

Socio-Political Activity and Criminalization of Politics in Cross River South Senatorial District, Nigeria

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[167] Abstract

This research was an evaluation of the extent to which socio-political activities relate to criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District, Nigeria. More specifically, the study was geared towards ascertaining the extent at which vote buying relates with criminalization of politics. To achieve this cardinal objective, one hypothesis was formulated to guide the study. The Pluralist theory was used as the theoretical framework of the study. Cross sectional research design was adopted for the study. The population of the study comprises of the people residing in Cross River South Senatorial District. Through the use unstructured interview and questionnaire, a sample of four hundred 400 respondents was selected from the study area using a multi-staged sampling technique. Hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Analysis. The study concluded that vote buying is now a norm in Nigeria political system which otherwise has led to criminalization of politics in the study area. The findings of the study revealed that there is a significant relationship between vote buying and criminalization of politics. From these findings this research advocates among others that, the economic and financial crimes commission (EFCC) and independent corrupt practices and other related offences commission (ICPC) must be repositioned to play critical roles by punishing offenders of vote buying and the criminalization of politics. This will help to fish out those behind this security problem in Nigeria which the end result is violence.

Keywords: Criminalization of politics, Electoral fraud, Socio-political activities, Vote buying, Violence.

1. Introduction

Nigeria's political and electoral experiences since 1999 to the most recent general election in 2023 have left sad memories of criminalization of politics. In fact, violence has saturated the political atmosphere in the country. For instance, the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and most recently the 2023 general elections were marred by widespread fraud and by extension unparalleled partisan violence. The election violence in 2007, 2011 and 2015 led to severe harm to the political atmosphere in Nigeria, including loss of lives and property worth billions of Naira (Abah and Nwokuwu, 2015).

The 2019 general elections in Nigeria witnessed an increase in the use of the term "vote buying" in academic and media circles which according to Ushie (2016) is abhorrence to peaceful election. Even before the presidential election, and indeed at the party conventions, there was enormous breach of the rules and regulations of democratic elections. There were indications as well as documented proof of extensive use of money during the party primaries as well as the presidential election. Proof available to government as noted by Ulayi (2019) put the total amount of money spent by the presidential candidates at over two billion, one hundred million naira (N2.1 billion). The use of money was again the principal source of undermining the electoral process. Consequently, the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria, in particular, stand at the vanguard of scholarly examination due to the prevalent electoral

irregularities and derelictions that have blemished the democratic process such as vote buying (Abdu-Raheem and Bamgbade, 2023).

Vote buying has been a fundamental element of money politics in Nigeria despite the fact that the 2010 Electoral Act (as amended), and the 2022 Electoral Act criminalising it. Precisely, S Section 121(2) of the 2022 Electoral Act outlawed vote buying. But, recent experiences however show that vote buying takes place at multiple stages of the electoral cycle and has been witnessed eminently during voter registration, the nomination period, campaigning and on the election day. It is more predominant on Election Day, just prior to or during voting. Vote-buying is currently the most common and deceptive electoral strategy used by political parties and their candidates in Nigeria to win elections. According to Onapajo & Francis (2015), the practice of selling votes permeates elections in Nigeria. The Nigerian political scene has been marked by a variety of forms of crime, including corruption, cultism, violence, and unkempt promises, to name just a few. Criminality in politics in Nigeria brings a complex set of events such as poverty, ethnic or religious grievances, which affect the social relationship of the people in the society. Those who are able to get around these crimes have limited their political participation. Apathy among voters as a result of various political crimes has also diminished citizens' faith in the government.

According to Gberevbie (2014), electoral violence has really discouraged citizens' participation in the political process in many states in Nigeria, and this development portends serious danger to Nigeria's democracy because without sufficient turnout, elections would not reflect the people's preference. It is against this background that it becomes imperative for this study to examine socio-political activities and the criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District vis-à-vis Intimidation of voters, use of thugs, vote buying and mass thumb printing.

It is worthy to note that the 2019 election specifically was full of vote buying in Cross River State where some political parties were giving voters money to vote for their candidate (Obeten, 2020). There is also a brazen willingness on the part of some electorate to sell their vote to a highest bidder for one reason or the other. Vote buying and mass thumb printings are among the major electoral malpractices that characterized elections in Cross River State in particular and Nigeria in general. While in some areas elections tend to be peaceful, the malpractices of vote buying and mass thumb printing are seen to be frightening. As rightly noted by Robert (2020), the absent of physical violent in Nigeria electoral process means the irresistible present of vote buying and mass thumb printing. This is because in polling units or areas where there is resistance to vote buying or mass thumb printing there is bound to be political thugs armed to intimidate voters.

While politicians in Nigeria are noted for their penchant for perverting the political process and sponsoring violence, they do this using the youth as their foot soldiers. Given the sorry state of the nation's economy, unemployment, and pervading poverty, youth, the most productive segment of the population, has become the willing tool for election criminality in the hand of the political elite. The lack of meaningful and productive engagement meant that the youth are willing instruments that can be deployed for dirty assignments by the politicians, who control their loyalty.

The criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District State is clearly reflected in vote buying which is quite undemocratic and grossly defiles the essence of election in every democratic setting. These menace in recent times has been seen to be exacerbating rather than ameliorating as often times those who win the election do not reflect the overall interest of the masses but rather few Godfather's whose interest is to use the office of imposed leaders to amass wealth for personal gains rather than the good of the general populace. The pluralist theory was used as theoretical anchorage. The theory holds the view that, politics and decision-making are located mostly in the framework of government, but that many non-governmental groups use their resources to exert influence. Since Nigeria is a plural society, composed of various ethnic groups, there is always competition among these ethnic groups to capture political offices and control national wealth (Bassey, 2016). This is because in variegated society like Nigeria, every ethnic group is mobilizing support for its candidates during elections.

This could result in election improprieties. The relevance of this theory to the study is anchored on its ability to explain the existence of different groups in every political system. These groups are known to have diverse interest which the group strives to maximize through all means possible. These groups during elections in Nigeria comprises of different political parties and interest groups that strives maximize their interest through winning of elections using all means possible such as vote buying which is unethical in every democratic setting. Therefore, this this research article raises the following question: Does vote buying relate to criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District?

The crisis of criminalization of politics *vis a vis* vote buying in every electoral process in Nigeria is gradually gaining global recognition considering it associated effect in the nascent democracy of the country. Arising from this debilitating crisis, this study sought to examine socio-political activities and the criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District. Arising from the research question and objective, the following hypothesis was set. There is no significant relationship between vote buying and criminalization of politics in River State South Senatorial District. The study covers from 2007 to 2023. Also, the obvious fact that from the extant literature consulted and used for the study clearly shows that no existing literature has sufficiently dwell on the influence of socio-political activities and the criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District clearly establish a gap in the literature. Thus, the quest to fill this existing gap in the literature thereby contributing to the existing body of knowledge makes this study very relevant in the scholarship.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Political Violence and Criminalization of politics in Nigeria Political violence is the collapse of community standards, political alienation and the cohesiveness of a ruling group; a response to frustrating conditions (Azeez, 2005). Political violence, according to Anifowose (2002), is defined as “the use of threat or physical act carried out by an individual or group within a political system against another individual or individuals, property, with the intent to cause injury or death to persons, damage to property, or destruction of property,” and whose goal, choice of targets or victims, setting, implementation, and effects have political relevance—that is, they tend to change the behavior of others in the existing class structure, which has some effects on the political system.

According to Obeten (2016), political violence during elections constitutes an illegal interference with the election process. The work of viciousness differs as eagerness; rigging of elections, electoral fraud, thuggery, and power abuse are all forms of electoral abuse, as is the “sit tight” syndrome. Problems with voter registration, god-fatherism, intra-party violence, violent disruption of political meetings, parallel party congresses, delegate bribery, duplicate polls, refusal to send election materials to supposed rival constituencies, ethno religious slurs, manifestos devoid of concrete vision and ideologies, imposition of candidates, perversion of election procedures, kidnapping of opponents, assassination of would-be Candidates and political chieftains, stealing of ballot boxes, and out These packs, as indicated by the Basic liberties Watch (2007) report, was made fundamentally out of jobless young fellows activated to assaults their backers' adversaries, scare individual from the general population, rig races, and safeguard their supporters from comparative assaults. In every state of the Nigerian Federation, politicians encourage youth gangs to commit violent crimes. During the 2019 general elections, Nigeria recorded a total of 52 deaths, according to the NSA (2020), and a significant amount of personal and public property was destroyed.

2.1.2 Overview of Electoral fraud and it effect on Criminalization of politics in Nigeria The prevalence of electoral fraud as a bane on Nigeria’s democracy has been attracting scholarly attention for quite some time now. This is not only because of good governance, but also because it serves as a tool to undermine the role played by the electorate in determining who occupies public office. In the

course of reviewing the available literature, electoral fraud will be used inter-changeably with electoral malpractice.

Elections are central to the existence, stability and development of democracies and political parties plays significant roles in such democracies. This is evident, because a free and fair election promotes and ensures democracy. Taking a look at the democratic history of Nigeria, it is observed that electoral violence has adversely affected the country to the extent of causing major political upheavals and terminating democracy. Politically speaking, electoral fraud has affected the democratic foundation of the country. Although, it is an acceptable fact that violence is an indispensable factor in human existence (Ayene, 2000).

Electoral fraud has caused a lot of harm to the democratic stability in Nigeria. An uncontrolled electoral violence has the potential of truncating democratic stability in a country. A consequence to this is sabotaging the will of the electorate at the elections. It may lead to a situation where leaders that emerge are elected by the minority because the majority that has fears for their lives will not go near the electoral process. More so, large scale electoral fraud has adverse effect on democratic stability because it negates the essential purpose of elections as a popular basis for government. For instance, a government which by electoral fraud sustains itself in power against the wishes of the majority of the electorate lacks the legitimacy or moral authority that popular mandate bestows (Ezeani, 2005).

2.1.6 Vote buying and criminalization of politics in Nigeria Vote buying the most recent electoral fraud in Nigeria simply means the exchange of private material benefits for political support. It is an action in which the voter sells his or her vote to the highest bidder. It is also a form of financial, material or promising inducement or reward by a candidate, political party, agent or supporter to influence a voter to cast his or her vote or even abstain from doing so in order to enhance the chances of a particular candidate to win in an election. This is seen as an integral practice, just like a typical market environment, the politicians, political parties and party agents becomes the buyers of votes or vote buyers while the prospective voters are the potential vote sellers. In this therefore, voters cast their votes not according to their consciences but based on the highest bidder. In this situation what determines the value or price of a vote by the vote seller is the level of desperation of our politicians since everybody wants to win an election no matter the means, because for them the end justifies the means.

In the just concluded 2019 general elections in Nigeria, vote buying and vote selling became prominent and Nigerian politicians adopted two approaches in perpetrating their act. The first is the cash for vote method and the vote for cash method. In all the stages of election conducted in Nigeria in 2019 which ranges from Presidential, National Assembly elections, Governorship and House of Assembly elections, vote buying which became very prominent ranges from N2,000, N3,000, N4,000 and N5,000 depending on the political parties and the candidates. The two major political parties in the said election, the APC that is the ruling party and desperate to return to maintain their position and the People's Democratic Party, the PDP that is in the opposition and wants to return to power again are the major culprits. It would be stated here that there were glaring cases of vote buying during the 2019 election was too disappointing to the sustainability of our democracy.

Several attempts have been made by writers and researchers to define the concept of vote buying. This is because vote buying carries different notions in different countries depending on the country's historical, cultural, political aspects and its election models (Schaffer, 2007). One of the most cited definitions on vote buying is from Etzioni-Halevy who defined vote buying as "the exchange of private material benefits for political support" (Heidenheimer, Johnston & LeVine 2009). The definition stresses on gaining private material benefits by voters in return for their political support. In other words, it is about giving voters some benefits in the form of gifts or incentives for them

to reciprocate with their votes by voting for the giver or the candidate. In effects, voters are given items for their private use and they are expected to return this gesture from candidates or political parties by voting for them. She sees this act as an exchange in the sense that the materials are given to the electorates in anticipation that the electorates would consider the gift received and vote for them.

Similarly, Fox (2004) sees vote buying as “exchanging political rights for material gains”. His focus is on the right of a person to exercise his/her franchise. His definition, also stresses on an exchange which is also seen as a transaction. Thus, selling one’s right by accepting a gift, incentive or benefit to vote for a candidate or a political party. To Fox, the aspect of exchange between the material benefit and the political support is more significant than the objective of the exchange.

Bryan (2005) also defines the concept as “the use of money and direct benefits to influence voters.” While the first two definitions did not actually focus on the use of money, Bryan specifically includes money in his definition. His definition, unlike other existing literature does not restrict vote buying to only money but includes other materialistic items like food. In this instance, electorates are given money and other direct benefits to manipulate their decisions. Thus, they are given these items to influence their decisions or choices at the polls. Again, voters are also given these direct benefits and may be expected to abstain from voting. Thus, to vote in a particular way or not to vote.

Existing research shows that a mix of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, old age, early-stage democratization, and a winner-take-all electoral system has contributed to the menace of vote-buying. Khemani (2015) found that there is a link between vote-buying and poor delivery of electorates. Although Nath (2015) concluded that vote buying ordinarily increase voter support, it is noteworthy that existing literature has not examined the connection between electorate and vote selling. Moreover, none of the available research has explored the vote selling phenomenon from voters’ perspectives. Political parties use various illegal means to ensure electoral success in Nigeria.

Vote buying or selling is frowned upon in every democracy. It raises questions about the quality of democracy. Neeman and Orosel (2006) identify three types of arguments that are usually made against the practice. First, they argue that because vote buying gives wealthier individuals an unfair advantage, it violates the principle of equality. Second, they argue that votes belong to the community as a whole, and should therefore not be alienable by individual voters. Third, there is a concern that votes buying may promote incompetence. This is because the interests of some voters are bought by parties before the election, and their needs or interests may therefore be ignored by political representatives after the election. Buying of votes is also frowned upon in most economies. This is because once a nation becomes accessible to vote buying and vote selling; it ceases to be in the good books of foreign multinational companies seeking to invest in developing countries. In fact, even though elections in Nigeria are far from being democratic due to various forces, the most destructive force for Nigerian elections would be the practice of vote buying. In their work against this undemocratic practice, Nkwede and Abah (2019) explain that: “... Across the globe, election represents a mechanism which people are elected to offices. It is a modern and universally accepted process through which individuals are openly and methodically chosen to represent a body or community in a large entity of government. It is still one of the cardinal features of democracy. Democracy itself is adjudged to be the best form of government all over the world but simultaneously being constantly assaulted in Nigeria due to the phenomenon of vote buying. Indeed, vote buying seems to have the centre stage in the democratization process in Nigerian politics. Essentially, the electorates trade their votes for certain outcomes that are important to them.

In the nutshell, while some cultures and literature restrict vote buying to the handing out of cash for votes, others also extend vote buying to the distribution of materials for votes. As Schaffer (2007) puts it, “political operatives frequently hand out not just cash, but also a wide

range of goods and services such as bags of rice, chickens, whisky, clothing, soccer balls, Viagra, haircuts, and teeth cleaning.”

Again, while other literatures see the concept as payments made before one goes to the poll, others define the concept in terms of “a reward” which is usually given to the person after going to the poll. Thus, in some instances, a voter receives the incentive before going to the poll while in other instances too, a voter only receives the incentive after he s/he has gone to the polls or performed his/ her part of the contract.

Another similar definition of vote buying is proposed by Oladopo et al., (2020), who define it as “any form of financial, material or promising inducement or reward by a candidate, political party, agent or supporter to influence a voter to cast his or her vote or even abstain from doing so in order to enhance the chances of a particular contestant to win an election.” Armed with the various submissions, it can be deduced that two parties are involved in the practice of vote buying: political parties or their candidates/agents, on the one hand, and the electorate with their voters’ cards, on the other hand. Here, the politicians offer money and other material things or promises to induce the electorate to vote for them or to prevent them from voting for candidates who, otherwise, they would have originally voted for.

From the aforementioned definitions, vote buying can therefore be explained to be the use of monetary or non-monetary materials or items to influence the decisions or behaviours of voters in an election. It is thus; any reward given to a person for voting in a particular way or for not voting. Vote buying does not only involve money but also other materialistic items.

On the perceptions on vote buying incentives, Kramon (2011) observed that vote buying signals a willingness and capacity to deliver small private goods which tend to be more highly valued by poor voters. In other words, politicians buy votes because of the information it conveys to voters about their credibility with respect to the provision of targeted, particularistic, or patronage goods to poor voters. He sees vote buying to signify credibility as a patron for the poor and as a candidate who understands the needs of poor constituents. He adds that a candidate who is willing and able to finance widespread vote buying during a campaign is perceived to be more likely to provide poor constituents with targeted benefits in the future.

Bratton (2008) in his paper “Vote buying and violence in Nigerian election campaigns” asserts that vote buying enhances partisan loyalty. Parties may offer incentives or benefits to core supporters during elections to sustain electoral coalitions. This is explained from the fact that the distribution of incentives to party supporters is a recognition and affirmation of their membership to the party. This stabilizes the support base of the party, by ensuring that party supporters do not defect to or vote for the opposition. As Gans-Morse, Mazzuca and Nichter (2009) put it, “unless operatives provide particularistic benefits, supporters may become swing or opposition voters during the next election.” This indicates that, it encourages them to turn out on election day to vote for the party. In other words, it eliminates apathy among supporters. In effect, parties may distribute rewards to voting supporters to prevent the erosion of partisan loyalties over time. All these become necessary as it is being perceived that electorates may not be aware of the laws on vote buying.

Most fundamentally, vote buying perpetuates corruption throughout the entire political system. When a candidate chooses to pay for support, rather than compete fairly for votes, they show a disregard for democratic norms and a willingness to use illegal means. Broadly speaking, vote buying obstructs the democratic process by interfering with the rights of citizens to freely decide who will represent them and their interests. This can result in the candidates with the deepest pockets winning the election, rather than candidates who would best serve their constituents (Amos, 2019).

Ideally, elections create a “social contract” between candidates and constituents who voted with the presumption that the candidates will govern along the lines of their stated policy platforms.

Vote buying enables poor governance and undercuts citizens' ability to hold their elected officials accountable. If a candidate believes all they need to do to be elected is pay off voters and government officials, they will have no incentive to be responsive to issues their constituents care about like water and sanitation, education and unemployment (Esira, 2020).

Vote buying has become a common practice associated with elections in Nigeria. Apart from reports from the media and different organizations that observed elections in Nigeria in 2015 and 2019 and the governorship elections in Edo and Ondo States in 2020, studies carried out by several scholars, such as Chile and Habu (2020), Davies (2016), Nkwede and Abah (2019), Iornumbe et al., (2020), and Oyewole and Omotola (2020), have attested to this anti-democratic practice in Nigerian elections. Unfortunately, vote buying has no positive benefit as far as credible elections are concerned. It does not only mar the credibility of elections, it also destroys the credibility of INEC and the image of Nigeria as a country in the committee of nations. Currently, such practice has produced leaders who have questionable characters and are not actually elected by the people to represent them

Along with damaging the candidate's credibility, vote buying according Desmond (2016) deters aspiring political leaders from running for office because it suggests that money, rather than ideas or experience, is how to win an election. That discourages qualified candidates from running for office, while entrenching corrupt officials in their positions. In places where vote buying is common, candidates face the dilemma of needing to mobilize most of their resources to buy the votes and assuming office with significant debts from campaigning.

According to international standards, in a true democracy every citizen has the right to stand for office, subject to reasonable restrictions. Vote buying makes it impossible to meet these standards by penalizing potential candidates who are at an economic disadvantage, especially women and minority politicians. Elections are the key to participatory democracy.

3 Research Methodology

3.1 Design and scope The study adopted cross sectional research design. This design is considered appropriate for this study because it has the capacity to accurately gather necessary information within a limited time frame. And also provides deeper and more thorough grasp of issue being investigated. The study area for this study is Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State. The choice of this area is as a result of the appalling and exacerbating state of criminalization of politics in the area and the researcher's familiarity and proximity to the area.

Cross River state have three (3) Senatorial Zones / Districts. They are Cross River Central Senatorial Zone / District, Cross River North Senatorial Zone / District and Cross River South Senatorial Zone / District. The study is mainly centered on Southern Senatorial District of Cross River Stated which is a political creation that has existed in Cross River State Nigeria for decades. The district comprises seven local government areas otherwise referred to as greater Calabar; namely Akamkpa, Akpabuyo, Biase, Bakassi, Calabar Municipality, Calabar South and Odukpani.

The study is basically concern with socio-political activities and criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District of State. The focus of this study is on the socio-political activities of both politicians and electorate and the criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District of State. The study is centered on the effect of vote buying and criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District, Nigeria. The study covers from 2007 to 2019.

3.2 Population of the study: The population of the study comprised of all the adult indigenes in seven (7) Local Government Areas in Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State. These specifically is made up of male and female who are 18 years and above and are considered to be educated enough to provide valid and reliable answers relating to socio-political activities and criminalization of politics in their area.

Using the 2019 projected population of Cross River State, the population of the six Local Government Areas that makes up Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State is 1,270,420 the breakdown of the population is as shown below.

TABLE 1 LGA IN SOUTHERN SENATORIAL DISTRICT

LGA in Southern Senatorial District	Population size 2019 projection
Calabar Municipal	187,432
Calabar South	191,630
Akpabuyo	271,395
Bakassi	106,771
Odukpani	192,884
Akamkpa	151,125
Baise	169,183
Total	1,270,420

Source: Compiled from 2019 projected population of Cross River State, Nigeria

3.3 Sampling techniques The study adopted a multi- staged sampling procedure. The sampling technique adopted for this study is stratified random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. Stratified random sampling technique was chosen because of its capacity for the proportional representation of subjects from the different units or department of the population. From each of the different Local Government Area that was stratified, three wards in the various Local Government Areas were selected using hat and draw simple random sampling technique. Respondents were asked to pick and not return from the hat, three wards from each Local Government Area that make up Cross River South Senatorial District and the wards that were picked was used as the target area of the study. This is clearly shown in table 2 below. The sample size of 400 was determined using the Taro Yamane's (1967) sample size determinant with a confidence level of 95% and a maximum variability level $p=5$. Out of this sample, 380 respondents were used for the analysis. This represents a return rate of 95% which is considered satisfactory for conducting data analysis.

Finally, the purposive sampling technique was used to administer the questionnaires to the respondents. The research adopts the purposive sampling technique because it gives the researcher the opportunity of interacting with the respondents in other to ensure that such respondents are intelligent enough to provide firsthand information which is needed to enhance the study.

TABLE 2 LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREAS IN SOUTHERN SENATORIAL DISTRICT OF CROSS RIVER STATE AND RANDOMLY SELECTED WARDS

Local Government Areas	Randomly selected wards
Calabar Municipal	Ward 3
	Ward 6
	Ward 10

Calabar South	Ward 7
	Ward 9
	Ward 11
Akpabuyo	Atimbo West
	Atimbo East
	Ikang North
Bakassi	Abana
	Atia Ema
	Amoto
Odukpani	Creek Town I
	Eki
	Ikoneto
Akamkpa	Awi
	Akamkpa urban
	Ojuk South
Baise	Adim
	Akpet/Abini
	Ehom

Source: Authors field survey 2024

3.5 Instrument of data collection A blend of qualitative and quantitative procedures and methodologies for data collection were adopted to obtain an insightful view of respondents' understanding of the issue under study. A total of 400 questionnaires were administered to the research participants. The research instruments were self-administered by four researchers. The distributes questionnaires were filed out and returned on site, except in cases where participants expressly asked for the researchers to return at a later date for collection. This collection approach ensured that the appropriate research participants filled out the questionnaires, this resulted in satisfactory return rate of 95%, which is satisfactory enough for data analysis.

All established ethical standards governing research in social sciences were observed in the study, including obtaining informed consent, voluntary involvement, participants' freedom to withdraw, as well

as cultural sensitivity. Prior to the study, the instruments used underwent a pre-test to ensure validity. A pre-test was carried out on 50 participants outside the research population but have similar characteristics.

A total of 14 in-depth interviews were carried on conveniently selected participants within the study area. The interviews were conducted during the daytime and at a participants' convenience. Participants were choosing based on their ability to provide adequate information on the issue under study. All the participants were informed of the purpose of the study, and their written consent was obtained. The interview session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes for each participant.

3.8 Method of data analysis The simple percentage was used to analyze data gotten from the field relating to demographic variables such as age, sex, marital status, qualification and religion. Also, the data gotten through field was used to analyze research questions using the simple percentage. Before the analysis of the hypothesis was carried out, the dependent and independent variable was identified as this enabled the researcher to ascertain the best possible statistical technique to use for the analysis. The statistical technique that was most suitable for analyzing the hypothesis is the Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Analysis. This analysis was carried out at 0.05 level of significant and 98 degree of freedom.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Analysis of respondents' demographic variables The variables considered in this study were sex, age, marital status, educational qualification and occupation. These variables are presented based on the responses of the respondents given in the questionnaire instrument. The gender balance was 297 respondents representing 78% were male while 83 respondents representing 22 % were female. This shows that the male respondents were much compared to the female respondents used for the study. Although this difference exists, it has no implication whatsoever on the result of the study as both sexes are considered to have valid knowledge of socio political activities and criminalization of politics the study area. The age balance was 49 (13%) respondents were within 21-30 years; 73 (19%) respondents were between 31-40 years; 103 (27%) were between 41-50 years; 87 (23%) were between 51-60 years and 68 (18%) were between 61 years and above. This clearly shows that respondents within the age range of 41-50 years were more in the respondents used for the study. Consequently, the marital status shows that 96 (25%) respondents were single; 251 (66%) respondents were married; 26 (7%) respondents were either separated or divorced and 7 (2%) respondents were widowed or widowers. This therefore suggests that married men and women formed the majority of the study respondents. However, the educational status shows that 24 (6%) respondents were First School Leaving Certificate holders; 114 (30%) respondents were Senior School Certificate holders; 65 (17%) respondents were either diploma or NCE holders; 89 (24%) respondents were B.Sc. or HND holders; 17 (4%) respondents were Master degree holders; 9 (2%) respondents were Ph.D. holders and 62 (17%) respondents were holders of different certification not mentioned. This clearly shows that majority of the respondents are Senior School Certificate holders with the foundational knowledge about the society and the issues under study. In terms of respondents' occupational status, 78 (20%) respondents were engaged in farming; 56 (15%) respondents were into fishing; 94 (25%) respondents were public servants; 50 (13%) respondents were students; 86 (23%) respondents were businessmen and women and 16 (4%) respondents were unemployed as of the time of this study. This result clearly shows that majority of the respondents studied were businessmen and women.

4.2 Analysis of research question

TABLE 3: ANALYSIS OF RESPONDENT RESPONSES TO THE VOTE BUYING AND CRIMINALIZATION OF POLITICS IN NIGERIA

S/N	Questionnaire items	Scale	Frequency	Percentage	Commutative percentage
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1	Vote buying is a very common practice during election in my polling unit?	Strongly Agree	149	39%	39
		Agree	140	36%	75
		Disagree	52	14%	89
		Strongly Disagree	44	11%	100
2	The masses are very comfortable with vote buying considering how much the make during election in my polling unit?	Strongly Agreed	174	45%	45
		Agree	159	41%	86
		Disagree	32	8%	94
		Strongly Disagree	20	6%	100
3	The growing state of poverty in my community has made vote buying to flourish in my polling?	Strongly Agreed	177	46%	46
		Agree	181	47%	93
		Disagree	17	4%	97
		Strongly Disagree	10	3%	100
4	Political candidates now see vote buying as the best possible means of winning election in my polling unit?	Strongly Agreed	189	49%	31
		Agree	152	40%	65
		Disagree	20	5%	91
		Strongly Disagree	24	6%	100
5	The process of vote buying is often carried out in collaboration with INEC officials in my polling unit?	Strongly Agreed	166	43%	43
		Agree	171	45%	88
		Disagree	29	7%	95
		Strongly Disagree	19	5%	100

Source: Field survey, 2024

The distribution in table 3: shows that majority of the respondents sampled for the study strongly agreed that vote buying is a very common practice during election in their polling unit. This is based on the fact that 149 representing 39 percent strongly agreed, 140 representing 36 percent agreed, 52 representing 14 percent of the respondents disagreed, 44 representing 11 percent of the respondents strongly disagreed.

The table also reveal that majority of the respondents sampled for the study strongly agreed to the fact that the masses are very comfortable with vote buying considering how much the make during election in their polling unit. This is based on the fact that 174 representing 45 percent of the sampled respondents strongly agreed, 159 representing 41 percent of the sampled respondents agreed, 32 representing 8 percent of the sampled respondents disagreed, while 20 representing 6 percent of the sampled respondents strongly disagreed.

Also the table shows that majority of the respondents agreed to the fact political candidates now see vote buying as the best possible means of winning election in their polling unit. This is based on the fact that, 189 representing 49 percent of the sampled respondents strongly agreed, 152 representing 40 percent of the sampled respondents agreed, 20 representing 5 percent disagreed and 24 representing 6 percent of the respondents sampled strongly disagreed.

Finally, the table shows that majority of the sampled respondents strongly agreed to the fact that the process of vote buying is often carried out in collaboration with INEC officials in their polling unit. This is based on the fact that 166 representing 43 percent of the sampled respondents strongly agreed, 171 representing 45 percent of the sampled respondent agreed, 29 representing 7 percent of the sampled respondents disagreed, while 19 representing 5 percent of the sampled respondents disagreed.

4.3 Hypotheses testing The hypotheses used in this study were stated in a null form showing the dependent and independent variable and the statistical tools used for data analysis. There is no significant relationship between vote buying and criminalization of politics in River State South Senatorial District.

Dependent variable; Vote buying

Independent variable; Criminalization of politics

Test statistic; Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Analysis

TABLE 16

TEST OF HYPOTHESIS FOUR USING PEARSON PRODUCT MOMENT CORRELATION COEFFICIENT ANALYSIS (N=400)

Variable	Ex Ey	Ex2 Ey2	Exy	R-cal
Vote buying	2117	6149		
Criminalization of politics	986	1974	7893	0.531

Level of significant= 0.05, DF=378, critical R-value=0.126

Table shows that the calculated R-value of 0.298 is greater than the critical R-value of 0.126 at 0.05 level of significant and 98 degree of freedom. With this result, the null hypothesis was rejected and the alternate hypothesis was accepted. Thus, there is a significant relationship between the vote buying and criminalization of politics in Cross River South Senatorial District of State.

4.4 Semi-structured interview analysis The researcher identified major subthemes associated with the socio-political activities and criminalization of politics in Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State from the participants' narratives of their personal experiences in politics and elections in their

area. These are; (a) Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) attitude and practices towards elections: This was discussed under the subtheme; INEC as an instrument of electoral malpractice.

The fact that INEC which is charged with the constitutional responsibility of ensuring a free and fair election which will clearly reflect the interest of the masses on who to represent them in governance ironically been used as an instrument of electoral malpractices clearly spells doom to the democracy of Nigeria. As clearly noted by a participant, there is no electoral malpractice that occurs without the consent and approval of INEC officials. He further noted that rigging can only be effective in an election if INEC officials are directly. Therefore it is very correct to state that the existing electoral malpractices in Nigeria elections is as a result of the fact that INEC officials are the direct instrument for electoral malpractices to be effective.

One of the participants also noted that INEC officials are desperate for electoral malpractices during elections in Nigeria. This is because it is through such foul plays that they generate more money from top politicians. The conventional free and fair election that reflects the interest of the masses during an election does not generate money for INEC officials during an election. Thus, INEC officials enjoy conducting election where they can easily manipulate the election for a particular party that pays them huge amount of money.

Another participant clearly decry the appalling scenario of INEC officials been used as an instrument for electoral malpractices. The participants noted that the existing scenario where INEC officials play an active role in electoral malpractices is the core reason why leaders with little or no integrity are installed into political offices who keeps perpetrating the trending poor leadership crisis that has engulfed the country. The most disturbing aspect of this trend is that INEC officials being used as an instrument of electoral malpractices is now a trend in Nigeria that has gained global recognition.

Most of the participants attributes the appalling trend of INEC been used as an instrument of electoral malpractices to the wide spread nature of corruption in the country. The fact that corruption is now glorified to be the fast means of becoming rich in Nigeria without any significant punishment to deter others from engaging in the act has made rigging of election to benefit the minority by INEC officials as a means of becoming wealthy. This is why most INEC officials prefer to conduct elections in a private apartment of top political office holder's where mass thumb printing can take place in as much as they are well paid than conducting same election at the designated polling units where they will stay hungry throughout the election period.

(b) The masses attitude towards INEC Public unwillingness to come out and vote in an election, due to lack of trust on the conduct of elections. This theme portrays that due to a lack of public trust in the INEC during elections, the people are unwilling to engage in electoral process. As clearly noted by some of the participants, going out to vote during election is a complete waste of time as INEC officials are well known for collecting bribe with the sole responsibility of rigging the election to suit the interest of the ruling class or top political officials rather than reflecting the wishes and desire of majority masses in an election. One of the participants boldly asked the question ' what is the essence of participating in election in my polling units when the political godfathers always have the final say on who should win the election in his political ward?' This clearly implies that the interest of one top political official is far greater than the interest of the general masses in an election. The fact that the electorates are aware of this menace makes it difficult for them to come out to vote in an election.

Another participant attributed the poor turnout in election to the persistent collection of bribe by INEC officials to rig the election for the ruling class. Talking from personal experience with the INEC officials, one of the participants linked INEC monetary bribery/corruption and lack of trust to his unwillingness to come out to vote in the previous election. The participant said the nature of relationship between the INEC and the people in Cross River State is full of mistrust and that is why they hardly come out to vote in an election. Another participant nailed it home thus; for some time now I have not exercised my franchise because of mistrust, bribery, and corruption in the political system

orchestrated by INEC. What is the need to go out there and vote when you know that at the end INEC will collect bribe and rig election for a particular candidate that may not be the people's choice but simply because the candidate is supported by the power from above and have pledged to do their biddings(Interview participant).

4.5 Discussion of findings From the analysis of the hypothesis it was revealed that there is a significant relationship between vote buying and criminalization of politics in Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State. As previously stated, election period in Nigeria is seen as a means through which money is made and as such the electorate tends to sell their vote to the highest bidder. This mostly takes the form of vote buying which is clearly seen during party primaries ranging from national to state primaries. The fact that this crisis has been left unattended in Nigeria politics has led to all forms of criminalities in the electoral process and beyond as revealed by the findings of this study. This finding supports Lawrence (2020) assertion that Nigeria political system is flawed by the greed for money by the electorates as well as political candidates during election. There is absolute loss of interest to pursue true democracy in Nigeria political system as virtually everybody is driven by selfish interest during and after election. The concept of winning at all cost during election is mostly fueled by the distribution of money to various polling units during election period to aid in ensuring vote buying and bribing of INEC officials.

The problem of vote buying and bribing of INEC officials is now becoming one of the generally accepted conduct in Nigeria electoral system. As rightly noted by William (2020), party primaries is now characterized by vote buying. Most disturbing is the fact that this appalling scenario is no longer done in hidden places as the highest bidder mostly win the interest of party delegate. Party members now lobby to become party delicate because of the possibility of amazing wealth during party primaries. While INEC on yearly bases announce their enthusiasm to curb the social problem of vote buying in Nigeria electoral system, very little effort has been made to curb this crisis as often times INEC officials are seen benefiting from this electoral impropriety.

Johnson (2021) attributes the problem of vote buying to the trending menace of poverty that has engulfed greater present of the public in Nigeria. Sustaining a healthy living in Nigeria is a very complex task. Thus, selling their vote during an election is seen as a viable means of sustaining a living. Supporting this view, Desmond (2021) opined that with the vicious cycle of poverty in Nigeria, the masses are prone to all form of criminality during election. This mostly takes the form of vote buying and political thuggery which is to the detriment of the populace but of great benefit to the ruling class. Thus, the best form of curbing vote buying is by increasing the standard of living of the masses because a destitute is bound to engage in all form of social vices for sustainable living.

The study also revealed that INEC officials benefit from the trend of vote buying because often time's political candidates through their agents seek their approval through bribing before vote buying can be carried out in the polling unit. The fact that INEC officials benefit from this trend has enabled it proliferation to other polling units. On a similar note, Abang (2019) noted that vote buying is now a conventional practice in most polling units as this electoral malpractice is now perpetrated publicly and in the present of INEC officials and security operatives. Curbing it is now a difficult task considering the fact that it is to the benefit of all in the polling unit.

5. Conclusion

The study titled "socio-political activities and criminalization of politics in Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State" was carried out as a result of the degenerating state of electoral process which is mostly associated with different forms of criminalities in Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State in particular and Nigeria in general and the growing need to address this menace for true democracy to flourish.

The study concludes that vote buying during election is now a norm and custom of Nigeria political system in the study area in particular and Nigeria in general. The trending vicious cycle of poverty among greater percentage of Nigerians has made vote buying easy in every election process. The masses are now more interested in generating money during an election rather than voting a credible political aspirant that will usher in a new dawn. Most devastating is the fact that INEC officials are directly involved in the vote buying process as they are often bribed to enable this aberration flourish in various polling units. Research in this area can be of immense benefit to Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the federal government, researchers and other critical stakeholders understand the existing state of electoral process and the effect of criminalization of politics in the country. This will enable them to efficiently incorporate appropriate strategies that can effectively tackle this exacerbating menace affecting the democracy of the country.

Finally, the findings from the study will not only serve as a contribution to the already existing body of knowledge on socio-political activities and criminalization of politics in Nigeria but will also stimulate criminology and other researches by providing adequate data for further comparative and theoretical formulation. The major limitation of this study is that its scope is limited to socio-political activities and criminalization of politics in Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State, Nigeria, using vote buying as a baseline indicator from 2007-2023. As a result, data collected and analyzed in this study is based solely on information obtained from the study area. To support this research, secondary sources such as internet based materials, textbooks journal articles have utilized. However, due to the focus on a specific senatorial district, caution must be exercised when attempting to generalize the findings of this study to other regions of the country and even beyond.

Based on our findings and analyses, the following recommendations were proffered to help Nigeria address persistent issues affecting the electoral process *vis-à-vis* vote buying: There is urgent need to enlighten the masses on the need not to sell their vote as this will only aid in exacerbating the existing vicious cycle of poverty through electing leaders who has no interest in the demands and wishes of the masses. These enlightenments can be carried by National Orientation Agency and INEC VOTERS commission. Politicians as well as electorate who engage in voting buying should be arrested and prosecuted according to the constitutional and electoral stipulations. This will help in curtailing the trending electoral malpractices where Nigeria elections will be seen as a means through which the highest bidder emerges as winners in different elected offices. The activities of anti-corruption agencies should be reviewed. The Economic and financial crimes commission (EFCC) and independent corrupt practices and other related offences commission (ICPC) must be repositioned to play critical roles in issues relating to vote buying and the criminalization of politics. This will help to fish out those behind this security problem in Nigeria which the end result is violence.

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