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Vote Buying in the 2018 Governorship Election in Ekiti State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This paper aims to comment on the manifestation of vote buying regarding voter turnout and voter choices in the 2018 Ekiti governorship election in Nigeria and its implications. The article notes that vote-buying might not have significantly influenced voter turnout, but it changed voters' choices as the two major political parties in the election resorted to a massive monetary inducement for electoral support at the poll. Even though the election was decided by secret balloting, the advent of “see and buy” shows that politicians are stepping up their games to manipulate elections. The paper thus argues for institutional electoral reform and strengthening the enforcement of the law.

Keywords: vote buying; Ekiti governorship election; Nigerian election; voter turnout; voter choice.

1 Introduction

With over 180 million people, Nigeria is the largest democracy in Africa (Nwankwo, 2017) and since the return of democratic rule in 1999 after decades of military dictatorships (Nwankwo, Okafor & Asuoha, 2017) one would expect that the primary features of electoral democracy would have at least germinated if not fully developed. At the moment, Nigerian democracy still exhibits features of authoritarianism. The significant difference is that while the conduct of elections might signify democracy, elections must be “free and fair” to pass as democratic. The principles of democratic self-government are irreconcilable with electoral shambles. Therefore, compliance with democratic norms in the contest signifies electoral democracy whereas the reverse is the case for electoral authoritarianism.

Elections free from malpractice are therefore the springboard of democracy (Nwankwo et al., 2017), they serve as the conduit for peaceful change of government and boost and grant political legitimacy to the government (Ojo, 2008). Also, they genuinely involve the citizenry in political decision-making which engenders accountability and answerability. In most African countries, however, elections are anything but free and fair with violence and vote-buying being significant characteristics (Bratton, 2008). Ideally, in a democracy, seeking electoral support is expected to be an open debate of reasoned arguments about why specific political candidates are most competent for election to office (Heywood, 2007). Candidates are supposed to compete for popular support by presenting programs of public good to stake out competitive positions by persuading the median voter at the centre of the political spectrum (Nichter, 2008). Electorates then elect the candidate whose policy and programmes most directly reflect their own set of preference.

However, in Nigeria as much as many African countries, elections are an offshoot of the vicious brawls over access to the resources controlled by the state, which are the significant treasure in Nigerian society. Due to the juicy nature of Nigerian elective positions, elections are very competitive, and politicians thus deploy various measures to win including violence, intimidation, manipulation and rigging (Cletus, 2017). Where these strategies are not convincing enough to win, they deploy ‘carrots’—voter buying. Vote buying

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is commonly conceived as offering rewards especially money in exchange for vote choices (e.g., Lehoucq 2007; Ojo, 2008; Kramon, 2016) but it is sometimes mistaken for turnout buying which refers to offering incentives for people to turnout on election day (Nichter, 2008).

The focus of this paper is not on turnout buying but on vote buying (the paying of voters to vote for a party or candidate). However, the aim is to comment on the manifestation of vote buying regarding voter turnout and voter choices in the 2018 Ekiti governorship election in Nigeria and its implications. The article notes that vote-buying might not have significantly influenced voter turnout, but it changed voters’ choices as the two major political parties in the election resorted to a massive monetary inducement for electoral support at the poll. Even though the election was secret balloting, the advent of “see and buy” shows that politicians are stepping up their games to manipulate elections. The paper thus argues for electoral institutional reform and strengthening the enforcement of the law.

It is argued that Nigerians aspire for free and fair election (Ojo, 2008), while this could be the case, it is not evident if they are immune to vote-buying–an essential element of electoral shambles in the country. The 14 July 2018 gubernatorial election in Ekiti State, Nigeria is another episode of massive vote buying by the two major political parties: All Progressives Congress (APC) and People’s Democratic Party (PDP). With the deployment of 30,000 police operatives, 19,997 NSCDC personnel, surveillance vehicles, sniffer dogs and many soldiers, one would expect that the election will be devoid of any form of malpractice. While the poll was generally peaceful, the police dispersed the opposition party, PDP’s supporters in a campaign venue, and arrested many of the party’s leaders days before the election.

The zenith of it is the security operatives’ deliberate allowance of a high level of open vote buying, what the PDP accused the APC of doing “see and buy” implying that the voters have to show the APC operatives (agents) their ballot paper to confirm they voted for the party before paying. Other cases of malpractices are ballot box snatching and dispersal of PDP supporters at polling units considered PDP strongholds. The level of vote buying in this election has become subject of public discourse generating intense debate far more than before. The reason is obvious, while the incident of vote buying has steadily increased since 1999, the money paid per vote skyrocketed in the 2018 Ekiti governorship election. In the history of Nigerian elections, the 2007 presidential election which former president Olusegun Obasanjo dubbed a “do or die affair” was the most fraudulent and monetized election.

As monetized as the 2007 general elections were, as reported in the press, voters were paid as high as 2000 naira. However, in the just concluded Ekiti election, voters were paid as high as 10000 nairas representing 500% increase in the value of a vote from 2007. An online news media, Pulse, quoted an aggrieved voter as saying “PDP middlemen are distributing N3,000 instead of N5,000” (Pulse, 2018) implying that the voter is displeased by the amount the PDP is offering. Thus, the election was like an auction market where the highest bidder buys the good. The view of Mr Sesugh Akume, the National Publicity Secretary of the Abundant Nigeria Renewal Party (ANRP) as quoted in an article by the Premium Times corroborates it,

Elections for sale where the highest bidder carries the day are akin to a death knell on our democracy. What we have presently is democracy for sale – a democracy that perpetuates ignorance, poverty, violence and underdevelopment. This ugly trend is entrenching the practice of corrupting the system to earn illicit money in order to buy votes from an impoverished and psychologically-damaged populace. This leads to politicians offering bad governance, gaining illicit wealth in the process and repeating the cycle (Premium Times 2018).

An investigation by one of the leading newspapers in Nigeria, Sun indicates that the two major political parties in the election, the PDP and APC took part in vote buying. The reporter of the Sun Newspaper, Ismail Omipidan notes that,

An average Ekiti voter yesterday became instantly rich. Depending on who the voter must have cast his/her ballot for, the least an average voter got was N2, 500. And this happened in Isan-Ekiti. If those who got the N2,500 had benefited the initial N4,000 from the other party, the voter would have smiled home with N6,500. But in Oye, where one of the parties began with N7,000 per voter, before raising it to N10,000, which was only delivered to the voter after casting his/her ballot, such a voter would go home with between N14,000 and N11,000 if the voter had benefited from the other party’s N4,000 which was distributed a day to the election (Omipidan, 2018, Sunday Sun, 15 July 2018).
The manifestation of a high level of vote buying is evident in the 2018 election result compared with the 2014 election. As Fig. 1 indicates, the margin between the winner party and the loser party was more extensive in 2014 than 2018. In 2014, the PDP scored 57.97% of the total valid votes while APC scored 34.37% and other political parties combined have 7.66%. The margin between the two major parties is 23.6%. In 2018, the APC scored 51.34% of the total valid votes while the PDP scored 46.31% and other political parties combined have 2.34%. The margin this time is 5.03%, also notice that the margin of voters supporting the minority parties declined by 5.32%. So, we can see that the election was very competitive. Therefore, in juxtaposition with 2014, it can be argued that the competitiveness of the 2018 election is a manifestation of vote buying since the two major parties appealed for votes using money as rewards for people who voted the parties.

As Table 1 shows, the voter turnout in the 2018 Ekiti election is 44.62%, a 5.7% decrease from 50.32% in 2014 despite the high level of vote buying in the 2018 election which suggests that perhaps vote buying did not influence turnout. However, Nwankwo and Okafor (2017) argue that vote-buying might have influenced voter turnout in the presidential election of 2015. Regardless, a survey will be required to determine if it affected turnout while taking into account other significant predictors of participation such as political trust and home ownership (see, Nwankwo and Okafor 2017).

Table 1: Voter turnout in the election.

|                | 2014   | 2018   |
|----------------|--------|--------|
| Registered Voters | 733,766 | 909,585 |
| Accredited Voters | 369,257 | 405,861 |
| Votes cast      | 360,455 | 403,451 |
| Valid Votes     | 350,366 | 384,594 |
| Rejected Votes  | 10,089  | 18,857  |
| Percentage Turnout | 50.32  | 44.62   |

Sources: Channels Television (2018) and INEC (2014).
The implication of the manifestation of vote buying in the Ekiti election for the 2019 general election and beyond is that it will undermine political legitimacy and make a mockery of Nigerian democracy. It will create a fundamental problem of unaccountability and irresponsibility as the voters will not have the moral ground to demand good governance from politicians and it will affect the credibility of the elections. Vote buying increases the outlays of elections for candidates and parties and may preclude dependable aspirants from contesting for political office (Matenga, 2016). It generates disparagement among voters, with a sense of alienation from a besmirched system that nosedives democratic principles (Matenga, 2016). Consequently, there is a need for an essential check to this electoral menace, strengthening the electoral statutory framework is imperative. The Electoral Act of 2002, 2006 and 2010 have positioned the Nigerian democracy on the right path by enhancing the legal structure to check financial malpractices regarding elections. Nevertheless, Gram Matenga indicates that the Electoral Act has some significant inconsistencies and potential gaps that need to be addressed (Matenga, 2016).

He observes that while section 91(9) of the Electoral Act states that “no individual or other entity shall donate more than one million nairas to any candidate”, section 93(2)(b) permits political parties to collect limitless amounts above the threshold. This lacuna needs an amendment to restrict political parties from receiving an unlimited amount of money from any political office holder, nor groups in ways that are not transparent. Limiting the money politicians can spend on an election will to some extent curtail vote buying. Matenga (2016) also advocates secret balloting but with the advent of “see and buy” as manifested in the Ekiti election, what is needed is beyond secret balloting. Enhanced secret balloting is indispensable for electoral integrity but as Matenga (2016) argues, stringent legislation is needed especially as the electoral officials and security operatives aided “see and buy” in the Ekiti election.

While vote buying is not alien to some advanced democracies, Nigeria needs to step up the game by putting heavy penalties on vote buying or selling. For instance, in the 2004 election in the United States five Democratic Party agents in East St. Louis were sentenced in federal court for offering $5 to $10 incentives, beer, cigarettes, medicine to sway turnout of the poor (Nichter, 2008). The incident of vote buying in the 2018 Ekiti governorship election might be a signal that Nigerian democracy is at a critical juncture for another massive electoral manipulation similar to the 2007 election. Therefore, institutional reform is most needed to avert impending political and electoral crisis.

The Nigerian democracy has progressed to a reasonable extent regarding curtailing election rigging since 2011, however, vote buying remains a bane to the progress being made. Therefore, as path dependence theorist argue there is a need for institutional reform at this critical juncture (see, Nwankwo, 2018a; 2018b) to check vote-buying ahead of the 2019 general elections. A further amendment to the electoral act is imperative to outlaw and criminalise vote buying and selling including any person or group aiding it. Besides, there is a need to improve the enforcement mechanisms of the law to tame the tides of vote buying and selling.

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