who accepted the gifts did not do as expected with votes in favour of the politicians. This finding corroborates previous randomized control trial campaigns which refocused on convincing voters to abandon reciprocity norms after their initial campaign on refusing gifts failed⁹. The current prevalence of non-monetary reciprocity may be attributed to personal factors such as willpower, ignorance, present bias, or contextual factors such as fear of social injunctions and punishments, as well as monitoring mechanisms instituted by politicians to ensure their kindness is reciprocated with a vote. For this to occur, politicians usually target people who are vulnerable enough to sway their votes and demand evidence of reciprocated votes.



What do we think about this result?

The Naira redesign policy by the Central Bank of Nigeria (and accompanying scarcity of cash) was implemented partly to limit vote-buying by politicians during the elections. This might explain the reason politicians offered more non-monetary than monetary gifts during the elections as recorded in this study.

What have we learnt and what should decision-makers do better?

- » The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should intensify and strengthen compliance of the secret ballot system as a critical factor to reduce clientelist reciprocity during elections. Given that monitoring offers by politicians can be quite difficult and near impossible, individuals who receive gifts can effectively choose not to reciprocate if the gaps that the politicians exploit to verify reciprocity are blocked.

- » This study demonstrates the possibility of non-reciprocity of votes. Therefore, where anti vote-selling campaigns which target gift-refusal norms fail (possibly due to social pressures and economic situation of targeted voters), it is more realistic to focus on shifting the messaging to non-reciprocity norms.
- » Implementing the Naira Redesign policy, accompanied with naira scarcity may reduce monetary exchange, but other measures such as enforcement of political spending limit for politicians, as contained in the electoral act, are required to complement this effort. Evidence from this study suggests a shift from monetary to non-monetary reciprocity which potentially weakens the policy's effectiveness in curbing vote-buying.

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