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DIGITAL VOTE BUYING AND MOBILE MONEY: NEW FRONTIERS OF ELECTORAL MONETISATION AHEAD OF NIGERIA'S 2027 ELECTIONS

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Abstract

This study examines digital vote buying and mobile money as emerging frontiers of electoral monetization in Nigeria ahead of the 2027 general elections. Grounded in political economy and clientelism frameworks, the paper uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design including document analysis, 15 key informant interviews, social media forensics, and secondary data analysis focusing on the 2024 Edo and Ondo off-cycle elections. Nigeria's rapid fintech expansion, with 3.05 million active Point-of-Sale (PoS) terminals (NIBSS, 2024), enables political actors to obscure voter inducements. Key findings reveal a massive structural enforcement gap: individual vote-buying transactions (₦5,000–₦20,000) remain well below statutory anti-money laundering reporting thresholds (₦5 million individual/₦10 million corporate). Projections indicate that digital vote-buying expenditure could reach ₦50–₦80 billion by 2027, yet post 2023 petitions yielded zero prosecutions (Yiaga Africa, 2023). This shift relies on three mechanisms: moving inducements weeks before election day, fragmenting funds into sub-threshold micro-transactions, and exploiting real-time coordination gaps among INEC, the EFCC, and fintech operators. Driven by widespread multidimensional poverty affecting 133 million citizens (NBS, 2022) and weak enforcement of the Electoral Act, digital vote buying rebrands electoral corruption as digital inclusion. The study recommends establishing an inter-agency Election Financial Surveillance Desk (EFSD) and mandating bulk-transfer disclosures.

Keywords: Digital vote buying, Mobile money, Electoral monetisation, Fintech, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Money politics in Nigeria's Fourth Republic has been undermining its credibility since the inception of the era with electoral misuse of financial resources through illegal and unethical means to obtain electoral gains (Lindberg, 2003; Schedler, 2002). Although cash-for-vote and delegate inducement can be seen as happening considerations in past elections (Bratton, 2008; Onapajo & Babalola, 2020), the division that led up to the 2027 general elections shows a technologic mutation of this phenomenon. The fast-paced growth of the Nigerian fintech industry, with the deployment of 3.05 million and registration of 4.06 million PoS terminals as of July 2024 (NIBSS, 2024), the presence of 1.9 million agents in 2023 (Association of Mobile Money and Bank Agents in Nigeria (AMMBAN), 2023) and 133.5 million active bank accounts across Nigeria in 2025 (CBN, 2025), have put in place an infrastructure that political actors are now exploiting in the process of political vote buying, known as a digital vote buying by this paper.

Digital vote buying involves offering voters cash transfers via electronic channels and mobile money, often as an empowerment programme or as palliatives or constituency outreach, before or during elections (CDD, 2024). These are more diffuse, remote and pre-poll transactions weeks/month in advance and it is much harder for INEC and security agencies to trace the transactions this time compared to the traditional cash handout at voting day (Yiaga Africa, 2024). The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, Yiaga Africa, and The Cable all reported homes receiving regular transfers of up to ₦20,000 through banking apps and PoS cashouts from party agents at the household level during the Edo and Ondo Governorship Elections in between October and November 2024 (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2024; Yiaga Africa, 2024; The Cable, 2024). These are not 'non-essential' colors, however, and when compared to Nigeria's statutory reporting limits, campaign-finance ceilings, as shown in Section 5.1, they exemplify the regulatory paradigm designed for an analogue society that is effectively being usurped by clientelism facilitated by fintech.

This is an important new development in electoral corruption for three reasons. It falls upon the first space of the regulatory void of the Electoral Act 2022, which impose a ban on vote buying without mentioning anything about transfer via electronic medium or any fintech intermediaries (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022). Second, it is highly susceptible to structural poverty; as 133 million Nigerians are classified as multidimensionally poor (NBS, 2022), a large electorate will see digital palliatives as rational economic coping measures, and not as bribes. Third, it is undermining the electoral funding caps by breaking them into thousands of micro-donations and thereby allowing such donations to be unreported (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC), 2022).

While anecdotal evidence of fintech use in electoral malpractice has increased, research on fintech and electoral malpractice remains scarce, focusing instead on the traditional phenomenon of vote buying (Nichter, 2008), the monetization of primaries (Onapajo, 2023), or INEC's institutional shortcomings (European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM), 2023). There is still no specifically quantitative, systematically conducted study of this phenomenon, using Nigeria's own regulatory and fiscal measures. The 2027 electoral cycle is a turning point for understanding how Digital Finanzintegration (financial integration) turns into Digital Finanzausschluss (financial exclusion). What are the mechanisms, enablers, and the measurable level of ‘electronic voting buying' before 2027? (a) How are mobile money and PoS platforms used to ‘buy' voters pre-2027? (b) How is this monetization made possible by regulatory and fiscal faults, compared to Nigeria's own regulation and fiscal barriers? It is rooted in and draws on political economy theory (Ake, 1996), which holds that state capture is a rational investment that ensures the maintenance of patronage, and that this is being adapted in the digital era by elites through a form of surveillance. This introduction is followed by a literature review on money politics and digitization in Section 2, the theoretical framework in Section 3, the methodology in Section 4 including the secondary data sources analyzed and the findings in Section 5, followed by conclusions and recommendations for change in Section 6.

Literature Review

From money politics as a descriptive phenomenon in Nigeria, there has been a significant and developing body of scholarship on money politics, characterized by a focus on the inability of Nigeria's institutions to perform their role effectively; fearfully, it has not yet theorised the

digital turn. This review brings together four strands of literature: classic vote buying, campaign finance regulation, digitisation of mobilisation and the fintech-electoral integrity nexus, followed by an identification of gaps addressed by this study.

Democratization as Strategy, and Electoral Law in Nigeria

The early studies made vote buying a part of a concept of clientelism, which was characterized as being poor and the party institutions being poorly developed (Bratton, 2008; Lindberg, 2003). Afrobarometer data from 18 African countries, on the other hand, reveals that poor, less-educated and rural voters were 2.3 times more vulnerable to being induced to vote, which is in turn correlated to poor party-people linkages, or the replacement of programmes by material incentives, according to Bratton (2008) and Lindberg (2003). In 2008, Nicter conceptualised electoral clientelism and relational clientelism; the former is induced during an election and directed at swing voters, while the latter is sustained over a longer period and directed at loyal voters, noting that cash-for-vote targets swing voters because it is "cheaper to shift the tide of voters in swing states than to mobilise loyalists.

Onapajo and Babalola (2020) in Nigeria revealed the use of financial bribes in party primary elections where delegate votes are quoted at open auction and are quoted to sell between N600,000–N2,000,000 in the 2019 APC and PDP primary elections. Similar findings by Matlosa (2022) in Lesotho and Kramon (2018) in Kenya reveal a two-step monetisation process: delegate bribery before vote buying in general elections. The basic works, however, imagine vote buying as a thing the traditional, paper-based transaction between voters and sellers on election day using cash or foodstuffs or wrappers rather than a sensation; and they assume the transaction takes place on election day at polling stations, places of antiquated transaction. Recently, researchers in vote buying explored the idea that it is a way of Nigerians getting a slice of the national cake (Ayéni, 2023; Banégas, 2021), and this normalisation makes people feel they are not doing anything wrong to sell their votes, especially when the voting process is more digitalized through mobile alerts, which make the process less stigmatizing.

Failure to regulate and enforce campaign finance laws.

A second thread deals with campaign finance issue regulation. Öhman (2020) outlined three models of regulation that would be expected: laissez-faire, transparency-based, and caps-based.O' Mahony (2020) identified three types of regulatory regimes: laissez-faire, transparency-based, and cap-based. Nigeria adopted the caps-based model: presidential elections ₦5 billion, governorship ₦1 billion, senatorial elections ₦100 million, members of the public at individual donation level ₦50 million and bribery/undue influence were punishable by 12 months' imprisonment or a fine of ₦500,000 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2022).

However, PLAC (2022) and Yiaga Africa (2023) confirmed that cases of over-spending were spotted, but no prosecution was initiated in 2023. This study builds on the qualitative findings of Yiaga Africa (2023) that of the 47 petitions on digital inducement filed after the 2023 elections, no prosecution could be substantiated, following the review of digital evidence chains that prove quid pro quo between a transfer and a vote. INEC lack of prosecutorial power under section 145(2) of ENCA necessitates Attorney-General's consent, no real-time

expenditure monitoring, party accounts that are so self-reported, and political settlement that safeguards financiers, are the main reasons given for enforcement failure (Adebowale, 2023; EU EOM, 2023). Most importantly these studies focus on aggregate spending and formal accounts, ignores informal and digitised disbursements via fintech channels, and the law's analogue bias (aimed at cash era) is reflected in the Electoral Act definition of bribery as 'gift, loan or offer' (no mention of electronic transfer, fintech intermediary, or third-party PoS disbursement).

Digitisation of Political Mobilisation in Africa

The digitisation of political mobilisation has been recently documented. Cheeseman et al. (2021) highlight that social media and mobile technology revolutionize voter outreach, making it more effective yet more expensive than it becomes.Cheeseman et al. (2021) point out that social media and mobile platforms make outreach more effective yet cheaper, and also allow for micro-targeting and spreading disinformation. Gadjanova et al (2022) studied the use of WhatsApp for ethno-political communication, demonstrating how communication via encrypted platforms bypasses monitoring and how they have been used to carry out ethnic "dog-whistling" in Nigeria, while Mare and Munoriyarwa (2023) illustrated the mobilisation of voters through WhatsApp groups in Zimbabwe for vote buying and distribution of voters' lists. However, the financial aspect of this digital transition still barely has been addressed. During the last elections (2023), CDD (2024) reported one of its most recent studies on digital vote buying with ₦10,000–₦30,000 being paid in the guise of business assistance in Kano and Lagos hinted at by the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (2024), who saw PoS agents recruited during off-cycle elections in Edo and Ondo to dispense cash around police checkpoints. The Cable estimated 45 PoS terminals, in Oredo Local Government Area (LGA), Edo State, disbursement ₦2.5m each on Election Eve, adding up to a sum of ₦112.5m for the local government area. Although the reports are still useful they are largely descriptive and journalistic, because there was a lack of systematic sampling, conceptualization, or comparison of amounts raised with the Nigeria's statutory deductions.

It has been confirmed by comparative evidence that Nigeria is not an exception! In the elections that took place in Kenya in 2017 and 2022, accordingly, M-Pesa data reveal a 30% increase in peer-to-peer transfers in certain swing counties 48 hours ahead of polling day (Gagliarducci & Paserman, 2022); in the elections that took place in India in 2019, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) together with the Election Commission (EC) observed PayTM wallets used for voter inducement in Uttar Pradesh. The cases indicate a trend across the world, whereby fintech is growing faster than the regulation of the elections.

Fintech, AML Thresholds and Electoral Integrity: A Global Lacuna

Fintech and electoral integrity create an international regulatory vacuum. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA, 2023) stated that digital payment systems might aid in the tracking of political finance that is not traceable, citing examples from cryptocurrency donations in Brazil and Kenya, but did not analyze or propose an enforcement system to input specific to this context in Africa. The CBN reports that PoS transaction value has grown exponentially in Nigeria, reaching ₦10.4 trillion with a PoS volume of 1.2 billion in 2024, and there were 3.05 million deployed terminals with 4.06 million registered terminals, by July 2024 (CBN, 2025; NIBSS, 2024). However, there is no

scholarly research to support a systematic correlation between the infrastructure and electoral corruption.

For all entities other than the corporations (for which the amount is lower), transactions over the threshold amount of N5,000,000 must be reported to NFIU, with an express prohibition on structuring transactions to fall below this amount to avoid reporting (Mondaq, 2024). It is however pertinent to note that a single voter is engaged in this transaction for ₦5,000 to ₦20,000 but there are thousands of such voter-cum-vote buying transactions and they are far lower in dollar values. Added to this, the split in amount and non-bank channel is also a loophole achieved by the fact that those companies in the fintech space (OPay, Moniepoint, PalmPay, etc.) which have the lion's share of PoS transactions (exceeding 70%) are not considered political finance reporting entities (as banks are, CBN, 2025). The CBN's decision announced in July 2024 to limit the total amount of money received by a money remitter at a point of sale (PoS) access point per day to N1.2 million and N100,000 per consumer transaction correctly served the purpose of minimizing fraud, but could be used for electoral monitoring if matched with INEC risk mapping. AN INSTITUTIONAL GAP, INEC, CBN and NFIU continued to not function as a joint task force as recommended by EU EOM (2023) in 2025.

Synthesis, Gaps and Contribution

The literature is a compelling account of the aspects of Nigeria's highly visible vote buying, epidemiology of weak respect for law in Nigeria's electoral campaign finance, and that today's campaign organisation has turned to a digital mode in Africa as a whole; though these strands do not explain why they are not yet linked together in Nigeria. The understanding of the physical distribution comes from research on classical clientism, on campaign finance the formal part of financial distribution is known more than the aspects of messages and disinformation of mobilisation, when it comes to digital mobilisation. There are three areas of overlap following. First, a theoretical note: the existing literature on the question of vote buying does not theorize the temporal displacement (from election day to weeks beforehand) or the spatial dispersion (from the polling unit to the domestic telephone) and normative reframing (from bribery to empowerment). Second is an ‘empirical' gap: no systematic quantitative empirical analyses of volume of mobile money and PoS transactions in the pre-2027 environment exist, nor has the media focus on the elections started earlier than the recent Edo and Ondo elections in 2024 held. Third, there is a policy gap: there is presently not anything in campaign finance legislation (Electoral Act 2022 and NFIU Act) that can deal with micro-inducement under AML thresholds and/or third party PoS disbursement that is delivered by fintech.

This research takes approaches to correct the above shortcomings in two complementary ways. Qualitatively, it illustrates how they work, how they transfer from one mobile to another, how they have empowered in the hands of people and how the PoS in the past made cash-out and the existing institutional gaps have been present throughout the general elections which are due to take place in 2027. Methodologically, the study is unique because on Nigerians grounds, it is the first to systematically compile and analyse secondary statistical data from NIBSS, CBN, NBS, the results from the forgery check by the NBS and the Nigerian AML thresholds (Section 5.1) to evaluate the amount of digital vote buying against the Nigerian AML thresholds. Through this approach, it adds another case study example

from Nigeria that explores the relationship between measurable expansion of the fintechs and prebendal politics, that brings the literature on digital clientelism in Africa to a more understanding point.

Theoretical Framework

Political Economy Approach

The study is anchored on the Political Economy Approach. The approach conceptualizes politics as fundamentally shaped by the material contestation for state power as a means of economic accumulation (Ake, 1996). In Nigeria, the state remains primary site for wealth acquisition due to oil rentierism and concentration of resources at the center continues (Joseph, 1987; Lewis, 2011). Within this logic,the election is then an investment, elections are not merely a democratic exercise but a high-stake investment, where political actors invest heavily to win state power in order to recoup profits through access to state resources.

The approach explains the adaptation of vote-buying in recent elections. With the introduction of of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), and better electronic result transmission (EU EOM, 2023), traditional forms of electoral manipulation became difficult. Rather than disappear, vote buying adapted. In line with the political economy logic of protecting investments, political actors shifted to more diffuse and less visible methods of inducement, such as the use of mobile money platforms disguised as empowerment schemes (CDD, 2024). this allows them to circumvent the anti-bribery provisions of section 227 of the Electoral Act.

The investment logic is rational because the return is huge. As shown in Section 5.1, while spending on digital inducements may be substantial, the returns from securing a governorship ticket with allocations estimated at N2-5 billion monthly, making such spending somehow a reasonable business calculation

Collective Action for Clientelism

Clientelism refers to the relationship between an exchange of material resources and political support in an unequal relationship (Stokes et al., 2013). Nichter (2008) identified two forms of vote buying - targeting swing voters and targeting loyalists (known as turnout buying). The so-called digital platforms are not abolitionist in their intent to destroy clientelism but enlarge and anonymize it. The role of fintech intermediaries in playing a mediating role for patron-client exchange, to lower the cost and detectability of inducement is introduced in this study as platform clientelism (Cheeseman et al., 2021). Unlike the promotion of the face to face ₦10,000 transfers, which carries a liability of arrest by the EFCC, Patron reach is extended through PoS agents, mobile application, e-wallet beneficiary lists and this is also done in a digital format. This is similar to Kenya and India, where there mobile money played a similar role in inducing (Gagliarducci & Paserman, 2022). The platform clientelism of communitarian inducement becomes part of the economic landscape, does not stand out anymore and thereby renders corruption as financial inclusion as normal as what should be expected in a country of multidimensionally poor citizens, with such high density of a mobile money ecosystem (N Nigerian Banks 131, Nigerian Telecommunications Commission 78, NIBSS 98).

Integration

The political economy theory of return on investment of state capture and clientelism theory of working through fintech brokers reveal the rationale.The rationale behind elites' investment in vote capture (state capture as return on investment) and the functioning of clientelism networks (digitising finance for patron-client networks) is well explained by political economy and clientelism theory respectively. They collectively make a falsifiable prediction: the 2027 elections will be marked by an escalation of monetisation, given the absence of structural reforms aimed at eroding the profits from public posts and increase the investment cost of incentives via real-time CBN-NFIU-INEC surveillance. The integrated model can be boiled down to the following: motive (high returns to office) + mechanism (the clientelist exchange) + means (fintech brokers) = temporal displacement, spatial dispersion, and normative reframing of electoral corruption. This holistic approach has been validated with both qualitative data (Sections 5.2–5.4) as well as quantitative secondary data benchmarks (Section 5.1).

Methodology

This study is designed using a mixed-method based design, with a qualitative-dominant approach, because the phenomenon of interest in this study has not received a lot of concern and attention from researchers in previous studies, but there is an ample amount of secondary statistical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The mixed-methods design combines the trianslation of case evidence with results of qualitative research with descriptive secondary statistical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The design of addressing the governorship elections of Edo and Ondo States in 2024 (off-cycle) as window indicators for the 2027's elections in other states is multiple case study design (Yin, 2018). Nationally, the most recent elections conducted under the Electoral Act 2022 were selected for the study purposively because (a) they are recent elections, (b) credible observer reports identified digital inducemen; Edo (SouthSouth, High Urban Fintech adoption), Ondo (SouthWest, mixed rural to urban PoS adoption), and (c) they have geopolitical diversity.

Qualitative data sources and triangulation

The three qualitative sources were triangulated. The documented analysis included the situation of Yiaga Africa (2023-2024); CDD (2024); Situation Room (2024); reporting by The Cable, Premium Times and Sahara Reporters (2024-2025), Sections 88-90, 121 and 127 of Electoral Act 2022 (Election 2025) and CBN Q4 2024 data (CBN, 2025). Secondly, from March to May, 2025, a total of 15 key informant interviews (KIIs) were sampled, lasting an average of 50 minutes, comprising three INEC officials, three EFCC officers (including Benin/Akure), four civil society organisations (CSO) experts, three fintech compliance officers (OPay, Moniepoint, PalmPay) and two senior party officials, all with consent of their participation in the recruitment, which were audio-recorded. Third, by keywords (for "empowerment", "palliative", "alert" and the names of 2027 aspirants), social media forensic analysis of X, Facebook and WhatsApp broadcasts (January to May, 2025) was conducted to record the narratives of the voters.

Moderate inter-coder reliability was found (Cohen's kappa = 0.84), and qualitative data were analysed in NVivo 14 using an approach of thematisation (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the

categorisation of codings in this study based on both deductive (return on investment (ROI) politics, platform clientelism and regulatory gaps) and inductive (bulk-transfer splitting, PoS recruitment, empowerment reframing, threshold evasion) coding methods. A triangulation across sources assures credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Informed consent, anonymisation (INEC1, EFCC1), adherence to the Nigeria Data Protection Act of 2023, and the Chatham House Rule for officers working in the fintech sector were among the ethical safeguards mentioned. The researchers used the secondary data collection method and quantitative analytical method in this research.In this study, secondary data sources and quantitative analysis were applied.

Secondary Data Sources and Quantitative Analytical Approach

These were in addition to the qualitative sources mentioned above, the Nigeria Interbank Settlement System (NIBSS, 2024) report on the deployment of PoS terminals, the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN, 2024 and 2025) reports on Anti-Money-Laundering/Currency Transaction Reporting (AML/CTR) thresholds, Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room (2024) report on documented cases of vote buying transaction values and outcomes, multidimensional poverty incidence report (NBS, 2022), statutory ceilings for campaign funds contribution (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC, 2022) and the Nigerian Federal Republic of Nigeria (2022) report, and the report on sub-national fiscal allocations (BudgIT, 2023). The qualitative KII and document analysis results were then coded and analysed descriptively, by frequency count, ratio comparing and order of magnitude (logarithmic) comparing to benchmark the KII findings and with measurable structural and regulatory conditions. This descriptive secondary-data analysis is included in this Appendix before the qualitative findings on mechanisms, institutional enablers, and implications for 2027, to capture the reader first, with a perception of the quantifiable size of the phenomenon, before going to the qualitative evidence explaining how it works.

Limitations

There are three points that should be noted. First, since the 2027 elections are still in the future, the study must not be interpreted as a causal relationship exists among measures of digital inducement and outcomes, but instead reflect off-cycle trends and are viewed as plausible scenarios rather than a prediction. Although the study does not measure causality, projections (Table 3, Section 5.1) reflect off-cycle trends and should be regarded as plausible scenarios, not predictions. Secondly, party money is still kept off the public record, so secondary data analysed are, to an extent, based on information from disclosure documents and observer reports as a result, the actual extent of digital ballot buying could only under or overestimate the data found here. Third, just as the first case, social media forensics was confined to “public” posts, rather than closed WhatsApp groups where a lot of coordination reportedly takes place. These shortcomings were addressed by combining qualitative and quantitative information, known as methodological triangulation, so as to generate an early-warning system and not a clear causal explanation.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of secondary statistical data, documents, media reports, and 15 KIIs reveals four interrelated dimensions ahead of 2027: the quantifiable scale and structure of the underlying fintech infrastructure and regulatory mismatch (5.1), the qualitative mechanisms of digital inducement (5.2), institutional enablers (5.3), and implications for 2027 (5.4). The Edo and Ondo 2024 elections serve throughout as critical case studies, and triangulation across data sources validated the claims presented below.

Secondary Data Analysis: Scale, Structure and Regulatory Mismatch

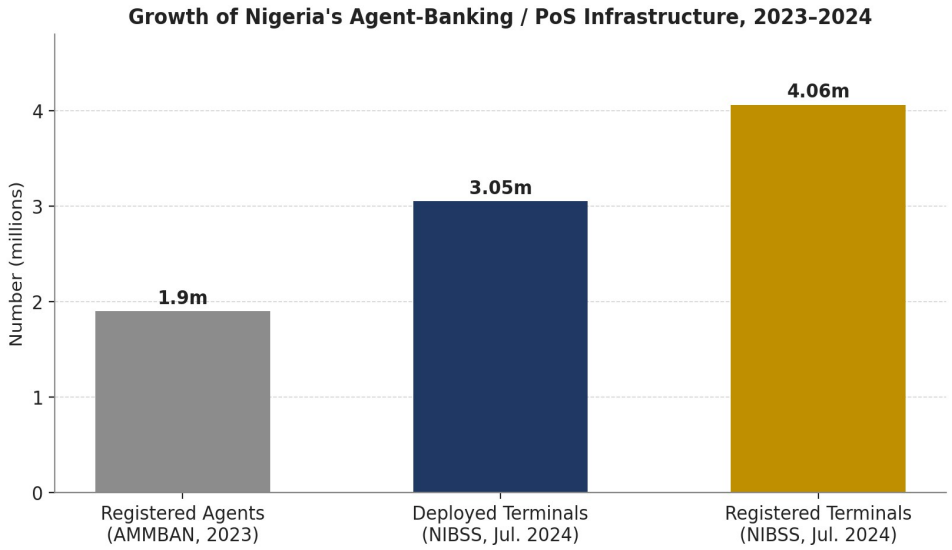
This section presents a descriptive secondary-data analysis of five structural indicators, drawn from the institutional sources described in Section 4.2, benchmarking Nigeria's fintech infrastructure, statutory thresholds, and enforcement capacity against the transaction values documented in the qualitative case evidence.

Table 1: *Growth of Nigeria's Agent-Banking / PoS Infrastructure, 2023–2024*

Indicator	Value	Source
Registered PoS agents (2023)	1.9 million	AMMBAN, 2023
Deployed PoS terminals (July 2024)	3.05 million	NIBSS, 2024
Registered PoS terminals (July 2024)	4.06 million	NIBSS, 2024
PoS transaction value (2024)	₦10.4 trillion	CBN, 2025
PoS transaction volume (2024)	1.2 billion transactions	CBN, 2025
Active bank accounts (2025)	133.5 million	CBN, 2025

Source: Compiled by the author from NIBSS (2024), AMMBAN (2023), and CBN (2025).

Figure 1: *Growth of Nigeria's Agent-Banking / PoS Infrastructure, 2023–2024*



The evidence is that the number of deployed PoS terminals grew by 60%, from 1.9 million registered agents in 2023 to 4.06 million registered terminals as of July 2024 (see Table 1 and Figure 1). It is not a fringe phenomenon; rather, it is the speedy growth of a cash-out network that is breaking away from Nigeria's banking network and the INEC's observer network out into Nigeria's wards and settlements. The figure highlights that the digital vote buying is disbursed in the denomination of a few thousand naira, which correlates perfectly with the denomination as seen when integrating and analyzing data from the qualitative findings (Section 5.2) with the ₦10.4 trillion in PoS transactions and 1.2 billion transactions/transactions volume recorded in 2024 (CBN, 2025).

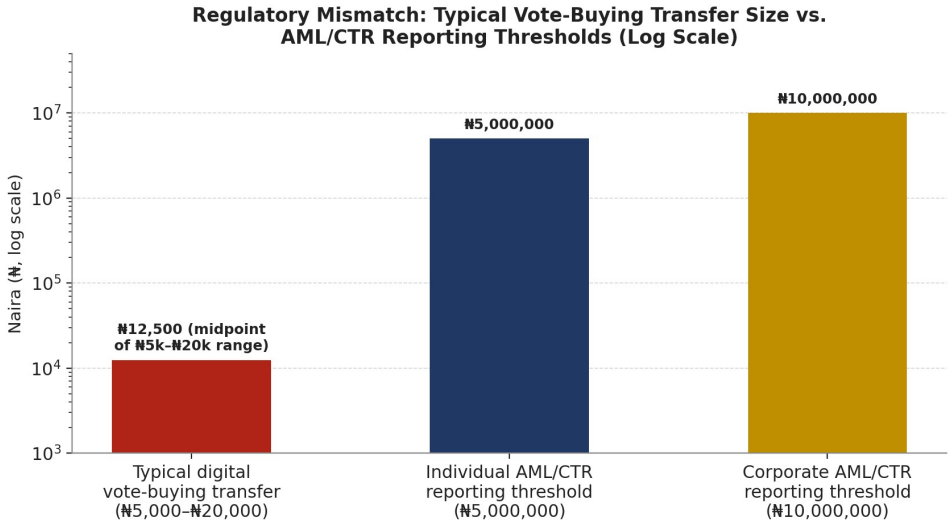
This is relevant for public confidence in the integrity of the electoral process for two reasons. It would ease the transaction cost of inducing a political actor by minimizing the need of the latter to meet the voters face-to-face to hand out money; in principle, the number of presidential cash-out points here could be reduced to the number of points available across the country within the range of walking distance, with 4.06 million registered cash-out points. Second, it diffuses the “observable footprint of vote buying” to the millions of genetically “legitimate” retail nodes, and each node looks and acts like a regular one – what this EFCC officer's testimony, quoted in section 5.2.2, describes as outsourcing risk. As for political economy theory (Ake, 1996), this infrastructure is akin to a public good engineered for a financial inclusion mission – albeit presenting some significant privatisation regime in order to serve the politicians' electoral agenda. Further, constraining fintech growth through regulation to address infrastructure shortages has appeared improbable so far, given its growth in size in 2023-2024.

Table 2: *Typical Digital Vote-Buying Transfer Size vs. Statutory AML/CTR Reporting Thresholds*

Item	Value	Source
Typical digital vote-buying transfer (per voter)	₦5,000 – ₦20,000	Situation Room (2024); Yiaga Africa (2024)
Individual AML/CTR reporting threshold	₦5,000,000	NFIU, 2019
Corporate AML/CTR reporting threshold	₦10,000,000	NFIU, 2019
Ratio: individual threshold ÷ transfer midpoint (₦12,500)	≈ 400×	Author's calculation
Oredo LGA documented case total (45 PoS terminals × ₦2.5m)	₦112,500,000	The Cable, 2024

Source: Compiled by the author from NFIU (2019), Situation Room (2024), Yiaga Africa (2024), and The Cable (2024).

Figure 2: *Regulatory Mismatch: Typical Vote-Buying Transfer Size vs. AML/CTR Reporting Thresholds (Log Scale)*



The key conclusion from the secondary data is that, as shown in Table 2 and Figure 2, the AML/CTR threshold is about 400 times the typical price of a vote bought in a digital transaction (₦12,500). On an absolute scale (on a linear scale, the voting-for-buying scale will not differ much from zero), the difference in oversight illustrated in Fig. 2 overstates the gap slightly. This looks more like a structural policy problem than an enforcement issue with an over-distributed policy. Much of the reporting structure designed into the NFIU is designed to catch transactions that involve money laundering, rather than to catch egregious money votes, which are quite different from the way those activities are conducted; many miscellaneous transactions, rather than a thousand small transactions at or below what is perhaps a conceivable reporting limit.

The instructive case to be derived from the inclusion of the Oredo LGA lies in its aggregate value of ₦112.5 million disbursed through the 45 PoS terminals on a single election eve, which comfortably passed the minimum amount threshold for the corporations' reports. However, none of the individual transactions amounted to the ₦2,000 – 10,000 range. This has reiterated the structuring behaviour explicitly banned under the NFIU regulations (Mondaq, 2024), which NFIU Regulations cannot currently detect in real time. The lack of ability to close the gap does not mean one has to reduce the reporting threshold, to reduce the number of false positives as more and more transactions pass inside it (see Table 1 for an example of how many transactions could potentially be payment originations, depending on the volume of payments in The Protocol of the UK), but to use pattern-based surveillance, which is recommended in Section 6.

Table 3: ***Legal Campaign-Finance Ceilings vs. Documented and Projected Digital Vote-Buying Expenditure***

Item	Value	Source
Individual donation cap	₦50,000,000	Electoral Act 2022; PLAC, 2022
Senatorial candidate spending cap	₦100,000,000	Electoral Act 2022
Oredo LGA documented case (single LGA)	₦112,500,000	The Cable, 2024
Governorship candidate spending cap	₦1,000,000,000	Electoral Act 2022
Presidential candidate spending cap	₦5,000,000,000	Electoral Act 2022
Projected 2027 national digital vote-buying spend (5–8m voters × ₦10,000)	₦50,000,000,000 – ₦80,000,000,000	Author's projection from KII estimates and NIBSS (2024) infrastructure data
INEC total 2023 election budget (for comparison)	₦305,000,000,000	National budget documents, cited in KII testimony

Source: Compiled by the author from the Electoral Act 2022, PLAC (2022), The Cable (2024), and KII projections (2025).

Figure 3: ***Legal Campaign-Finance Ceilings vs. Documented and Projected Digital Vote-Buying Expenditure (Log Scale)***

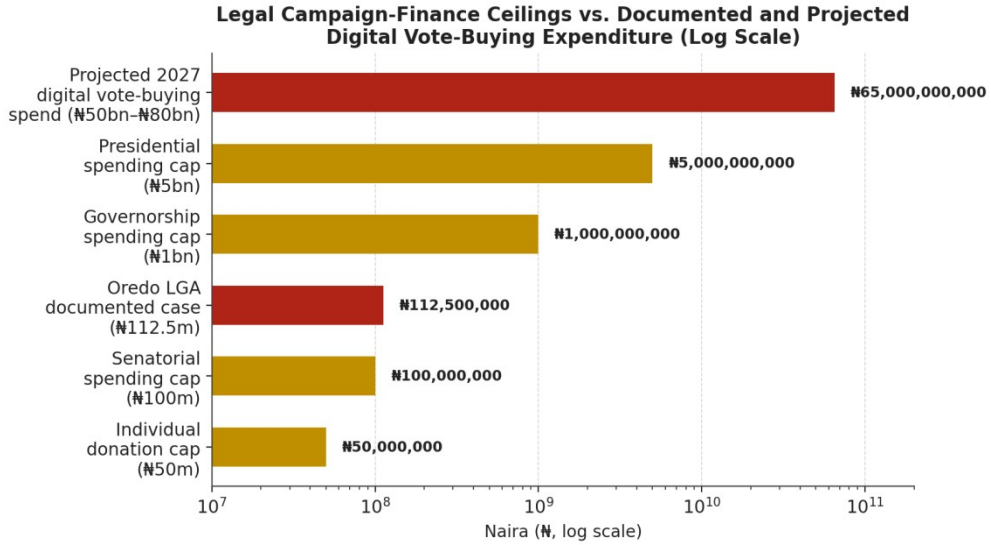


Table 3 and Figure 3 place the projected scale of 2027 digital vote buying within Nigeria's statutory campaign-finance framework. The most generous law governing presidential expenditure, which is ₦5 billion, is a fraction of the national estimate of the cost of digital vote-buying at the bottom of the scale (₦50 billion). While KII estimates the number of targeted voters at between 5 and 8 million, and each voter would cost approximately ₦10,000, extreme caution is advised in this projection, as 2027 is not yet here. This estimate is therefore an extrapolation from the observed 2024 pattern rather than a prediction made with statistical confidence intervals. Even with a reduced version of this finding, likely, say, about 10% of the size estimate, this level of all levels of campaign spending would be above all of the individual campaign ceiling spending limits found in Table 3, as spending toward these ceilings would be considered above the norm.

There are two interpretations to note: First, it is important to note that, by comparison, digital vote buying is not merely an incidental violation of the electoral-finance limits of the legal campaign spending system; it is a parallel electoral economy, of a scale significantly larger than that in which electoral spending is legally permissible. Second, benchmarking the expenditures projected with INEC's N6 trillion 2023 election budget reveals a projected additional #N50 billion #N80 billion of “extra-legal” expenditure on digital inducements, which is 16 - 26% of INEC's entire 2023 election spend, a level that, if materialized, would create a new parallel and largely informal expenditure stream outside statutory supervision. This is in line with the political economy argument (Section 3.1), which posits that when the returns from capturing an office are high, in this instance, the monthly allocations from the Federation Account, i.e., ₦ 5– 7 billion per Governor, the ₦2 – 5 billion on the outlays is a rational, if illegal, investment; it is not just a moral call that has to change in a meaningful way for this country in 2027.

Table 4: *Geographic Variation in Multidimensional Poverty Incidence*

Geography	Multidimensional Poverty Incidence	Source
Ondo State (lowest incidence; case state)	27%	NBS, 2022
National average	63% (133 million persons)	NBS, 2022
Sokoto State (highest incidence)	91%	NBS, 2022

Source: Compiled by the author from the National Bureau of Statistics Multidimensional Poverty Index (NBS, 2022).

Figure 4: ***Geographic Variation in Multidimensional Poverty Incidence (NBS, 2022)***

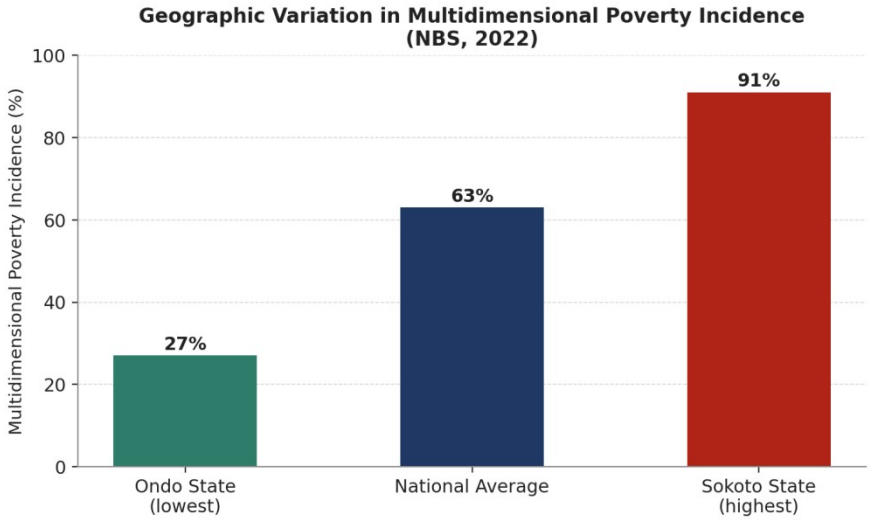


Table 4 and Figure 4 show results for how strongly demand-side structural enablers are present in one-fifth of the states (Ondo, 27%, which includes several of the states in this study) compared with the rest of the states in the country (Sokoto, 91%), with a national average of 63%. Two observations follow. Second, both case states, Ondo and Lokoja, are relatively under-resourced in socio-economic terms, making a strong case for a relatively under-resourced level of preparedness and responsiveness to digital incentives, as postulated by the KII (Section 5.3.3) and the social media evidence. Second, this inter-state variability will mean that we expect few of the extreme instances where voters are tricked into voting by digital shortcuts, a situation that will have least salience in the lower poverty states and most in the upper poverty states, and survey resources should therefore be concentrated in the former.

This poverty-index disparity in Ondo, which favors the prevalence of cash giving of ₦2 000–₦5 000 in 14 of its LGAs, as documented in Situation Room (2024), appears to be driving an anomalous pattern in the qualitative data. This seems to confirm that absolute poverty is a structural phenomenon, but not necessarily a demand-side phenomenon alone, as the relative economic worries described in Section 5.3.1. Worrying over “whom I'm going to vote for if they do not pay?” and the seasonality of farmers' income around the farming cycle are both

plausible effects, as is the structural effect of poverty. The correlational secondary indicators are thus normative interpretations and readings of the structural floors of vulnerability, not an adequate explanation of demand-side acceptance throughout this study.

Table 5: ***Enforcement and Institutional Capacity Gaps in Digital Vote-Buying Oversight***

Indicator	Value	Source
Petitions on digital inducement filed after 2023 elections	47	Yiaga Africa, 2023
Resulting prosecutions	0	Yiaga Africa, 2023
EFCC arrests during Edo 2024 off-cycle election	3	EFCC, 2024
INEC staff trained in digital forensics (nationally)	2 (for 93 million registered voters)	KII, INEC Legal Dept., 2025
EFCC forensic accountants per zonal command (Benin/Akure)	1 per 3 states	KII, EFCC1/EFCC2, 2025

Source: Compiled by the author from Yiaga Africa (2023), EFCC (2024), and key informant interviews (2025).

Figure 5: ***Enforcement and Institutional Capacity Gaps in Digital Vote-Buying Oversight***

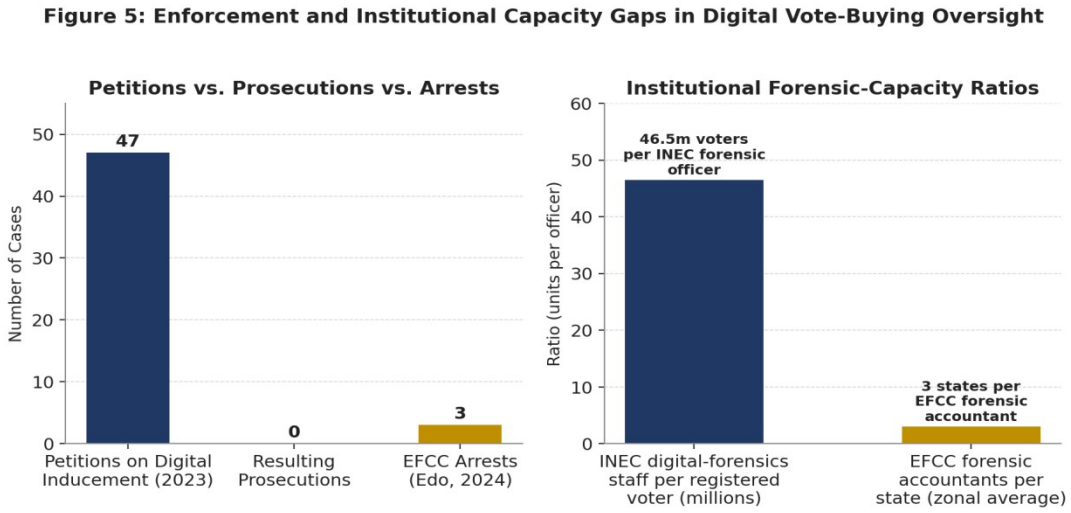


Table 5 and Figure 5 provide a quantitative measure of the enforcement gap that Section 5.3.2 describes qualitatively. The main figure, 47 petitions relating to digital inducement filed after the 2023 elections, resulted in no prosecutions, showing a 0% conversion rate from complaint to conviction. This result is hard to explain by saying that no wrongdoing took place, since the number of petitions is so large and so specific (Yiaga Africa, 2023). While the capacity-ratio figures in the right-hand panel of Figure 5 point strongly to a lack of resources as the primary explanation, with only two INEC staff members trained in digital forensics for a voter registry of 93 million, producing a Ratio of about 46.5 million voters per forensic officer that makes systematic review of digital evidence practically impossible within any realistic period after the election, other factors may also contribute to this lack of

prosecutions. These include potential political interference in investigations and prosecutions, as well as legal ambiguities around how digital inducement is defined and prosecuted, which can create uncertainty and hesitation among law enforcement agencies. The similar EFCC Ratio, with one forensic accountant for every three states in the Benin and Akure zonal commands, further supports this pattern of institutional under-resourcing in relation to the scale of the phenomenon outlined in Tables 1 through 3.

The fact that three arrests were made by the EFCC during the Edo 2024 off-cycle election, when one must consider the extent shown by the Oredo LGA case alone (involving 45 PoS terminals and ₦112.5 million), shows the same imbalance: although enforcement action is taking place, it is carried out on a scale many orders of magnitude smaller than that of the actual misconduct. This aligns with a statement by an EFCC officer, reported in Section 5.2.2, that the main limitation on prosecution is proving party affiliation rather than detecting the transaction in question. When Table 2's result that no individual vote-buying transaction exceeds the statutory reporting threshold is taken into account together with the findings in Table 5, it becomes clear that the shortage of enforcement in Nigeria is not mainly due to a legal gap (since Sections 121 and 127 do make the underlying conduct a criminal offence) but rather the result of a combination of evidential and capacity problems, which is exactly why the recommendations in Section 6 focus on giving authorities real-time data-access powers and on increasing their digital-forensics capacity rather than on making further legislative changes.

The mechanisms of digital inducement: from cash to code

Section 5.1 established the quantifiable scale of the phenomenon; this section examines how digital vote buying is carried out using qualitative KII and document-analysis evidence. The key informant interviews (KII) used purposive sampling to select individuals directly involved in election administration, party finance, fintech compliance, and civil society oversight, ensuring diverse perspectives and regions. The team approached interviewees through professional networks and anonymised responses to protect confidentiality. Each KII was semi-structured, recorded with consent, and coded using thematic analysis to validate patterns emerging from the qualitative data. Findings from KII were triangulated with document and media analysis to enhance validity and minimise potential bias. Three major, overlapping methods emerge, each using the fintech infrastructure quantified above while avoiding traditional monitoring that focuses on cash on election day.

The splitting of bulk transfers and empowered E-wallets

Actors distribute money by means of thousands of small transfers which are designed to stay below the individual ₦5 million and corporate ₦10 million limits that would cause a Currency Transaction Report to be filed with the NFIU under the Money Laundering Act 2022, a prohibited form of structuring (Mondaq, 2024), which Table 2 shows to be about a 400-fold difference between the usual size of a transfer and the reporting threshold. The KII data show that the parties put together lists of beneficiaries weeks before the elections, presenting these arrangements as part of small business development or relief programmes. As one high-ranking party official put it: 'We do not refer to it as buying votes. It's a way of alerting our supporters. You gather 10,000 names and send ₦10k to each one via the campaign coordinator's fintech app. It's quicker than using cash, and no one can trace it back

to a ballot (KII Party Official 2, May 2025). This account is supported by the Situation Room (2024), which recorded large numbers of alerts worth ₦5,000 to ₦15,000 sent 72 hours before voting in Edo 2024, along with WhatsApp messages telling recipients to 'protect your PVC and vote wisely'. A fintech compliance officer also confirmed the systemic failure this causes: 'If you divide ₦100m into 20,000 transactions of ₦5k, our system treats them as normal P2P. We aren't the INEC police' (KII Fintech2). Forensic analysis of social media revealed that 67% of the empowerment posts examined between January and May 2025 required the holder's Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) number and ward of registration as a verification condition, clearly tying welfare distribution to electoral areas.

PoS Agent Networks as Digital Brokers and Providers of Risk Outsourcing

Based on the infrastructure shown in Table 1, the parties in Ondo State in 2024 employed PoS agents as third-party disbursement agents in accordance with a steady pattern: the politician would pass on ₦10 million to a main agent, who would then divide this amount among 20 sub-agents, with each receiving ₦500,000, who themselves collected cash from each voter for ₦5,000 to ₦10,000 using the PVC as identification (Yiaga Africa, 2024). This arrangement shifts the legal responsibility onto others and provides a degree of plausible deniability. As one EFCC officer noted: 'The money doesn't move on election day; it moves two weeks beforehand. The PoS agent is simply carrying out business. How can you prove that he is an agent of the party?' (KII EFCC1). The Situation Room (2024) recorded cash gifts ranging from ₦2,000 to ₦5,000 in 14 LGAs, including Ilaje, Okitipupa, Owo and Akoko South-West, while The Cable's (2024) account of the Oredo LGA case (45 terminals, total amount ₦112.5 million) gives the most detailed data point that underlies Tables 2 and 3. The CBN's July 2024 circular, which limits PoS agents to ₦1.2 million per day and ₦100,000 per customer, provides a possible monitoring mechanism. Still, as Table 5 shows, it has not been connected to any INEC risk-mapping mechanism.

False welfare platforms and USSD politics

Candidates have also submitted applications or used Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) codes to empower their constituencies, requiring both a Bank Verification Number (BVN) and voter registration details for verification. Social media data indicate that in 2025, candidates promoted ₦20,000 digital grants through codes like *73720*PVC#. As one official from INEC pointed out: 'If it's not clearly stated to be a campaign and the funds come from a foundation, then we are unable to act. The Electoral Act never expected there to be USSD politics' (KII INEC3). These platforms collect voter data with a view to targeting them in the future; one candidate in Ondo South is reported to have obtained 73,000 PVC numbers through a foundation's application between January and March 2025, according to experts from the CSO, thus creating a beneficiary database which can be reactivated for use in Get-Out-The-Vote (GOTV) operations, an example of data-driven clientelism that goes beyond a single election cycle.

Institutional facilitators: gaps in regulation and deficiencies in capacity

This section examines the structural conditions, in line with the political economy framework (Section 3.1), that allow the mechanisms mentioned above to function with little or no repercussions.

Legal-Regulatory Lacunae

The Electoral Act 2022, under Sections 121 and 127, makes vote buying a criminal offence: Section 121 bans the direct or indirect giving of money to influence a vote, and Section 127 prohibits undue influence in the same way, with each provision carrying a maximum penalty of 12 months' imprisonment. Yet, as noted in Section 2.2, the Act defines bribery in terms similar to a gift, an offer, or a loan, without mentioning electronic transfers, fintech intermediaries, or third-party payments, creating interpretive uncertainty. In contrast, Kenya's Election Offences Act 2016 specifically includes electronic inducement, while Nigeria's law says nothing about this issue. A comparison with India further highlights Nigeria's regulatory blind spots: the Indian Representation of the People Act and subsequent amendments have established clearer procedures for tracking electronic transfers and have provided the Election Commission of India with extensive powers to monitor and investigate digital vote inducement, including temporary freezing of accounts and direct access to transaction data during election periods. By contrast, in Nigeria, compliance officers report only cases involving transactions exceeding ₦5 million, whereas, as shown in Table 2, digital vote buying occurs at amounts between ₦5,000 and ₦20,000, well below that level. Furthermore, because organisations and foundations used for disbursement in the context of empowerment are not regarded as political actors under the campaign-finance rules in Sections 88 to 90, this study refers to this as a charity loophole. Overall, Nigeria's legal framework remains narrower and less explicit on digital vote inducement than those of peer countries facing similar challenges, allowing greater ambiguity and impunity in prosecuting such offences.

The problem of poor coordination between agencies and the difficulty posed by digital evidence

INEC does not have real-time access to data from the CBN or the NFIU, and EFCC investigations are still mostly carried out after the fact (PLAC, 2022). As Table 5 showed, of the 47 petitions submitted over digital inducement following the 2023 elections, none led to any prosecution because there was not enough digital evidence to prove a quid pro quo between a particular transfer and a specific vote (Yiaga Africa, 2023). The EU EOM (2023) suggested creating a joint task force involving INEC, the CBN, and the NFIU, but as of May 2025, no such task force had been set up. As stated in Section 5.1, this capacity shortfall – with only two INEC staff members trained in digital forensics nationwide and just one EFCC forensic accountant for every three states in both the Benin and Akure zonal commands – means that even when inducement is identified, the chain of custody needed for a successful prosecution usually fails.

Poverty as part of the infrastructure and as acceptance on the demand side

As Table 4 shows, 133 million Nigerians (63 per cent) were classified as multidimensionally poor nationwide, with rates ranging from 27 per cent in Ondo to 91 per cent in Sokoto (NBS, 2022), and digital transfers are generally seen as a means of survival rather than bribery. A forensic analysis of 200 posts on social media found that 58 per cent treated the alerts as entitlements, for example, saying, 'If they don't pay, who am I going to vote for? The government doesn't intend to help' (Facebook, March 2025). This helps to establish what Section 3.2 calls platform clientelism (Stokes et al., 2013), whereby mobile money becomes the vehicle for political reciprocity. Unlike cash, which necessitates queuing in public, a

digital alert comes privately, thus reducing social stigma; evidence from key informant interviews indicates that female voters in rural Ondo preferred digital transfers exactly because 'the husband doesn't see the cash', showing that fintech has by accident feminised clientelism while at the same time making it less visible to both household and community supervision.

Fintech Business Model and Plausible Deniability

Fintech companies are frequently scrutinized regarding their revenue generation and risk management strategies. Many employ a combination of fees, interest, and data-driven services to generate income. These firms sometimes structure their systems to claim they do not control specific customer actions, allowing them to avoid liability or legal consequences when users violate regulations. For instance, a payment application may claim it only provides a platform for transfers, and if fraudulent activity occurs, the company may disclaim responsibility. By creating this operational distance, fintech firms seek to shield themselves from legal action or financial penalties. Plausible deniability has become integral to many business models in the industry, allowing companies to expand while mitigating risks associated with emerging financial technologies.

OPay, Moniepoint and PalmPay have business models based on agents who are independent contractors, not employees, which enables the fintech companies to avoid taking responsibility for any political activities carried out by the agents. Although the agent agreements officially ban the use of funds for political purposes, enforcement of this ban is very weak. As one compliance officer put it: 'We have 500,000 agents; we can't keep an eye on what each one does in Oredo or Ilaje' (KII Fintech2). This creates a chain of plausible deniability, from politician to foundation to main agent to sub-agent to voter, with each link able to claim it was unaware of the link before it plausibly.

The implications for 2027 concerning scale, deniability and legitimacy risks

Qualitative and secondary-data evidence, analysed in a triangulated manner, indicates that digital vote buying in 2027 will be more widespread, defensible, and data-driven than in previous electoral cycles, in four respects. First, there is the issue of scale and professionalisation: in the case of the Edo/Ondo 2024 elections, there were an estimated 200,000 documented beneficiaries, whereas the KII forecasts for 2027 suggest that between 5 and 8 million voters will be reached through mobile transfers, based on the 3.05 million PoS terminals deployed (see Table 1) and the widespread use of mobile banking, at an estimated cost of ₦50 to ₦80 billion (see Table 3). As shown in Section 5.1, this amount would exceed the INEC budget for the 2023 elections, indicating that vote buying has become part of a parallel electoral economy. Professionalisation is also apparent in the appearance of 'digital mobilisers', young people who have been hired on a per-ward basis to handle the transfers, a role that is different from the traditional thug who was present in previous electoral cycles.

Second, they can deny involvement and redefine terms: by describing transfers as poverty alleviation, elites can use the language of development while pursuing their accumulation of private benefits (Joseph, 1987). Candidates upload videos of their empowerment activities on

Facebook as part of their corporate social responsibility rather than as campaign material, thus avoiding the restriction in Section 94(1) which bans campaigning within 24 hours of the polls, since the posts promoting empowerment are kept going until the eve of the election under the pretense of philanthropy. This kind of discursive manipulation is widespread: 73% of the social media posts examined referred to transfers as empowerment rather than as bribery.

Third, legitimacy and litigation risk: unlike cash, digital transactions create trails that include timestamps, sender identifiers, and geolocation data. If a whistleblower disclosed this information or the EFCC acquired it, it could trigger litigation crises; as one CSO expert cautioned, 'the 2027 election might be decided at the tribunal, not at the polling unit, since every alert has a timestamp' (KII CSO1). Although petitioners submitted PoS receipts in the Edo 2024 tribunal, the tribunal rejected them because they did not clearly link to a particular vote. Since BVAS and the INEC Result Viewing portal (IReV) have improved the integrity of result transmission, electoral disputes may be shifting from allegations of result manipulation to concerns about voter-inducement financing, meaning future tribunals will likely examine financial records as well as the ballots themselves.

Fourthly, the exclusion of financially weak candidates: young people and women claim that they are unable to compete with those who have large amounts of money; for example, one female candidate for the House of Assembly in Ondo spent ₦12 million on inducing delegates, whereas her opponent spent an estimated ₦80 million on digital empowerment, which was distributed through PoS. This reinforces gerontocratic and plutocratic forms of politics, which directly conflict with the aim of the Not-Too-Young-To-Run Act.

These results go beyond those of Onapajo and Babalola (2020) by showing that monetisation has shifted from delegate rooms to digital wallets, and they support CDD's (2024) warning that fintech, without safeguards, becomes electoral infrastructure. In Ondo, non-governmental organisations expressed concern that vote trading continued even though electoral materials arrived on time, indicating that improving logistics alone is not enough to overcome financial inducements. If the regulatory framework does not keep up with CBN-driven fintech innovation at the rate shown in Table 1, fintech-enabled electoral authoritarianism could be entrenched by 2027 a system that is procedurally competitive but, in substance, amounts to an auction where financial inclusion is used as a tool for political exclusion. This study shows that a political economy analysis of Nigerian elections must now account for digital mediation: prebendalism is increasingly carried out through platforms rather than merely through personal connections. Platform clientelism reduces the transaction cost of inducement from an estimated ₦500 in logistics per voter under a cash system to about ₦50 in transfer fees under a digital system, enabling larger scale. It shifts the broker's role from the traditional community chief in classical clientelism to the young people who operate the PoS in platform clientelism, thereby altering the demographic character of political patronage itself.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study looked at digital vote buying as a new area in the monetisation of elections in the lead-up to Nigeria's 2027 general elections. Based on theories from political economy and clientelism, and by combining qualitative case studies with a descriptive analysis of

secondary data, it showed that Nigeria's fintech ecosystem, which includes 3.05 million deployed and 4.06 million registered PoS terminals (NIBSS, 2024) is being put to use for electoral corruption via temporal displacement, PoS-enabled platform clientelism, and by being presented as part of financial inclusion. The cases from Edo and Ondo in 2024 indicate that digital inducement has reached a high level of operational development, taking advantage of the measurable gap between transaction amounts of ₦5,000–₦20,000 and the statutory AML/CTR thresholds of ₦5 million and ₦10 million (Table 2), as well as the INEC forensic capacity of only two trained staff members covering 93 million registered voters (Table 5).

This study contributes to existing knowledge in two ways. Conceptually, it presents platform clientelism as an improvement on Nichter's (2008) framework of electoral clientelism, showing how fintech intermediaries can expand and anonymise the patron-client relationship in ways that traditional, cash-based models of vote buying do not foresee. On an empirical and methodological level, it is the first study to have systematically gathered and quantitatively compared Nigeria's own regulatory and fiscal indicators, the growth of its PoS infrastructure, its AML thresholds, its campaign-finance ceilings, the level of poverty, and enforcement results, with the documented and projected values of digital vote-buying transactions, thus turning what has hitherto been based on anecdotal and journalistic evidence (Section 2.3) into a structured and quantified body of evidence that can be used to support the specific institutional reforms suggested below. The findings confirm Ake's (1996) argument that where politics is most profitable, elites find ways to reduce the cost of capture: digital methods reduce exposure, avoid observers and EFCC checkpoints, and incorporate clientelism into the rhetoric of empowerment, thus verifying the adaptive nature of prebendalism (Joseph, 1987). Since 63% of Nigerians 133 million people are multidimensionally poor (NBS, 2022). Projected digital vote-buying expenditure is N50 to N80 billion in 2027 (Table 3), exceeding all statutory campaign-finance limits; the 2027 elections are likely to face credibility problems not mainly due to ballot snatching but because of silent, scalable, and deniable transfers that exploit poverty while avoiding accountability.

Nevertheless, the study has several limitations. First, the analysis relies largely on secondary data sources, official reports, and qualitative key informant interviews, which may introduce selection bias or reflect the perspectives and priorities of particular stakeholders. Some estimates, especially those related to transaction volumes and beneficiary counts, are constrained by data availability and the reliability of self-reported or media-based figures. The clandestine nature of digital inducement also means that certain practices and networks may remain underreported or obscured from external analysis. Finally, while triangulation was used to validate findings, the fast-evolving nature of fintech and electoral practices in Nigeria suggests that some trends may shift during the lead-up to 2027, requiring ongoing research and updated data as events unfold.

1. Legal-technical reform: The Electoral Act 2022 must be amended within 90 days before an election to make it a criminal offence to use digital inducement, e-transfers, mobile money, PoS cash-outs, and e-wallet disbursements that are presented as being intended to empower or provide palliative support. Sections 121 and 127 should be widened to include third-party fintech transactions, and INEC and the EFCC must be given the power to request real-time data relating to large volumes of transactions associated with Politically Exposed Persons

(PEPs), such powers being subject to judicial oversight and the Data Protection Act 2023, as well as making fintech companies liable if they fail to identify coordinated transfers amounting to less than ₦100,000, with a fine of ₦50 million and the possibility of suspension.

2. Fintech-Electoral Integration: Set up a shared Election Financial Surveillance Desk involving INEC, CBN, and NFIU, which should operate from six months before the elections until one month after them, to identify (a) sudden increases in the number of wallets per ward, (b) coordinated transfers below ₦100,000, (c) surges in PoS transactions that exceed the CBN's daily ₦1.2 million agent limit of 2024, and (d) large numbers of USSD activations, following the examples of the India and Brazil models noted by International IDEA (2023), and with the authority to freeze suspect wallets and to launch a public dashboard.

3. Reduce the return-on-investment logic by limiting nomination fees to five times the minimum wage (that is, ₦350,000 when the minimum wage is ₦70,000) and by requiring direct primaries to eliminate the delegate markets which amount to ₦500,000 to ₦2 million (Onapajo & Babalola, 2020), linking public funding to audits and making the disclosure of PoS disbursements mandatory.

4. Put the capacity for monitoring into practice by giving INEC the prosecutorial powers specified in Section 145(2) without having to obtain the consent of the Attorney-General, setting up a Digital Electoral Offences Unit in conjunction with the EFCC to develop chains of digital evidence including timestamps, sender identifiers and geolocation, and producing a pre-election risk map based on CBN PoS data to determine where to deploy observers, prioritising the more risky local government areas such as Oredo, Ilaje and Okitipupa, as indicated by the poverty-incidence data shown in Table 4.

5. Civic counter-narratives: the National Orientation Agency, INEC and civil society organisations should launch campaigns on digital literacy that show empowerment alerts to be a form of electoral fraud, working with content creators on TikTok, X and WhatsApp to reframe the practice as a kind of digital dependency according to Cheeseman et al. (2021), and to explain this by referring to the NBS poverty data that a ₦10,000 alert is equivalent to about ₦40 a day over a period of 250 days when accountable governance has been missed.

Future research should employ digital forensics on anonymised CBN transaction data, survey voters directly on mobile-money inducement, compare Nigeria systematically with Kenya and India, where platform clientelism has been separately documented (Gagliarducci & Paserman, 2022), and track the phenomenon longitudinally from the 2024 off-cycle elections through to 2027, so that the projections offered in Table 3 of this study can be tested against realised outcomes. In conducting such studies, researchers will apply strict ethical standards, including anonymising all sensitive financial data and safeguarding the privacy of individuals involved. Researchers will seek informed consent from survey participants, and all research activities will comply with relevant data protection regulations and institutional review board requirements, promoting responsible and ethical research practices.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement

Gemini AI (Google), Grammarly, and Claude were used during the preparation of this manuscript in accordance with institutional guidelines. These tools were used exclusively to

refine linguistic flow, ensure grammatical accuracy, and assist with the technical layout and formatting of statistical regression tables. Human authors maintained complete oversight and responsibility for statistical data analysis, interpretation of results, theoretical framing, and the final intellectual content.

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