



# Vote-selling: A normative discourse? Highlights from the 2023 Elections in Nigeria.

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## Introduction

Individuals will conduct themselves within boundaries defined by prevailing social norms, and potentially push those boundaries. The foundation of moral reasons for behavior is a set of overarching normative ideals. In addition to social norms, individuals are motivated by moral considerations to act in ways that are different from what others do or expect them to perform because they feel ethically obligated to do so<sup>1</sup>. Moral arguments in favour of vote buying may include a lack of trust for the political and electoral process. Conversely, the reasons for refusal to sell one's vote may include a firm belief in democracy, personal civic responsibility, and honesty. Along with insecurity and violence during elections, vote

buying has been adduced as one of the factors that stand in the way of citizens' participation in Nigerian elections<sup>2</sup>. While most Nigerians find it unacceptable for citizens to trade their votes for money or gifts, research carried out by the Chatham House Africa Programme, Social Norms, and Accountable Governance<sup>3</sup>, "most people agree that someone they know will trade their vote." The 2023 presidential election provided an avenue to understand the social and normative drivers of vote-selling in Nigeria. Vote-selling may be influenced by economic hardship, fear of intimidation or violence among other factors; this study explores vote-selling through the social identity approach which establishes that norms play a significant role in achieving behavioural outcome<sup>4 5</sup>.

## Why is it important to understand social norms?

To achieve a behavioural outcome, prevailing norms have been attributed as critical factors<sup>6</sup>. Social norms are the unwritten rules of behavior that guide our interactions with others. They can be formal, such as laws and regulations, or informal, such as our expectations about how people should dress or behave in certain situations. Social norms may influence the choices of individuals – citizens, politicians, and other election participants – determining whether to sell their votes or not. If vote-selling is deemed socially unacceptable, the likelihood of this behavior diminishes. In contrast, acceptance may normalize the practice. We undertook an assessment of vote-selling patterns in the context of an intervention aimed at addressing the normative drivers related to vote-selling practices.

## What was our assessment approach?

We executed a randomized intervention at the community level, fusing community engagement initiatives with messaging intervention strategies to counteract vote-selling practices. Two communities in Lagos state and two from Nasarawa state were randomly selected to participate in the intervention. The communities were homogenous in characteristics and in each state one community received the interventions while the other received no intervention. Prior to the intervention programme, data was collected to assess the knowledge, attitude, perception, and prevailing norms in each community around vote selling. The data provided information on the voting behavior of members of the communities. Participants shared their opinions on their intention to sell and proliferation of vote-selling in their communities; and their source of information on election matters. A total of 2,327 participants were interviewed, the results presented in this brief focus on the 32% (882) of these 2327 participants that indicated intention to sell votes.

## What did we find?

### Source of information during the elections.

Our assessment revealed that social media ranked highest (37.3%) as a source of information on election matters. This can be attributed to the surge in election related information on social media as the 2023 elections approached. During this period, social media users displayed heightened interest in election issues, engaged in political discussions, sought the opinion of major influencers, and participated in offline political activities compared to non-users of social media platforms. We also found that slightly over half (51.9%) of the respondents still relied on traditional media (radio and television) as information sources, with radio constituting the highest proportion (30.5%). This is understandable due to factors such as accessibility and reach of traditional media, internet infrastructure challenges, connectivity costs, and language diversity.

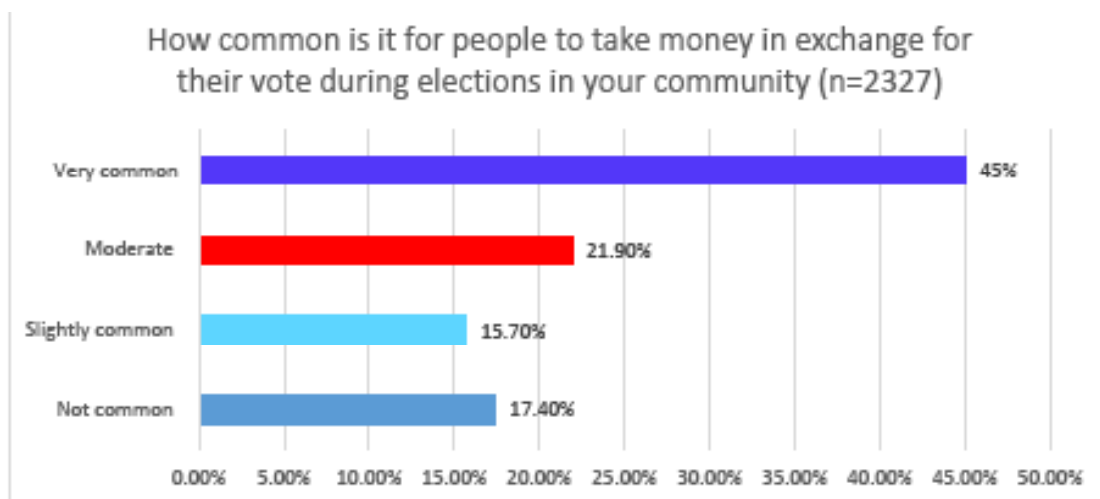


Figure 1: Information source on election matters

### Vote-selling as a norm.

Vote-selling thrives on the principle of exchange and the two parties perceiving what the other holds as valuable resulting in the inclination to exchange. Figure 2 shows that a larger proportion of the respondents (45%) perceived vote-selling as very common in their communities. Only 17.4% considered it as uncommon, while 37.6% perceived it as moderately common (Slightly Moderate: 15.7%; Moderate 21.90%).

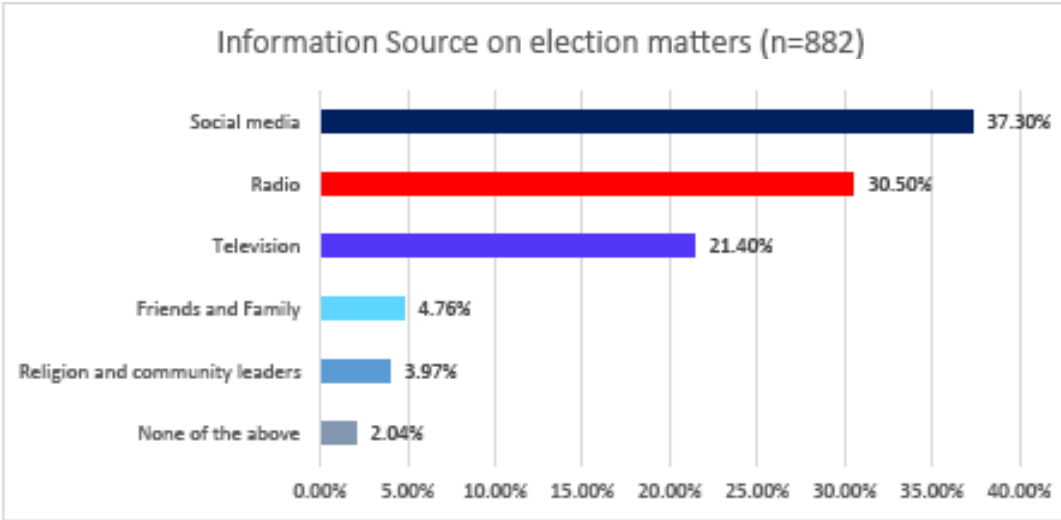


Figure 2: Perceived occurrence of vote-selling

### Is Vote-selling Justifiable?

We found that about two-fifth of respondents justified vote-selling. As shown in Figure 3, they cited reasons such as addressing the financial struggles of those lacking the means for basic necessities (17.1%), and perception that the money belonged to the people (24.1%). These choices may arise from rational considerations based on the lived experiences of individuals who intend to sell their votes. This inclination towards vote selling explained as discounting the future, holds a logical appeal to voters who view money received as a form of collective patrimony and a quick escape from cash crunch around the same period.

### What is your opinion about people taking money in order to vote for a particular candidate during elections? (n=882)

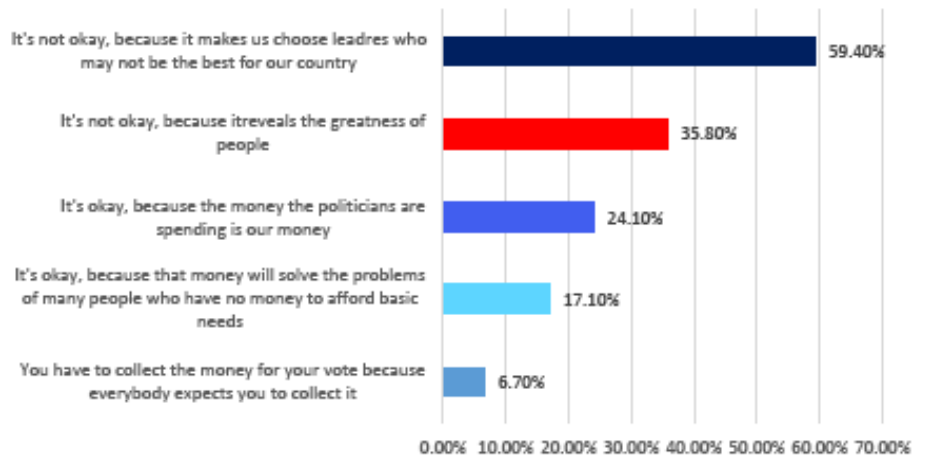


Figure 2: Opinion about vote-selling



## Policy Recommendations

- » **Strengthen norms and moral arguments against vote-selling.** This can be achieved by consistently conducting educational and awareness initiatives as well as supporting organizations dedicated to fostering good governance and upholding electoral integrity.
- » **Traditional news outlets and social media wield significant influence in shaping information against vote-selling.** The media should be leveraged as a powerful tool for disseminating the right information that discourages vote selling and upholds electoral integrity.
- » **Address the root causes of vote-selling, such as poverty and lack of trust in the electioneering process.** This could be done by investing in education and economic development, as well as by strengthening the electoral system to make it more transparent and accountable.

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