

VOTE BUYING IN AFRICA: *Comparisons Regarding Law and Practice*

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ABSTRACT

Vote buying remains a key challenge to democratic elections across Africa, as it does elsewhere. This article provides an overview of the concept of vote buying and its relationship to other phenomena, such as clientelism and campaign promises. The article also reviews the legislative provisions against vote buying across sub-Saharan Africa, noting that vote buying is effectively prohibited everywhere on the continent and is often connected with serious criminal sanctions. Furthermore, the article shows that vote buying remains a common problem in elections across many African countries. As illustrations, it explores the experiences of recent elections in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Sanctions are seldom imposed, which means the deterrent effect of any sanctions provided for in law is minimised. Popular attitudes toward vote buying, as reported by various surveys, are studied. The results reveal a complex set of views, which may vary significantly across countries and within one country over time. The article concludes that the long-term solution to this challenge appears to be economic development, which would effectively remove the demand side of vote buying; however, there is no single way to eliminate vote buying in the short term.

Keywords: elections, vote buying, Africa, clientelism, campaign promises

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INTRODUCTION

Many challenges hinder the election processes in African countries from accurately representing the voting intentions of the electorate, and ensuring that people can freely decide who should govern their country or region. Some of these challenges are emerging or rapidly increasing; they include disinformation on social media, illicit campaign donations using cryptocurrencies, and the use of artificial intelligence to spread false information about particular contestants or electoral processes.

Other challenges date back further in time. The giving of gifts to voters in return for their votes is a practice dating back at least to ancient Rome, and in African countries, this issue has plagued elections for as long as they have been held.²

Vote buying has been defined as the ‘transfer of cash or other material benefits from political parties, candidates, or their agents to voters during election campaigns to influence voters’ choices, to mobilise voters to polling stations, or to buy vote cards from voters’.³ The long history of this phenomenon does not make vote buying any less problematic for democratic elections in African countries today. The topic is an important one to study.

In this article, I review the legislation regarding vote buying in sub-Saharan African countries, noting that the practice is banned almost everywhere, often with strict sanctions specified in the legislation. In addition, I review practical experiences regarding vote buying in elections held in the region over the past ten years, showing that the practice remains a major concern throughout the African continent. As a recent study on vote buying in Ghana reported, ‘even when vote buying fails to change votes, it can affect turnout patterns, reinforce clientelist networks, and undermine citizens’ perceptions of electoral fairness’.⁴ Vote buying in African elections is a highly complex issue, and I cannot claim to cover all aspects of it here.⁵

In this paper, I also examine popular attitudes to vote buying as expressed in studies from various African countries during the last decade. It is clear that in-depth analyses of people’s understanding of vote buying in specific contexts,

2 Gans-Morse, Mazzuca and Nichter (2009) page 4.

3 Yung Yoon (2020) page 126.

4 Takyi and Kyere (2025).

5 For example, this article does not focus on the complicated relationship between vote buying and voter turnout; studies in African countries on this relationship have yielded different results. See Kramon (2009) page 4f (in his own study on Kenya in the 2002 elections, Kramon found a strong positive impact of vote buying on turnout). The level of academic interest in the concept of vote buying compared to other issues plaguing democratic elections, such as disinformation and abuse of state resources, is striking. It is also unfortunate that there is no space in this article to focus on the issue of brokers in the buying and selling of votes.

as well as their expectations from politicians, are essential for developing effective countermeasures.

THE CONCEPT OF VOTE BUYING

In exploring scholarly understanding of vote buying in Africa, a good starting point is the legal provisions against vote buying that exist in African countries. These provisions normally seek to ban giving – or promising to give – something of value in order to influence how someone votes or abstains from voting. Such provisions often cover gifts by any person or entity, but some countries limit the regulations to cover only political parties or candidates.

One version of such provisions is to prohibit what is sometimes called ‘treating’, effectively the giving of gifts to voters by political actors, even when no intent to influence their voting behaviour can be legally proven. This approach is close to the conceptualisation of ‘voter inducement’ used by the Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring in relation to Ugandan elections, including not only cash gifts to individual voters but also items such as the provision of ambulances and buses to communities by candidates.⁶

The impact of vote buying on democratic elections, as well as the interplay between vote buying and other factors, are complex and often difficult to understand. Vote buying is closely connected to other phenomena that are essential in African politics. They include *clientelism* or *client–patron relationships*, terms often used to describe politics in African countries; the concept has been defined as ‘asymmetric but mutually beneficial, open-ended transactions based on the differential control by individuals or groups over the access and flow of resources in stratified societies’.⁷ Elected politicians play a central role in such relationships. This point is illustrated by the statement that, in Kenya, ‘expenditure as a sitting MP takes on a social welfare dimension. MPs become a major source of funds for development projects, local social groups and supporting needy individuals.’⁸

A more technical consideration, highly relevant for the legal enforcement of regulations against vote buying, is the distinction between different forms of vote buying and election *campaign promises*. Campaign promises are something all politicians engage in, and they can be considered a positive aspect of democratic election campaigns.⁹ A common distinction is expressed as follows:

6 Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring, ACFIM (2023) Chapter 2.

7 Roniger (2015) page 603. On the link between clientelism and vote buying, see for example Nshimirimana (2025) and Klaus, Paller and Wilfahrt (2023), as well as the overview in Kramon (2009) page 4.

8 Kanyinga and Mboya (2021) page 34.

9 Whether campaign promises are effective in gaining votes is an entirely different issue. For a discussion on this point, see Ganslmeier (2023).

Candidate promises of benefits made on the campaign trail are not usually considered problematic and are seen as an acceptable campaign strategy... However, specific commitments to provide money or other rewards after election day, especially to voters who supply proof of their vote, qualify as vote-buying inducements.¹⁰

In practice, it is often difficult to make a clear distinction. One scholar goes so far as to conclude that 'campaign promises are a form of vote buying'. However, he argues that while vote buying should be banned, campaign promises should not be.¹¹

It is common in African countries for spending of state resources to increase ahead of elections with the goal of boosting the popularity of incumbent political parties. This will often include spending that directly impacts voters, such as social welfare, education, or infrastructure projects; increases in salaries of public employees; and benefits such as pensions. Targeted tax credits to specific industries can serve as a reverse approach to achieving the same goal of increasing the popularity of the incumbent. Arguably, activities of this kind serve as vote buying using public funds, and as such, they blur the distinction between vote buying and the abuse of state resources. However, as long as such increases in spending are not explicitly made in return for increased voter support, such activities are seldom covered by vote buying regulations.¹²

It is also valuable to consider vote buying within the broader context of electoral malpractices. Ballot box stuffing and the bribery of electoral administration staff can have a more direct impact on election outcomes and could partly determine the results of an election. Nonetheless, vote buying can be particularly damaging for the overall democratic process if voters come to view elections as an opportunity for personal enrichment, through exchanging their votes for benefits, instead of seeing elections as an opportunity to hold politicians accountable. Where vote buying is part of clientelistic ties between politicians and citizens, the opportunities for democratic governance become notably limited.

Because of these difficulties, vote buying presents a significant challenge to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, which is concerned with Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. In its SDG Report 2025, the United Nations concluded that 'trust in governance remains fragile, with many feeling politically unheard.' While there are naturally many complex reasons for this fragility, the negative impact of vote buying on accountability, trust, and feeling heard is striking.¹³ The aim

10 Joseph and Vashchanka (2022) page 11f.

11 Brooks (2016) page 20.

12 On this topic, see Joseph and Vashchanka (2022) page 13.

13 United Nations (2025) page 41.

of this article is to provide information that could help counter the challenges to strong and accountable institutions that are created through the buying of votes.

LEGISLATION AGAINST VOTE BUYING IN AFRICA

With some exceptions, the problems in dealing with vote buying in sub-Saharan Africa do not stem from a lack of legislation. Indeed, bans on vote buying are almost universal in African countries, although the exact provisions vary. Out of the 39 countries south of the Sahara for which data are available in the International IDEA Political Finance Database, bans on vote buying are reported to exist in all of them except Angola, the Central African Republic, Mauritania, and South Africa.¹⁴ The evident assumption that these four countries lack legal bans on vote buying may have arisen from limited access to relevant information. For example, vote buying is indeed prohibited in South Africa, in line with Article 871(a) of the South African *Electoral Act of 1998*.¹⁵

Regulations against vote buying are normally included in the electoral legislation of a country, frequently mentioned in the list of electoral offences. In some cases, it is instead (or in addition) regulated in the penal or criminal code.¹⁶ In most African countries, only the buying of votes is explicitly prohibited, although in some, the other side (vote selling) is also criminalised. This may include a ban on receiving benefits in return for votes, as in Cape Verde and Kenya, or a ban on actively seeking gifts in return for votes, as in Cameroon, Lesotho, and Namibia.¹⁷

Prohibiting the action of seeking money in return for votes can arguably counteract vote buying, if the provisions are enforced. However, criminalising the passive receipt of vote buying may be more problematic. One expert argued that a ban on vote selling

can reduce the willingness of voters to receive gifts, and so reduce the problem of vote buying. However ... the willingness of voters to report instances of vote buying is likely to be reduced if they may themselves face penalties.¹⁸

Not only is vote buying prohibited in almost all African countries, but the sanctions prescribed by legislation are often severe, typically including both a

14 International IDEA (2025).

15 For Angola, it seems that vote buying is prohibited in line with the 2021 Election Code, Article 193.

16 Where different laws are used for different types of elections, it seems that the provisions against vote buying are not always consistent in these laws, and hence different rules against vote buying may apply for different elections in the same country.

17 Ohman and Mambetalieva (2020) page 12f.

18 Ibid page 12.

fine and imprisonment. The International IDEA database includes information about the sanctioning provisions in 17 countries south of the Sahara, as shown in Table 1 below.¹⁹

Table 1. Sanctions against vote buying in the legislation of sub-Saharan African countries

Country	Fine	And/ or	Prison	Comment
Angola	250,000–1.5 million Kz	And	2–8 years	
Burundi	40,000–400, 000 francs	And/ or	1–3 years	
Cape Verde	–	–	Max 1 year	Same penalty for vote selling
Chad	0.5–1 million franc CFA	And	1 years	
Comoros	10,000–100,000 franc	And	8–15 months	
Guinea-Bissau	–	–	2–8 years	
Madagascar	Twice the amount involved in the transactions	And	(data missing)	Also loses civil rights and right to hold public office for 5 to 10 years
Mali	100,000–1 million francs	And	1–5 years	
Mozambique	6–12 minimum salaries	And	Max 1 year	
Namibia	Max R20,000	And/ or	Max 5 years	
Nigeria	N100,000	And/ or	1 year	
Sao Tome and Principe	5000–50000	And	Max 2 years	
Senegal	20,000 to 200,000 CFA	And	3 months–2 years	
South Africa	Up to R200, 000	–	–	The party may also have its votes in an area cancelled, and the party may be deregistered
Togo	100,000 –1 million CFA	And	1–5 years	
Uganda	72 currency points	And/ or	Max 3 years	
Zimbabwe	Yes, not specified	And/ or	Max 2 years	Specified as ‘level 7’

International IDEA (2025)

¹⁹ International IDEA (2025).

Table 1 shows that in nine of the 17 countries for which data is available, prison sentences are mandatory for cases of vote buying; in seven of these countries, prison sentences are also given. In another five countries, prison sentences are an optional addition to fines. The prison sentences called for in legislation vary from as little as three months, in Senegal, to eight years in Angola and Guinea-Bissau.

Arguably, a prison sentence of any length should be sufficient to dissuade potential vote buyers from engaging in such behaviour, if they expect such sanctions to actually be imposed. It appears that the sanctioning provisions in African legislation are not effective for preventing vote buying not because of the provisions themselves but more because of weak expectations that the sanctions will be imposed in reality. As the examples from various African countries below indicate, the effective enforcement of sanctions against vote buying is rare in many if not most African countries. In such situations, it may not matter decisively what sanctions are available, if people do not expect they will actually be used.

In short, bans exist against vote buying in almost all African countries. Refinements are certainly possible in many cases, for example in relation to vote selling and regarding how to judge the intent of those providing resources to voters. However, more important is to clarify the process through which cases of potential vote buying can be investigated and sanctions imposed. Legislation should clearly identify the mandate of capable institutions to act on accusations of vote buying, how investigations should be carried out, and how sanctioning processes should function so that vote buying is penalised effectively. These institutions would most likely need to include the national police force. They will also need to develop concrete plans on how to respond to potential vote buying for successful prosecutions, as appropriate.

PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES AND POPULAR ATTITUDES

Despite vote buying being prohibited in almost all African countries, the phenomenon remains widespread across the continent.²⁰ To illustrate the challenges, I review the experiences of three African countries. It should be understood that the inclusion – or exclusion – of any country in my analysis does not mean that the level of vote buying is necessarily higher (or lower) than in other African countries. It also does not imply that the issue of vote buying is a larger (or smaller) challenge in the electoral process in the countries I examine.

20 See for example Burbidge, Cheeseman and Panin (2025).

Kenya

Vote buying has been a major issue in Kenyan elections for a long time. According to a study published in 2021, 'Over the last two decades ... Kenya has witnessed some of the highest rates of vote buying in sub-Saharan Africa'.²¹ That study discussed ways of preventing vote buying in the Kenyan 2022 elections. Nonetheless, the European Union Election Observation Mission for those elections found as follows:

there was widespread payment of cash from a multiplicity of candidates to voters during the campaign ... Candidates spent large sums of money in direct handouts to organisers, supporters, and event attendees, as observed by EU EOM observers in 23 cases (11 involving Azimio parties and 12 Kenya Kwanza parties).²²

This finding seems to reflect a long-term experience in Kenyan elections.²³ An Afrobarometer survey on vote buying in Kenya related to the 2002 elections stated that the results indicated that 'political parties were more likely to engage in votebuying in the most politically competitive districts and to target the poor, men, and the supporters of a presumably competing party with little chance of electoral victory'.²⁴

Popular advice regarding vote buying in Kenya, as in other countries, urges voters to accept vote-buying offers from politicians but then to vote according to their own consciences.²⁵ As one commentator put it, efforts to alter the social norms and behaviour of Kenyan voters may 'discourage vote buying in future elections when politicians see that they wasted their money'.²⁶ However, there are reasons to be cautious in relation to such ideas. Lockwood argued that 'politicians in Kenya can and indeed do [win elections through vote buying] ... But the possibility remains for voters to take some of their money and run and, indeed, celebrate this as an act of political agency'.²⁷

The clientelistic ties described above that exist between patrons (in this case, politicians) and clients (the voters) mean that vote buying is not merely a transaction between individuals. The 'Cost of Politics' series of studies by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy provide interesting insights into the

21 Erlich (2021).

22 European Union Election Observation Mission (2022) page 23f.

23 See Improving Institutions for Pro-Poor Growth (IIG) (2012) claiming that 'both the two leading political parties contesting the 2007 Kenyan presidential elections used vote-buying practices extensively', page 2

24 Kramon (2009) page 10.

25 See for example Lockwood (2024) page 1063f.

26 Erlich (2021).

27 Lockwood (2024) page 1064.

financing of election campaigns from the perspective of politicians, and their study on Kenya is no exception. The statement by one politician is worth quoting:

Voters will not listen to anyone who does not give them money ... they openly demand money from candidates. In some instances, they demand payment to attend meetings ... they will fail to attend if they are not given what they call 'facilitation' (hand-out).²⁸

The future regarding vote buying in Kenya is uncertain. A worrying factor may be the 2024 finding that the 'national electoral commission (36%) is among the least trusted institutions the survey asked about.'²⁹ The same report stated that the 2024 trust level was the lowest since 2016; furthermore, trust in political parties had declined over the most recent surveys.

Tanzania

Since independence, Tanzania's politics have been dominated by the Chama Cha Mapinduzi (CCM) party, which has won every national election.³⁰ Although vote buying is prohibited by the *Elections Expenses Act of 2010*, this practice has played a significant role in Tanzanian elections, especially following the political and economic changes of the 1990s.³¹

Small gifts from politicians to voters are generally known as *takrima* in Tanzania, and these were legalised before the 2000 elections because the practice 'represented a traditional form of African hospitality to attendees at campaign rallies'.³² It has been claimed that the legislation of *takrima* 'raised public expectations that MPs would supply tangible goods and contributed to the expansion of clientelistic relationships between MPs and voters'.³³ Although this practice was banned again in 2006 after a legal challenge from Tanzanian civil society,³⁴ the practice continued in later elections. Indeed, 'some Tanzanian political analysts also note that it does not significantly matter whether *takrima*

28 Kanyinga and Mboya (2021) page 45.

29 Otele, Balongo and Iberi (2025) page 2 and 8.

30 It has been claimed that 'Despite being one of the oldest and longest-governing independence parties, Tanzania's ruling CCM has remained largely dependent on contributions and other handouts from private donors to run the party.' Khisa, Msami and Therkildsen (2024) page 202.

31 Tsubura (2015) page 5.

32 Croke (2014) page 14. This followed a legal change in 1995 allowing politicians to make contribution to communities ahead of elections, as long as the contribution 'proved to have been designed to advance the interests of community fund raising, self-help, self-reliance or social welfare projects within the constituency and to have been done before the campaign period'. Section 97.4. of the *Elections (Amendment) Act of 1995*, quoted in Tsubura (2015) page 5.

33 Tsubura (2015) page 1.

34 Pambazuka News (2006), Action for Justice (undated).

is legal or illegal when it comes to the actual interactions between politicians and voters'.³⁵

One study found that while some Tanzanian voters were willing to accept gifts in return for their votes, their continued expectation of benefits meant it 'became difficult for MPs to keep satisfying their clientelistic supporters after the elections.'³⁶ Another scholar studied vote buying in Tanzania from a gender perspective. The surveyed respondents viewed 'men as more active vote buyers, mainly due to the gender gap in vote-buying opportunities'.³⁷

However, the enforcement of vote buying regulations is not unheard of in Tanzania. During the holding of primaries for the October 2025 elections, the police arrested six individuals for alleged vote buying activities.³⁸ The fate of these individuals was not decided at the time of writing this paper shortly before the October 2025 elections. Focusing on primary elections within the governing CCM was particularly relevant for the 2025 elections, as the main opposition party in the elections between 2010 and 2020 was banned from participating in the 2025 elections.³⁹

Uganda

Politically, Uganda is certainly more similar to Tanzania than to Kenya, in that one political party has dominated politics for decades.⁴⁰ Indeed, until 2005, Uganda was governed on a non-party basis. Also, since multiple parties were allowed to compete in Ugandan elections, President Museveni and the National Resistance Movement have continued to dominate the political process. As one 2013 study reported, 'money and resources play an important role in Ugandan politics'.⁴¹ Vote buying 'was evident in the 2001 and 2006 elections, and occurred again in the 2011 elections'.⁴²

The Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring (ACFIM) has published several reports on Ugandan campaign financing, including the issue of vote buying. In relation to the 2021 elections, ACFIM claimed that vote buying was

35 Tsubura (2015) page 6

36 Ibid page 23. This is likely to relate to earlier findings of high turnovers among African elected politicians (members of parliament). Ohman (2004).

37 Yung Yoon (2020) page 125.

38 Kimwaga (2025).

39 Observer groups including Human Rights Watch have severely criticised the activities by Tanzanian authorities ahead of the elections. Human Rights Watch (2025).

40 For a comparison of Tanzania and Uganda from a perspective of campaign finance, see Khisa, Msami and Therkildsen (2024).

41 Helle and Rakner (2013) page 162.

42 Mpyisi and Mwirichia (2011) page 6. See also Kwarisima (2025).

overall more costly than all other forms of campaign spending together. However, that finding should be interpreted with some caution, as the ACFIM concept of ‘voter inducement’ was broader than the narrow definition of vote buying used by many other scholars; in addition, the methodology used to derive this conclusion was somewhat unclear.⁴³

There is little doubt that many services to Ugandan citizens that would otherwise be expected to be handled by the government are instead provided by political actors. As an illustration, around 2020, Ugandan members of parliament reportedly owned 180 ambulances, compared with the 178 ambulances owned by the state according to a 2019 survey by the Ugandan Ministry of Health.⁴⁴ The European Union Election Observation Mission to the 2016 Ugandan elections also found that vote buying was

widespread in districts with greater poverty. Voters expect to receive money, food, refreshments, or other goods at campaign events. While both giving and receiving bribes is illegal, distribution of food, refreshments and T-shirts does not constitute bribery... During the campaign’s final stage ... the ruling party’s representatives started distributing cash throughout the country without camouflaging it as a reimbursement ... [in] the following days, the EU EOM observed cash being distributed to voters in locations across the country. In some rural areas, voters received as little as 500 or 1,000 UGX each.⁴⁵

One of the recommendations from the report was that the Election Commission should ‘be empowered to address noncompliance with campaign regulations more effectively’.⁴⁶ However, in 2018, the European Union found that ‘none of the 30 recommendations, including the 11 priority recommendations, has been implemented by the Ugandan authorities’; as a consequence, the European Union decided to not monitor the 2021 elections.⁴⁷

A study focusing on voter interviews evaluated the ACFIM campaign to reduce vote buying in the 2016 elections in Uganda.⁴⁸ The campaign included distributing leaflets, holding village meetings, and making phone calls, through which activists sought to persuade voters during the last three weeks before the elections not to sell their votes. The researchers found that the campaign

43 Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring, ACFIM (2023) page 61.

44 Kitamirike and Kisaakye (2020) page 30 and Parliament Watch (2023).

45 European Union Election Observation Mission (2016) page 19.

46 Ibid page 49.

47 European Union Election Follow-up Mission (2018) page 8. The next general elections in Uganda are scheduled for early 2026.

48 Blattman, Larreguy, Marx and Reid (2024).

‘somewhat changed voters’ perceptions of the consequences of vote buying and fostered coordination against the practice’, yet it ultimately ‘failed to reduce vote buying’. The authors argued that this finding was at least partly due to the timing of the anti-vote buying campaign. They stated that ‘vote buying interventions should be conducted well ahead of elections, in order to also induce a reduction in vote buying by incumbents’.⁴⁹

POPULAR ATTITUDES TO VOTE BUYING IN AFRICAN COUNTRIES

Understanding the concept of vote buying requires in-depth knowledge of how voters perceive such practices. Hence, it is important to study the research that has been conducted on popular attitudes to vote buying. In reviewing the various surveys reported below, I did not focus on how often people reported they had been approached with offers to buy their votes.⁵⁰ My approach was based on the fact that the ways in which people respond to questions about this highly sensitive topic seem to depend on a range of factors. It is crucially important to interpret findings on this issue with great care.⁵¹

A 2019 Afrobarometer study in Uganda focused specifically on vote buying.⁵² More than half the respondents (56%) saw vote buying as ‘wrong and punishable’, with only 27% stating that the practice was ‘wrong but understandable’. When it came to selling votes, however, attitudes were somewhat different, with 39% seeing vote selling as ‘wrong and punishable’.

Interestingly, the study also compared attitudes in Uganda during 2019 with public views recorded in 2010 and 2011. Attitudes toward vote buying remained fairly constant over the years; the proportion who viewed it as ‘wrong and punishable’ was 49% in 2010 and 51% in 2011.⁵³ Importantly, however, there was a substantial change for the categories ‘wrong but understandable’ and ‘not wrong at all’, from 38% and 8% respectively in 2010, to 27% and 15% respectively in 2019. Furthermore, attitudes toward the selling of votes changed. The share who viewed vote selling as ‘wrong and punishable’ increased from 33% in 2010

49 Ibid page 22, 31.

50 For an overview of the percentages of respondents who reported they had been offered money for their votes in various countries and elections, see Ohman (2022) page 67.

51 One way to reduce the risk of bias in surveys on vote buying experience may be to use list experiments. When Kramon used such an approach in Kenya after the 2007 elections, he found that the share of respondents reporting to have been influenced by vote buying increased from 7% to 23%. Kramon (2016) page 397. There was a similar result when a list experiment was used to explore the experience of receiving gifts from politicians in Tanzania. Croke (2014). For examples from outside Africa and methodological presentations of this approach in evaluating vote buying, see Corstange (2010) and Gonzalez-Ocantos and Kiewiet de Jonge (et al) (2012).

52 Kakumba (2020).

53 Ibid page 3.

to 39% in 2019. The proportion who viewed vote selling as 'not wrong at all' increased from 9% in 2010 to 24% in 2019, an increase of more than 2.5 times.⁵⁴

Earlier Afrobarometer studies similarly explored attitudes to vote buying in Nigeria. The Nigerian survey focused on the 2007 elections showed that 41% of respondents would refuse to receive an offer to buy their votes. By contrast, 42% reported that they would take the money but vote their preference. Only 8% reported that they would take the money and vote accordingly.⁵⁵ Similarly, in a 2018 study on vote buying in Nigeria, respondents were asked if they thought that 'people should collect money or a gift for their vote'.⁵⁶ On average, 78% responded 'no'. The researchers reported that the overall responses indicated that

[al]though a large majority of those surveyed disapproved of vote-selling, this seems to have been a conditional view for most ... the view of these respondents, and therefore their behaviour, could change if the material conditions around vote-selling – an individual's personal socio-economic circumstances or perceptions of safety, for instance – or the level of reward offered were to change.⁵⁷

A 2024 study of attitudes to vote buying in Imo State in Nigeria showed a high level of awareness and popular rejection of vote buying. This included the finding that all but five of the 382 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: 'When I engage in vote buying I discourage conscientious people from participation in electoral politics'.⁵⁸ The authors concluded that 'vote buying in Imo State will soon become ancient as many residents of Imo State are refusing to act in that lane.' The statement might strike some as perhaps being overly optimistic.⁵⁹

A 2022 study on popular attitudes towards vote buying in Malawi found that 'candidates who criticize vote buying or promise community services are likely to do better at the ballot box than those who offer targeted handouts'.⁶⁰ It is admittedly a little bit difficult to square this optimistic research conclusion with other findings, such as that vote buying is a 'deeply embedded social

54 Most variables studied, such as gender, age and rural/urban, had only a minor impact on the survey results. However, higher levels of education clearly indicated a higher likelihood of the respondent rejecting both vote buying and vote selling. Kakumba (2020) page 5.

55 Bratton (2008) page 10. Interestingly, in the same survey, respondents also thought that few other Nigerian voters would accept a vote buying offer and vote accordingly.

56 Hoffman and Patel (2022) page 16.

57 Ibid page 16.

58 Effiong, Oduenyi and Onyekachi et al (2024), page 30.

59 Ibid page 31.

60 Kao, Lust and Rakner (2022).

practice. Voters often expect gifts, politicians see them as campaign essentials, and communities tacitly accept the exchange.⁶¹

A 2025 study specifically focusing on first-time voters in the Central region of Ghana found a significant impact of vote buying, with nearly 65% respondents stating that the practice had impacted their voting behaviour.⁶² The authors concluded that 'vote buying among first-time voters not only distorts electoral outcomes but also weakens institutional trust, undermines fairness, and entrenches governance systems where accountability is owed to brokers and benefactors rather than the electorate at large.'⁶³

CONCLUSION

In the long term, it seems commonly agreed that the most effective countermeasure against vote buying is economic development. This would allow voters to no longer feel the need to accept money for their votes; in addition, politicians may become unable to afford to buy sufficient numbers of votes for the practice to be worth their while.⁶⁴ Achieving such progress, however, seems a frustratingly distant goal to many people – and indeed, vote buying may serve only to undermine efforts to achieve such progress. No simple solution is offered here. Perhaps it serves the discussion best to highlight an earlier finding in this field:

There are no substitutes for an independent electoral commission, an honest bureaucracy, and a neutral police force that can guarantee a secret ballot ... there is less need for voter education than for a system of incentives and capabilities that will allow ordinary people to resist these misguided efforts to appropriate their votes.⁶⁵

In addition, electoral codes of conduct can be valuable tools for counteracting vote buying. Countries that currently lack such codes should consider their introduction. Where they exist, their effectiveness in stopping vote buying should be evaluated and potential improvements considered. Experts should

61 Nyondo (2026). This view reflects the finding concerning the 2025 Malawian elections that vote buying 'is culturally accepted'. European Union Election Observation Mission (2025) page 27.

62 Takyi and Kyere (2025) page 4858.

63 Ibid page 4761.

64 For a discussion on this point in relation to Kenya, see Erlich (2021). One study found poverty to not be a strong predictor for vote buying in Nigeria, see Awoyemi (2025). The opposite seems to be the conclusion in a study in Imo State in Nigeria, see Effiong et al. (2024), page 31. In their study of vote buying across Africa, Jensen and Justesen (2014) found that the effect of poverty on vote buying increased if the election in questions was highly competitive.

65 Bratton (2008) page 16. On the impact of the capacity of the Election Management Body on vote buying, see Lundstedt and Edgell (2022).

also consider whether dedicated electoral courts might be useful for enforcing the provisions against vote buying that are already contained in laws and codes of conduct.

It is especially important to understand how voters in different African countries understand the concept of vote buying as well as their expectations for politicians and the democratic process. In this context, I note the 2025 finding that 47% of Ugandan respondents said that ‘most’ or ‘all’ members of the Ugandan Parliament were involved in corruption. The equivalent proportion was 49% in Sierra Leone.⁶⁶

We must not assume that lessons learned from one African country necessarily apply to others. Indeed, the way that people perceive vote buying within a country can vary even among different sections of the electorate and can change over time.⁶⁷ Efforts to reduce vote buying should be based on the dynamics of popular perceptions of this phenomenon if they are to have any chance of being effective.

A final consideration is whether increased gender equality in the political process in African countries could potentially reduce the problem of vote buying. It is positive for democratic representation that the proportion of women members of parliament in African countries is steadily increasing, albeit very slowly. However, there is no consensus about the potential link between gender representation and vote buying. Mi Yung Yoon stated that some scholars

assume that women are less likely to tolerate and engage in corrupt behaviours and that their disinclined attitudes towards corruption translate into their political role once they enter into politics ... However, others argue that the negative relationship is rather spurious, and disappears if the effects of the contextual factors conducive to the gender differences in attitudes towards corruption are controlled for ... These studies do not view women as innately honest and averse to corruption.⁶⁸

In other words, although practical experience indicates that women are less likely than men to engage in vote buying, this could be because women have access to fewer resources.⁶⁹ The issue of gender and vote buying is woefully understudied. Additional research is clearly needed. It is also evident that efforts to counteract

66 Male and Nakayima (2025) Page 9, Institute for Governance Reform (2025) Page 33.

67 Interesting findings are reported in Jöst and Lust (2022) regarding the impact of social density on attitudes to vote buying.

68 Yung Yoon (2020) page 126.

69 See for example Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring, ACFIM (2023) page 115f.

vote buying in African countries must continue, with concerted efforts required from both women and men. Such efforts must consider the views of vote buying among the electorate, and they should include a combination of measures aimed at short-, medium-, and long-term progress.

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