VOTES AND FREEDOM:

ASSESSING VOTERS' FREEDOM IN NIGERIA

(1999-2023)

Introducing the Nigeria Voters' Freedom Index (NVFI)



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Executive SUMMARY

Voters' freedom is the ability of citizens to make electoral choices without coercion, inducement, or manipulation. Despite over twenty-five years of uninterrupted civilian rule, Nigeria's democratic experience continues to be undermined by persistent constraints on voter freedom. This study examines the evolution, drivers, and consequences of voter-freedom erosion in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023.

Drawing on qualitative analysis of six national election cycles (1999, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023), and relying exclusively on secondary data from election observation missions, conflict datasets, institutional reports, and academic literature, the study finds that electoral manipulation in Nigeria has undergone significant evolution. While early elections in the Fourth Republic were dominated by overt fraud, ballot stuffing, and physical coercion, more recent cycles reveal the normalization of monetized and technologically adaptive forms of manipulation, most notably vote buying. Widespread poverty, weak party ideology, and limited enforcement of electoral laws have turned elections into transactional exchanges, where votes are increasingly traded for cash, goods, or digital transfers. Vote buying now operates through organized brokerage networks and "see-and-buy" mechanisms that compromise ballot secrecy and undermine the principle of free choice.

Beyond inducement, voter freedom is further constrained by electoral violence, intimidation, and the politicization of security agencies.

These conditions generate climates of fear that suppress participation and subtly coerce voter behavior. Although technological reforms such as PVCs, Smart Card Readers, and the BVAS have improved procedural integrity, they have not addressed the deeper structural drivers of manipulation.

To address the absence of a holistic framework for assessing voter freedom, the study proposes the Nigeria Voters' Freedom Index (NVFI), a multidimensional diagnostic tool that evaluates voter freedom across five core dimensions: freedom from inducement, freedom from coercion, access to credible information, institutional integrity, and enabling socioeconomic conditions. Based on existing evidence, Nigeria currently falls within the "Low Voters' Freedom category.

The study concludes that restoring voter freedom in Nigeria requires more than technical electoral reforms. It calls for coordinated legal enforcement, disruption of vote-buying networks, strengthened institutional capacity, socioeconomic interventions to reduce voter vulnerability, and sustained civic education to reshape norms around political participation. Protecting voters' freedom is essential not only for credible elections but for democratic consolidation, national stability, and inclusive governance.

The NVFI offers a practical pathway for continuous assessment, accountability, and reform as Nigeria looks toward future electoral cycles.

1 INTRODUCTION

Overview of Voters Freedom in Nigeria

Elections are a central criterion for democratic engagement globally. Almost all countries hold elections to determine their leaders, but we can argue that electoral malpractice is widespread, and many elections are not free and fair according to international standards (Birch, 2011). Free and fair elections provide the fundamental mechanism for citizens to choose their representatives and confer legitimacy on governments. (LegalClarity).

Elections are a key element of democracy, and good-quality elections strengthen the leadership's political legitimacy. Elections enable citizens to choose leaders, legitimize governance, and shape public policy directions. This is succinctly explored by the declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections by the Inter-Parliamentary Council (IPC).

In any State, the authority of the government can only derive from the will of the people as expressed in genuine, free and fair elections held at regular intervals on the basis of universal, equal and secret suffrage. (Goodwin-Gill, 2006: viii)

The will of the people freely expressed captures the nexus between votes and freedom and the concept of voters' freedom.

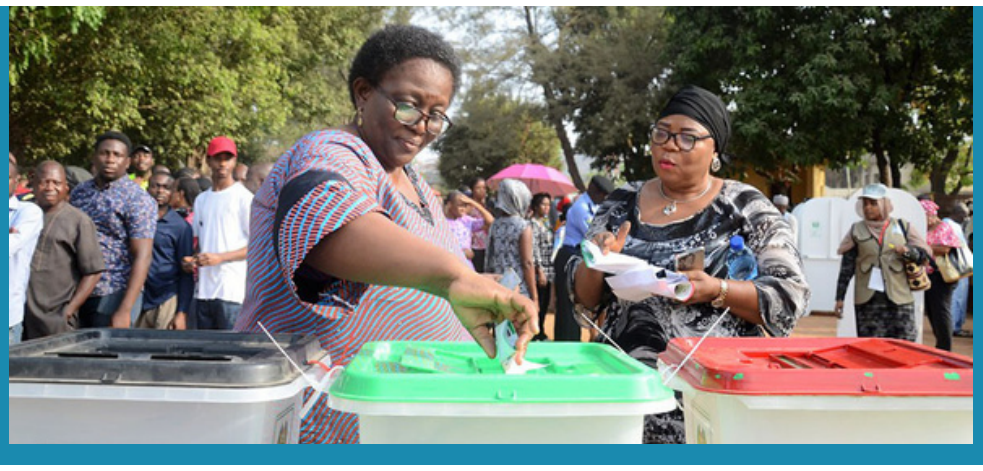
The Nigerian voter's experience continues to be undermined by entrenched electoral malpractices,vote buying, voter intimidation, ballot manipulation, militarization of elections, and widespread poverty that incentivizes transactional voting.

While traditional electoral malpractices have not disappeared, monetization in the form of vote buying has emerged as the most pervasive threat to voter autonomy. The 2023 election case provides empirical grounding for understanding this trend at the National level.

This publication, therefore, explores key concept points:

KEY CONCEPTS OF THE STUDY

- The historical trajectory of voters' freedom and political participation in Nigeria.
- Structural determinants of voter manipulation.
- The political economy of vote buying.
- Emerging patterns across recent electoral cycles.
- A proposed Voters' Freedom Index for Nigeria.
- Policy and institutional reforms.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative-driven mixed-methods approach to examine the erosion of voter freedom in Nigeria across the Fourth Republic (1999–2023). The research focuses on how structural, institutional, economic, and security-related factors have shaped electoral behavior and voter freedom over time.

The analysis covers six national election cycles: 1999, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023 allowing for longitudinal comparison across three broad phases: the consolidation of monetized politics (1999–2007), the introduction of technological reforms amid rising inducement (2011–2015), and the normalization of vote buying and technologically mediated manipulation (2019–2023).

The study relies exclusively on secondary data, drawn from multiple authoritative sources. These include election observation reports by the European Union Election Observation Missions (EU-EOM), Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), Yiaga Africa, and other credible monitoring organizations; conflict and security datasets such as the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); human rights and governance reports from Human Rights Watch (HRW) and allied institutions; official publications from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS); and peer-reviewed academic literature on democracy, electoral integrity, and political economy.

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A qualitative content analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns related to vote buying, coercion, electoral violence, security-force behavior, institutional performance, and socioeconomic vulnerability. This was complemented by historical-institutional analysis, which traces how early post-transition weaknesses created enduring incentives for clientelism and monetized electoral competition. Selected descriptive statistics such as turnout rates, poverty indicators, and reported incidents of electoral violence are used to contextualize qualitative findings and illustrate observable trends.

Each election cycle is treated as a comparative case study, assessed using a common analytical framework to enable cross-case synthesis. To integrate findings, the study introduces the Nigeria Voters' Freedom Index (NVFI) as a conceptual diagnostic tool. The NVFI evaluates voter freedom across five dimensions: freedom from inducement, freedom from coercion, access to credible information, institutional integrity, and enabling socioeconomic conditions. The index is intended to support policy analysis and comparative discussion rather than function as a definitive measurement instrument.

Validity is strengthened through Multi-source corroboration using multiple independent data sources, while reliability is supported by the consistent application of analytical categories across all cases. The study relies solely on publicly available data and does not involve human subjects.



LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study relies primarily on secondary data from election observation reports, conflict databases, and institutional publications, which may underreport informal or covert practices such as discreet vote buying and localized intimidation. Differences in data coverage and reporting standards across election cycles limit perfect comparability over time. The absence of primary data, including voter surveys or interviews, means the analysis reflects observed patterns rather than individual voter perceptions or motivations. Additionally, the Nigeria Voters' Freedom Index (NVFI) is presented as a conceptual diagnostic tool and is not fully operationalized due to data constraints. Finally, evolving political, technological, and security dynamics mean that findings from the 1999–2023 period may not fully capture future forms of electoral manipulation.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite more than two decades of uninterrupted democratic rule, Nigeria continues to struggle with the substantive freedom of its voters. While elections are held regularly and constitutional guarantees of universal suffrage exist, the conditions under which citizens make electoral choices remain deeply constrained. Across successive electoral cycles since 1999, voter freedom has been systematically undermined by the expansion of monetized politics, entrenched patronage networks, electoral violence, poverty, and weak institutional enforcement.

Over time, electoral manipulation in Nigeria has shifted from overt ballot fraud and physical coercion toward more subtle but equally damaging practices, particularly vote buying and inducement. By the 2019 and 2023 elections, vote buying had become normalized and technologically adaptive, operating through cash transfers, digital payments, and broker-mediated "see-and-buy" mechanisms that compromise ballot secrecy. These practices thrive in an environment of widespread economic vulnerability, low trust in institutions, and limited accountability for electoral offences, effectively converting elections from expressions of political choice into transactional exchanges.

At the same time, the heavy deployment and politicization of security forces, recurring election-related violence, and attacks on electoral infrastructure have created climates of fear and intimidation in many communities. These conditions restrict participation, depress voter turnout, and shape voter behavior in ways that appear voluntary but are driven by coercion or survival pressures. Technological reforms introduced to enhance electoral integrity have improved procedures but have not addressed the deeper structural drivers of voter manipulation. Despite extensive documentation of electoral irregularities, Nigeria lacks a systematic framework for assessing voter freedom beyond procedural measures of election conduct. This gap limits the ability of policymakers, electoral authorities, and civil society to design targeted interventions that protect voter autonomy.

The problem this study addresses, therefore, is the persistent erosion of voters' freedom in Nigeria and the absence of an integrated analytical framework to measure, explain, and respond to this erosion across electoral cycles.

2 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Votes and Freedom

Major thoughts on representative democracy identify vote as the primary mechanism through which popular sovereignty is exercised (Dahl, 1989; Pitkin, 1967). It is believed that votes mostly reflect citizen preferences especially on political outcomes and ensure that rulers remain accountable to the ruled,which is a core premise of democracy according to the classical democratic theorist (Rousseau, 1762). The idea of one person, one vote represents an institutional commitment to political equality (Rawls, 1993; Beitz, 1989). By granting individuals equal formal power, voting underscores the principle that all individuals possess equal standing within the political order. Citizens therefore have the freedom to evaluate political incumbents, enabling retrospective accountability from political leaders (Fearon, 1999; Przeworski, Stokes & Manin, 1999).

Through periodic voting, citizens can reward or remove leaders, thereby sustaining governmental legitimacy (Lipset, 1959).

Freedom in this context can be analysed through the lens of political philosophy which distinguishes between negative freedom;freedom from interference (Berlin, 1969) and positive freedom, the capacity to act upon one's will (Taylor, 1985). Both dimensions matter for democratic participation: negative freedom ensures citizens can vote without coercion, while positive freedom ensures they have the knowledge, resources, and freedom to vote meaningfully. Scholars of democratic development note that freedom is multi-layered (Sen, 1999): civil freedoms enable expression and association; political freedoms create rights to participate; material freedoms provide the socioeconomic foundations necessary for effective political agency (Brady, Verba & Schlozman, 1995). Freedom can also be viewed as being multi-layered, with diverse institutions like the courts, media systems, electoral commissions, and civil society structures which plays an interwoven role in safeguarding rights and regulating power (O'Donnell, 1994; Habermas, 1996). Thus, freedom is not merely an individual attribute but a systemic condition. Without certain conditions like the freedoms of speech, association, and information, voting becomes a formal ritual rather than an expression of genuine preference (Sen, 1999; Dahl, 1971). A lot of elections conducted by Authoritarian regimes illustrate this dynamic: votes exist, but meaningful choice does not (Schedler, 2006). However Freedom assures the authenticity of voters preference formation, the Inclusivity of participation and the freedom from coercion (Young, 2000;Fishkin 2009;) This aligns with democratic minimalist and maximalist thoughts, both of which affirm that without foundational liberties, elections cannot serve their intended democratic purpose.

2 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Votes and Freedom

Freedom also depends on votes for the preservation of its existence, freedom is vulnerable when not anchored in popular control. Elections provide a recurring mechanism through which citizens can prevent concentration of power and resist democratic backsliding (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Votes serve as a public check on state authority, ensuring renewal of democratic legitimacy,rotation or rejection of leaders who violate rights and policy direction toward protection or expansion of other forms of freedoms (Beetham, 1991;Przeworski et al., 1999;Carothers, 2002).Thus, voting acts as a safeguard of liberty by disciplining political elites.

The nexus between votes and freedom is therefore symbiotic and mutually productive: Votes operationalize freedom by giving it institutional expression. Freedom operationalizes votes by giving them substantive meaning. Breakdown in one typically degrades the other, a phenomenon observed in electoral authoritarian regimes where constrained freedoms hollow out electoral competition (Diamond, 2002).

2.2 Understanding Voters' Freedom in Nigeria

Voters' freedom refers to the capacity of citizens to vote according to their conscience without coercion, undue influence, intimidation, or monetary inducement. Although political scholars have diverse views and opinions on the true meaning and application of democracy as a form of government (P Schmitter & TL Karl, 1991). They are united at least on one of its core foundations: elections as a means of making popular voices heard and of putting to life the description of democracy as government of the people, by the people and for the people (Lincoln 1863).

With the foregoing we can validly infer that elections are the lifeline of democracies and without it peaceful change or retaining of political representatives will be impossible. If that is the case the freedom to vote becomes an important point of inquiry. Dahl in his opinion on the seven conditions necessary for the existence of a democracy identified the importance of all adults having the freedom to vote. Drawing from Obasun's evaluation of Nigeria's Democratic Journey Since 1999, Dahl's condition becomes increasingly significant due to the complex interplay of historical, socio-economic, and institutional factors that continue to shape the electoral landscape in Nigeria. Nigeria's return to democratic rule in 1999 marked a decisive step away from authoritarianism, but the consolidation of democracy has remained contingent on the ability of citizens to exercise their voting rights freely(Obasun 2025). In practice, however, several challenges threaten this idea from 1999 to now. First, the pervasive influence of political godfatherism,where powerful elites control candidate selection, campaign financing, and often voting outcomes undermining the freedom of voters. Godfatherism according to (Oke 2010), "has come to assume a dangerous dimension as a consequence of the monetization of politics. Godfatherism is one of the biggest dangers to democracy today and paradoxically, it only survives with government support and produces an unresponsive leadership". Ohiole and Ojo (2016) averred "democracy in Nigeria has not been fully established and the phenomenon of godfatherism has endangered democratic process and the socio-economic lives of the citizens"

2 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Understanding Voters' Freedom in Nigeria

This dynamic can create a climate in which citizens feel pressured to align their choices with the interests of these elites rather than with their own conscience(Igbini, Okolie 2020).

Electoral violence and intimidation remain recurring concerns too. In certain regions, the presence of thugs, cult groups, or armed actors sometimes sponsored by political contenders creates an atmosphere of fear that discourages genuine political participation. When voters fear physical harm, their freedom is compromised even before they reach the polling booth. Galtung's categorization of physical, psychological and structural violence becomes instructive when discussing electoral violence; in the Nigerian context however, the focus will be on psychological violence. Psychological violence has to do with a situation where citizens are left under the condition of perpetual state of fear of what will happen in a given threatened situation . In this case citizens are left unprotected as security agencies find it „difficult to assure the citizens of their protection within the framework of electoral security" ((Albert, IO,2003).

Vote buying has also become a systemic issue. Carreras and Irepoglu (2013) define vote buying as the direct exchange of material benefits by political elites to secure electoral support, encompassing both monetary payments and the provision of goods to influence voter behavior (Nichter, 2014). Economic hardship, high unemployment, and widespread poverty make many Nigerians vulnerable to financial inducements offered as immediate relief by politicians.

Studies by Omotola (2010) and Bratton (2008) highlight that in contexts of widespread poverty, voters often prioritize short-term material gains over the abstract benefits of good governance. The practice of exchanging votes for money or material goods distorts democratic choice, replacing informed decision-making with transactional politics. Although the law criminalizes vote buying, weak enforcement and the ingenuity of perpetrators undermine deterrence.

Logistical and administrative shortcomings from the electoral body also discourage voters' freedom. Since 1999, there have been several amendments to the original act in the form of the 2001 Electoral Act and 2010 Electoral Act, which has been amended in 2011 and sparsely in 2015 and recently in 2022. The Smart Card Reader (SCR) introduced in the 2015 elections did record remarkable successes. However, as this study will show, there were also many shortcomings. In addressing this, INEC introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). It is an all-in-one multifunctional integrated device serving different functions in the electoral process (Munya, 2022; Sibe & Kaunert, 2023). It verifies the authenticity of the Personal Voter Cards (PVCs) and fingerprints and has facial recognition technology, which it uses during the accreditation process. Another important feature is the ability to transmit unit results to the INEC Results Viewing portal (IReV) on the field. It is also used as the INEC Voter Enrolment Device (IVED) during voter registration.

2 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Understanding Voters' Freedom in Nigeria

From malfunctioning BVAS machines to late arrival of election materials, inadequate security at polling units, or flawed voter registers can hinder citizens' ability to participate meaningfully in elections. This can decrease election credibility while simultaneously eroding public confidence in elections. This has led to debates and contestations around the world about the introduction of electoral technologies (European Union,2023).

Finally, misinformation, ethnic and religious manipulation, and partisan propaganda limit the voter's ability to make rational, independent choices. In recent years, the prevalence of disinformation, particularly through social media, and its fundamental impact on electoral integrity, has become an issue of global concern(IFES 2019). When political actors deliberately inflame identity tensions or circulate falsehoods, the electorate's freedom becomes impaired not through physical force but through psychological and informational distortion.

Thus, in the Nigerian context, Dahl's condition that "practically all adults have the freedom to vote" must be viewed as both a legal right and a practical reality. While the constitution guarantees universal suffrage, the quality of democracy depends on whether citizens can exercise that right without fear, inducement, or structural obstruction. Strengthening voters' freedom in Nigeria, therefore, requires a combination of institutional reforms such as improved electoral administration, enforcement of campaign finance laws, and prosecution of electoral offenses and broader socio-economic interventions aimed at reducing poverty and political clientelism.

It also calls for civic education to empower citizens with the knowledge and confidence to resist manipulation.

Conclusively, the freedom to vote is not merely a procedural part of elections, it is the core of democratic legitimacy in Nigeria. Without it, elections become hollow rituals rather than genuine expressions of the people's will. Voters' freedom should encompass: Freedom from violence; freedom from vote buying and inducement; freedom from misinformation and disinformation; freedom to access credible information; freedom to vote in secrecy; and freedom to participate without fear of state repression. A system that undermines these freedoms cannot deliver democratic legitimacy, even when elections are conducted regularly.

3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Historical Overview of Voter Freedom in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2023)

INTRODUCTION

Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, Nigeria has undergone six national electoral cycles, each shaped by shifts in political competition, economic realities, and institutional evolution. Over this 25-year period, voter freedom, understood as the ability to make autonomous electoral choices without coercion or manipulation, has fluctuated significantly. The historical trend reveals a movement from crude ballot manipulation and physical coercion to more sophisticated, monetized, and technologically mediated forms of voter influence.

3.1.1 THE EMERGENCE AND ENTRENCHMENT OF MONETIZED POLITICS 1999–2007

The early years of the Fourth Republic were characterized by intense political competition, weak institutions, and fragile electoral management systems. While the 1999 transition election was widely tolerated as a compromise exercise after decades of military rule, subsequent elections witnessed the rapid emergence of monetized political practices.

During the 2003 and 2007 elections, widespread electoral fraud, ballot stuffing, violence, and open vote buying shaped electoral outcomes. The 2007 election, in particular, is considered by both domestic and international observers as one of the most fraudulent in Nigeria's history. Political actors openly deployed financial inducements, food items, and patronage promises to sway voters, while security forces and local strongmen played significant roles in constraining electoral autonomy either through intimidation or enforced loyalty.

This period solidified the expectation of material exchange as a normal part of electoral behavior, laying the foundation for subsequent institutionalization of inducement as a central tool of political competition.

3.1.2 . REFORM-DRIVEN PROGRESS COUPLED WITH EXPANDING CAMPAIGN FINANCE ABUSE 2011–2015:

The 2011 and 2015 elections marked a transitional era characterized by both reform and regression. The introduction of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and Smart Card Readers significantly strengthened electoral verification processes, reducing multiple voting and enhancing the credibility of accreditation. These reforms—pioneered under the Jega-led INEC were widely credited with improving process integrity and increasing voter confidence.

However, these technological advances did not eliminate manipulation; they merely shifted the terrain of influence. As ballot stuffing and crude manipulation became more difficult, political actors increasingly turned to campaign finance abuse and strategic inducement. Cash distribution at polling units, community-level patronage, and pre-election handouts grew in scale and sophistication. Political elites invested heavily in mobilizing local brokers to distribute money discreetly and influence voter behavior.

While these elections were generally more peaceful and transparent than their predecessors, the underlying structures of material inducement deepened, subtly constraining voter autonomy even as procedural improvements were achieved.

3 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Historical Overview of Voter Freedom in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2023)

3.1.3 DOMINANCE AND INNOVATION OF VOTE BUYING 2019–2023

The last two electoral cycles witnessed the full normalization and dominance of vote buying as the principal strategy for electoral manipulation in Nigeria. Observers reported widespread inducement in nearly all geopolitical zones during the 2019 elections, underscoring the practice's entrenchment as a national phenomenon. Vote buying was no longer confined to competitive urban centers it penetrated rural constituencies, peri-urban communities, and even traditionally low-risk regions.

By 2023, vote buying had not only intensified but also evolved in response to new constraints. The cash scarcity associated with the Naira redesign policy created temporary disruptions, forcing political actors to adopt alternative inducement methods such as: Bank transfers, Voucher systems, POS-mediated cash distribution, and Commodity-based inducements (food items, fuel coupons, clothing).

Although the scarcity briefly reduced the volume of cash exchanged at polling units, it neither eliminated vote buying nor weakened its political logic. Instead, it accelerated the shift toward digital inducement and more clandestine transfer mechanisms.

Throughout this period, the "see-and-buy" technique where voters display their marked ballots to agents before receiving payment became more widespread, further eroding secrecy of the ballot and compromising voter freedom.

3.2 SUMMARY OF TRENDS ACROSS THE FOURTH REPUBLIC



These historical dynamics reveal that while Nigeria has made notable procedural improvements, the substantive freedom of voters has declined due to expanding inducement culture and sophisticated manipulation strategies. Voter freedom is now less threatened by overt violence and more by everyday survival pressures, expectations of material benefits, and innovations in transactional electoral politics.

4 THE ISSUE
Drivers of Voters' Freedom Erosion in Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is not only about periodic elections but about the quality of citizen participation, institutional credibility, and the capacity of elections to translate popular will into political authority. Electoral integrity therefore requires:transparent processes, impartial institutions, an equitable campaign environment, equal access to political information, absence of coercion and undue influence.When these standards are compromised, voters' freedom is eroded.

4.1 THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF VOTE BUYING

Vote buying in recent times has become one of the most dominant features of Nigeria's electoral landscape. Although illegal under the Electoral Act, it persists because it reflects deeper political and economic incentives like widespread poverty, weak party institutions, money politics, and the growth of informal money peddling networks that link politicians to voters. Over the last two decades, vote buying has evolved from crude "cash handouts" to a highly structured marketplace involving party agents, ward coordinators, security personnel, and even community leaders. Vote buying in Nigeria has evolved into a big and complex market, driven by severe economic deprivation that incentivizes voters to trade votes for immediate material benefit. Weak party ideology and politicians' expectations of recouping investments once in office has also reduced elections to material distribution events.Electoral impunity due to none existence or rarity of prosecution for vote buying have also contributed to its expansion, this coupled with the existence of easy access provided by an informal network of political brokers have also emboldened the process, ward leaders, party agents and vote merchants now employ the see and buy mechanism that requires voters to display their ballot paper to agents in exchange for cash.

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) reports that vote buying was observed in 27 of the 36 states during the 2023 general elections, an increase from 2019.

The Election Analysis Centre (EAC) documented over 500 reported incidents of vote buying nationwide in 2023, indicating a systematic pattern rather than isolated occurrences.

In 2019, the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM) identified widespread vote trading in at least 20 states, including Kano, Lagos, Rivers, and Anambra.

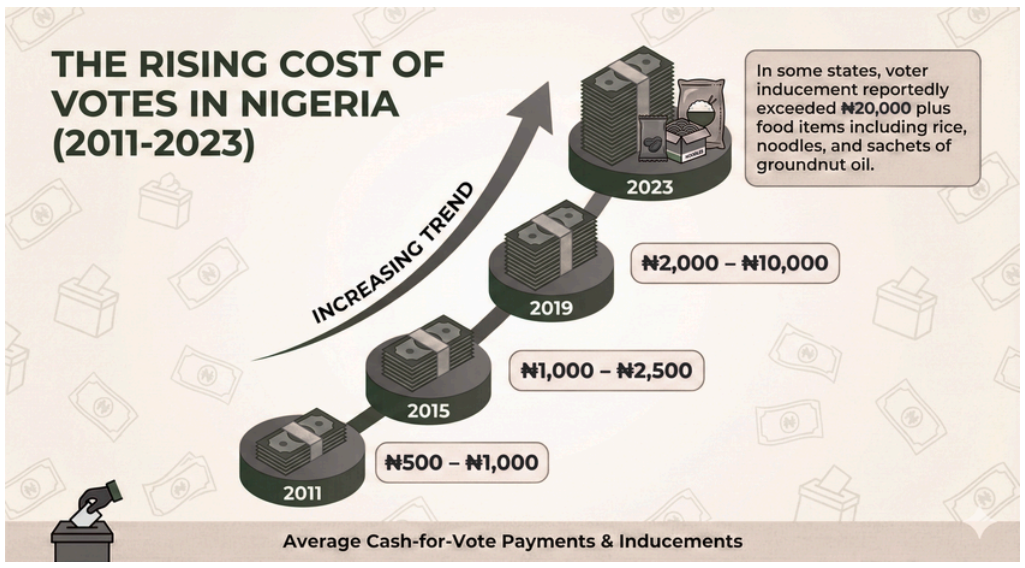
According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 63% of Nigerians (133 million people) were multidimensionally poor in 2022 in an environment where immediate material needs often outweigh political preferences.



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Drivers of Voters' Freedom Erosion in Nigeria

THE RISING COST OF VOTES



Since 1999, fewer than 50 individuals have been prosecuted for vote buying despite thousands of observed cases; most prosecutions are dropped or not pursued.

INEC's 2023 post-election report cited "persistent interference by security actors and political party agents" as a barrier to enforcing vote-buying laws at polling units.

4.1.1 WHY VOTE BUYING PERSISTS: A POLITICAL ECONOMY LENS

Extreme poverty, inflation, unemployment (estimated at 33% in 2021), and stagnant wages increase the value of small election-time handouts. For many households living below $2/day, even ₦5,000 represents several days' food security. This creates an economic logic where short-term material gains overshadow long-term governance consequences.

Weak political party ideology is another problem,parties in Nigeria rarely offer clear ideological platforms. Elections are becoming material distribution contests, where candidates win loyalty through spending rather than policy communication and direction. Voters therefore expect inducements, and politicians interpret spending as an unavoidable campaign cost. This validates the increasing cost electoral competition, running for political office is extremely expensive.

A 2023 Yiaga Africa analysis estimated that competitive House of Assembly campaigns cost ₦80–120 million, while Senate races cost ₦250–500 million. Candidates often borrow or rely on political godfathers, resulting in a "recoup-your-investment" mentality once in office,fueling corruption and further entrenching the vote-buying cycle. The Informal vote-brokerage networks is another reason for the persistence of votebuying. Vote buying is facilitated by dense networks of intermediaries who operate outside formal political structures: Ward leaders recruit loyal voters and distribute cash within neighborhoods. Party agents and vote merchants operate "collection points" near polling units. Youth groups and local enforcers provide social pressure and enforce compliance. These networks ensure reliability through social surveillance, threats, and financial incentives. The "See-and-Buy" Mechanism which is the most common contemporary method of votebuying, where voters must display their marked ballot to a party agent before receiving payment. This is achieved through phone-camera photography, folding techniques, or arrangements with compromised polling officials. The 2023 CDD report identified "see-and-buy" operations in over 15 states, making it the dominant vote-buying technique. Another important point is the near absence of consequences enables innovation and expansion in vote-buying tactics. Security forces are often complicit or passive, and politicians have little fear of sanction. The cost-benefit calculation is clear: the gains of winning outweigh the minimal risk of prosecution.

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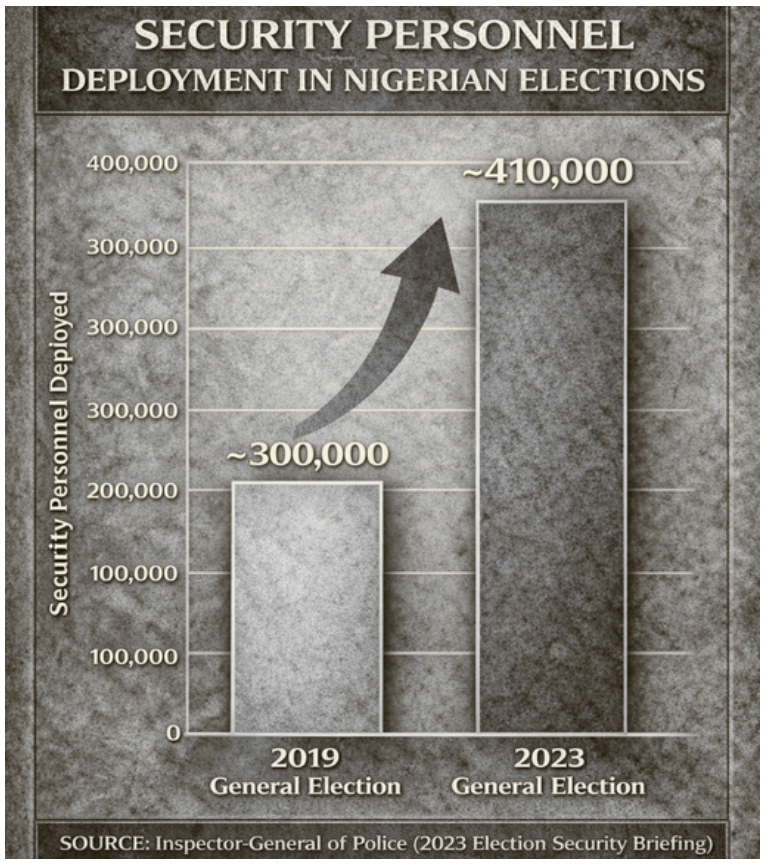
4.1.2 CONSEQUENCES FOR NIGERIA'S DEMOCRACY

Politicians who buy votes prioritize accessing state resources for personal or patronage gain. This weakens public service delivery and reduces incentives for long-term development planning.Office-holders will often seek to recover campaign investments, vote buying contributes directly to corruption in procurement, budgeting, and appointments. The vulnerable populations,especially the poor, youth, and women are disproportionately targeted, turning elections into auctions rather than expressions of political preference. Conclusively widespread vote buying often erodes public trust in the electoral process, reducing turnout and increasing cynicism toward democratic institutions.

4.2 MILITARIZATION AND COERCION

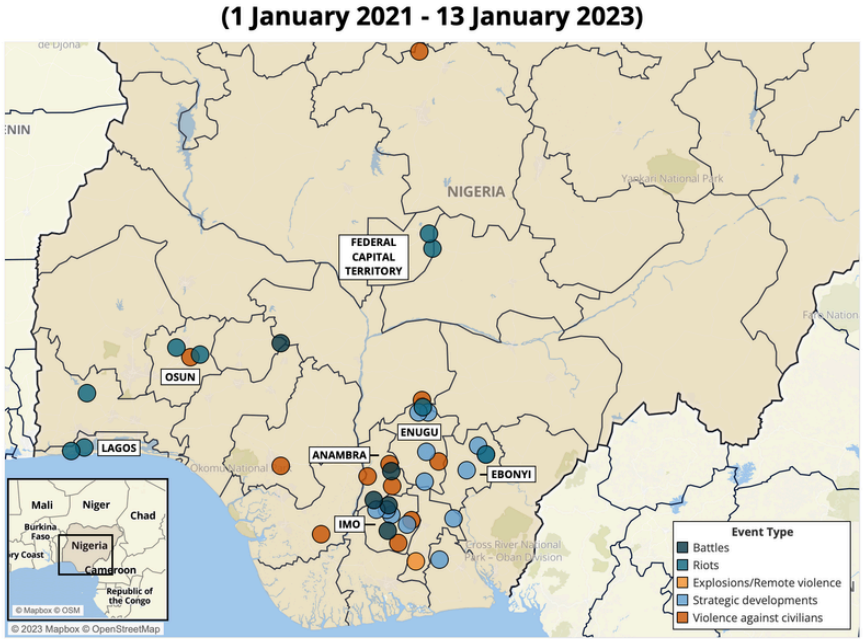
Since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, elections have been accompanied by recurrent patterns of militarization and coercion. While some national contests, especially 2015 demonstrated that peaceful and credible elections are possible, many cycles have been shaped by violence, intimidation, and the problematic involvement of both state and non-state armed actors. Evidence from conflict monitors, human-rights groups, and election observers consistently shows spikes in violence around elections, targeted attacks on electoral officials, and repeated allegations of security-force misconduct.

As documented, Nigerian elections have frequently resembled warfare, with heavy deployment of security forces creating a climate of intimidation rather than protection



ACLED analyses consistent spikes in party-linked and election-related violent events in election years since 1999. The pattern is cyclical: violent events involving party supporters and attacks on electoral infrastructure climb in the months preceding, during and immediately after elections. For the 12 months ahead of the 2023 elections, ACLED recorded over 200 violent events involving party members/supporters and nearly 100 reported fatalities, figures broadly comparable to pre-2019 run-ups. ACLED also reports that attacks on INEC offices rose substantially between 2021 and early 2023, with 44 violent incidents involving INEC staff/offices recorded between January 2021 and February 2023.

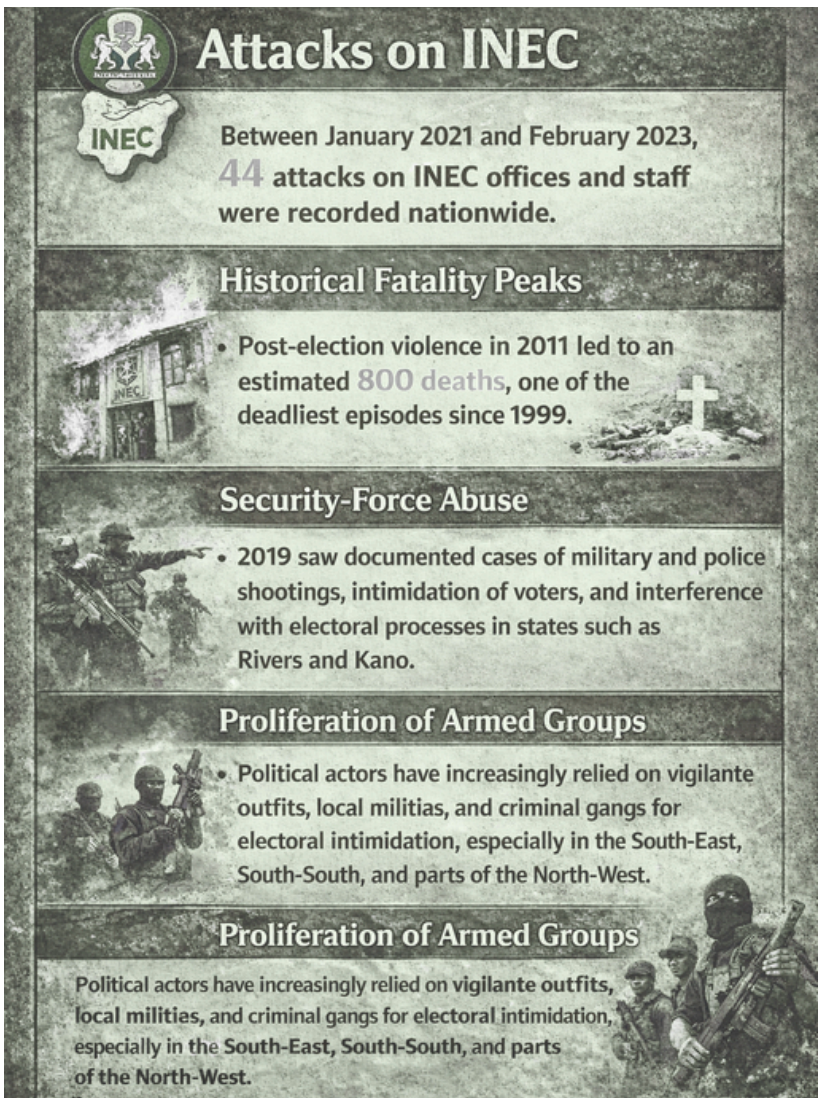
Attacks against INEC Offices and Staff in Nigeria
(1 January 2021 - 13 January 2023)



Source Acled

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Drivers of Voters' Freedom Erosion in Nigeria



Nigeria has made important democratic gains since 1999, including peaceful transfers of power at the national level. However, militarization and coercion continue to jeopardize the credibility of elections, undermine public trust, and endanger citizens and election officials alike. Reducing electoral coercion requires a coordinated approach: stronger accountability, safer INEC operations, regulated security outfits, targeted security-sector reform, and robust early-warning mechanisms. Implemented together, these measures would significantly improve electoral integrity and bolster Nigeria's democratic stability through 2027 and beyond.

4.3 INSTITUTIONAL WEAKNESS AND LIMITED ENFORCEMENT

In Nigeria, the freedom of voters has been persistently undermined by structural weaknesses within state institutions and the chronic failure of enforcement systems tasked with protecting electoral integrity. Nigeria's electoral system relies on a constellation of institutions, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), security agencies, the judiciary, and anti-corruption bodies that collectively determine the credibility of the electoral process. Although INEC operates with partial autonomy, its effectiveness is constrained by several systemic limitations. Inadequate logistical capacity, leading to late arrival of materials, disorderly queues, and opportunities for manipulation at crowded polling units is one of the issues.

Inconsistent training of ad-hoc staff, creating gaps that party agents exploit during accreditation and vote counting. Limited control over security deployment, also weakens INEC's ability to protect voters against intimidation. These institutional gaps make elections vulnerable to interference and compromise, thereby reducing the freedom with which citizens can participate.Political campaigns in Nigeria are also heavily monetized, yet oversight mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Reporting requirements for campaign finance are often ignored, audits are inconsistently conducted, and sanctions for non-compliance are rare. This lack of transparency enables illicit funding, which fuels vote buying, patronage distribution, and manipulation at polling units. Voters confronted with aggressive financial inducements operate under distorted incentives that compromise their free will.

4.3.2 POLITICIZATION OF SECURITY AGENCIES,LIMITED ENFORCEMENT OF ELECTORAL LAWS AND RARE PROSECUTION OF ELECTION OFFENCES

Security institutions are central to guaranteeing a free electoral environment. Yet in Nigeria, reports across election cycles show recurring patterns of selective deployment of police and military personnel, excessive presence in opposition strongholds, and passive or complicit behavior in the face of electoral malpractice.

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When security actors fail to protect polling areas or worse, enable intimidation the ability of voters to make autonomous choices is severely restricted. Fear of violence, harassment, or arrest often pushes voters to stay away from polls or comply with political actors who control the security presence.Although electoral malpractices such as vote buying, intimidation, and ballot snatching are criminalized in Nigeria, enforcement is weak. Historically, very few individuals including politicians, party agents, or thugs have faced meaningful prosecution despite widespread documentation of offences. When violations go unpunished. Political actors view malpractice as low-risk, high-reward,offenders return to communities emboldened, and voters lose confidence in the state's ability to protect them.

This enforcement gap forms a permission structure in which manipulation becomes normalized.

4.3.3 WEAK JUDICIAL ENFORCEMENT

The judiciary is designed to function as the final arbiter of electoral grievances. However, Nigeria's judicial process suffers from prolonged litigation timelines, inconsistent judgments across courts of equal standing, and political pressure on judges handling high-stakes election petitions. The perception that judicial outcomes can be influenced by political elites erodes public trust. Voters who believe that their votes will not be protected or reflected in outcomes are more susceptible to clientelism, coercion, and disengagement forms of erosion of voter freedom that thrive when judicial safeguards are weak.

4.3.4 HOW WEAK INSTITUTIONS ERODE VOTER FREEDOM

When institutions cannot guarantee safety, voters internalize the risk of harm. Fear becomes a form of invisible coercion, shaping political behavior in ways that appear voluntary but are driven by survival. In this environment, voters may comply with dominant political factions, turnout decreases in volatile areas, and citizens avoid expressing dissenting preferences. Institutional failure, therefore, translates directly into constrained voter autonomy. Clientelism also thrives in weak institutional environments. Voters who believe that their votes may not be counted or that officials will not uphold their rights shift toward short-term material gains. Vote buying, once normalized, reframes elections from civic exercises into economic exchanges. In such conditions, the exercise of voter freedom becomes a financial negotiation rather than a democratic choice. Trust is central to free electoral participation. Institutional weakness undermines this trust through poor transparency, conflicting announcements, delays in result collation, and perpetual allegations of manipulation. Without trust, voters lose confidence in the ability of institutions to safeguard their choices, and freedom erodes through disengagement, cynicism, or resignation to manipulation.

Institutional weakness and limited enforcement are not abstract governance deficits; they are direct and powerful drivers of voter-freedom erosion in Nigeria. When electoral bodies lack capacity, when security agencies are politicized, and when enforcement of laws is inconsistent or absent, voters face a distorted electoral environment marked by fear, inducement, and manipulation. Strengthening institutional effectiveness, professionalizing security deployment, and ensuring consistent enforcement of electoral rules are essential for restoring voter autonomy and building a resilient democratic culture in Nigeria.

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4.4 CULTURAL NORMALIZATION OF INDUCEMENT

"Stomach infrastructure," gift-giving, and distribution of food or cash have become socially normalized, blurring the boundaries between campaigning and vote buying.One of the most persistent yet least interrogated drivers of voter-freedom erosion in Nigeria is the cultural normalization of inducement an evolving system in which material benefits, cash payments, and patronage exchanges have become socially accepted components of electoral participation. Unlike overt intimidation or coercion, inducement operates through subtle expectations embedded in everyday social relations. Over time, these expectations have become woven into local political cultures, shaping how voters perceive elections, their rights, and the very purpose of democratic participation.

4.4.1 THE SOCIAL LOGIC OF INDUCEMENT

Inducement in Nigerian elections is not merely a transactional act; it is rooted in broader cultural understandings of reciprocity, obligation, and community support. In many communities, political exchanges are framed through norms of "giving and receiving," where candidates demonstrate generosity as proof of leadership capacity. Voters, in turn, see accepting inducements as legitimate compensation for their participation in campaigns, attendance at rallies, or simply enduring economic hardship. This cultural framing significantly weakens the perception of vote buying as an abuse of rights or a form of corruption.

Instead of viewing inducement as manipulation, many citizens internalize it as a normal, expected feature of election seasons. As this expectation deepens, the ability of voters to make independent choices erodes not because they are explicitly coerced, but because social norms shape their behavior as powerfully as threats or force.

4.4.2 POVERTY, EXPECTATION, AND EVERYDAY SURVIVAL

The cultural normalization of inducement is strongly linked to socio-economic realities. In contexts where poverty and unemployment are widespread, elections are viewed as rare opportunities for immediate material relief. Over time, the political marketplace becomes embedded in everyday survival strategies.
Families openly plan for "election season benefits" like cash gifts, food items, clothing, or transport reimbursement. This expectation transforms inducement from an exceptional tactic into a cyclical event embedded in household economic planning. As inducement becomes part of the informal economy of the poor, rejecting it becomes not just difficult but socially irrational. Voter freedom is thus compromised at the structural level, long before any ballot is cast.

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4.4.3 MORAL AMBIGUITY AND THE BLURRING OF PATRONAGE AND DEMOCRACY

Nigeria's long history of patronage politics has blurred the moral lines between legitimate political engagement and corrupt inducement. Patron-client relations, where leaders provide resources and followers offer loyalt,y predate modern elections. The persistence of these structures means that inducement is often understood through pre-existing norms rather than contemporary democratic standards.

This moral ambiguity erodes voter freedom by weakening the voter's sense of entitlement to public goods. Instead of demanding rights-based services, voters come to view benefits as favors tied to electoral loyalty. Consequently, democratic accountability is distorted: leaders feel obliged to compensate their patrons and supporters, not serve citizens based on universal democratic mandates.

4.4.4 HOW CULTURAL NORMALIZATION UNDERMINES VOTERS FREEDOM

The normalization of inducement compromises voter freedom in several interrelated ways, through distorted voter motivations, elections become opportunities for short-term gain rather than long-term political evaluation, undermining rational and independent political choice. Voters no longer see inducement as a violation but as a rightful component of political participation. This psychological shift erodes moral resistance to manipulation. Politicians who purchase electoral loyalty feel less bound to citizen demands, weakening the link between governance performance and electoral reward.

Communities dependent on inducements support structures that undermine their long-term political empowerment, making cycles of manipulation more durable.As inducement becomes normalized, the autonomy of the voter slowly recedes not through coercion, but through cultural adaptation to a system that rewards dependency and discourages civic agency. Cultural normalization of inducement represents one of the most profound but understated threats to voter freedom in Nigeria. It transforms manipulation into tradition, distorts the meaning of elections, and embeds political dependence within social norms. Addressing this challenge requires more than legal reforms; it demands community-level reorientation, socio-economic empowerment, and sustained civic education that reshapes how Nigerians understand their rights and responsibilities in a democracy. The erosion of voter freedom ultimately stems from the internalization of a political culture where inducement is expected and autonomy is negotiable. Restoring authentic voter choice requires transforming the norms and conditions that make inducement culturally acceptable in the first place.

5 CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDIES NIGERIA NATIONAL ELECTIONS (1999–2023)



Source: Online

5.CASE STUDIES NIGERIA NATIONAL ELECTIONS (1999–2023)

5.1 Case Study 1 – 1999: Transition and Fragile Beginnings

- Date: Presidential election, 27 February 1999 (transition from military rule).
- Lead observers: Carter Center and NDI deployed international observation missions.
- Principal outcome: Olusegun Obasanjo (PDP) elected president; the elections enabled return to civilian rule but were conducted in a context of fragile institutions.

Source The Carter Center

Analysis

1999 marked Nigeria's formal return to civilian government after military dictatorships. Observers described the process as a necessary but imperfect transition: elections were competitive and symbolic of democratic renewal, yet institutional capacity (electoral administration, judicial independence, security-sector reform) remained weak. These structural deficiencies set the stage for subsequent cycles where monetized and coercive practices could flourish. The electoral environment was therefore more permissive than protective of voter freedom especially at the local level where party machines and local strongmen exercised influence.

Implication

The 1999 cycle's main legacy was institutional fragility, a structural baseline that allowed later abuses (vote buying, manipulation, security politicization) to become normalized.

5 CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDIES NIGERIA NATIONAL ELECTIONS (1999–2023)

5.2 Case Study 2 2007: Fraud and Consolidation of Coercive Tactics

- Date: General elections, April 2007 (presidential: 21 April 2007).
- Observers & findings: Domestic and international observers (including Human Rights Watch analyses) characterized the 2007 polls as deeply flawed and among the most fraudulent since the return to civilian rule. HRW's 2007 reporting documented widespread ballot-stuffing, intimidation, and manipulative control of local electoral processes.

Source Human Rights Watch

Analysis

The 2007 elections are widely remembered as a turning point where blatant electoral manipulation and coercion were conspicuous. Political actors used patronage, force, and control of local bureaucracies to shape outcomes. The combination of weak electoral institutions, politicized security, and activist "big men" entrenched the idea that electoral victory could be purchased or enforced, further eroding the practical freedom of voters to choose without undue influence.

Implication

2007 demonstrated how weak enforcement and concentrated local power convert elections into contests of coercion and patronage. The reputational damage of 2007 also intensified demands for reform in later cycles.

5.3 Case Study 3 2011: Procedural Reforms, But post election violence

- Date: Presidential election held 16 April 2011 (postponed from 9 April).
- Fatalities: Human Rights Watch estimated 800 deaths in post-election violence concentrated in northern states in April 2011.
- Institutional changes: Growing pressure for reforms after 2007 led to increased scrutiny of INEC operations and electoral procedures.

Source Human Rights Watch

Analysis

The 2011 cycle showed two divergent dynamics. On the one hand, civil-society monitoring and international attention pressured improvements in process and oversight. On the other hand, disputed outcomes sparked large-scale communal and politically-inflected violence that cost hundreds of lives. The scale of the post-election fatalities underlined the stakes of contested results and the inability of state institutions to prevent or quickly contain large-scale unrest. Voter freedom here was undermined both by the immediate physical insecurity and by the fear that casting certain votes could trigger violent reprisals.

Implication

2011 revealed that procedural reforms alone (better processes or technologies) do not eliminate risks to voter freedom when social tensions and impunity for violence remain unaddressed.

5 CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDIES NIGERIA NATIONAL ELECTIONS (1999–2023)

5.4 Case Study 4 2015: Technology, Credibility Gains, and Continued Local Risks

Dates: 28–29 March 2015 (presidential and National Assembly).

- Technological reforms: Widespread use of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and Smart Card Readers for accreditation.
- Observers: EU EOM and others described the 2015 polls as more credible overall; nevertheless, technical shortcomings and some manipulations were reported.

Source ECOI.net

Analysis

2015 is widely seen as a success for procedural integrity muscle replaced, in part, by technology-enabled verification that reduced multiple voting and some forms of ballot fraud. The election delivered the first incumbent defeat at the federal executive level since 1999 (a peaceful transfer to the opposition at national level). Yet these gains were uneven: at subnational levels, local coercion, vote buying, and brokered mobilization continued. Crucially, the reforms changed the form of manipulation (from overt stuffing toward inducement and strategic mobilization) rather than eliminating the underlying drivers.

Implication

2015 showed that technological and procedural reforms can improve credibility at scale, but without reforms tackling patronage, enforcement, and socio-economic drivers, voter freedom remains fragile at the grassroots.

5.5 Case Study 5 2019: Persistent Abuse, Security-Force Concerns

- Date: 23 February 2019 (presidential and National Assembly).
- Observations: Reports by Human Rights Watch and the U.S. State Department documented instances of voter intimidation, attacks by armed groups or party-affiliated thugs, and allegations of security-force abuses in locations such as Rivers and Kano. The 2019 election also suffered logistical delays and local incidents of violence.

Source Human Rights Watch

Analysis

Though less catastrophic than 2007 or 2011 in terms of mass fatalities, the 2019 elections exposed worrying practices: partisan hiring of armed actors, selective security deployments, and episodes of excessive force by police or military units. These occurrences signaled the politicization of security institutions around electoral time and illustrated the limits of deterrence: voters in affected areas faced direct and indirect pressures—fear of violence, harassment at polling sites, and the normalization of transactional politics.

Implication

2019 confirmed that institutional and technological safeguards must be complemented by professional, non-partisan security conduct and robust post-election accountability to protect voter freedom.

5 CASE STUDIES

5 CASE STUDIES NIGERIA NATIONAL ELECTIONS (1999–2023)

5.5 Case Study 6 2023: Widespread Vote Buying, Adaptive Inducement & Election-Period Violence

- Date: Presidential and National Assembly elections, 25 February 2023; runoff dynamics and legal challenges continued into March.
- Turnout: Official and analyst estimates reported a historically low turnout of ~26.7% out of ~93.47 million registered voters who cast ballots in the 2023 presidential election (Dataphyte analysis).
- Election violence: ACLED and CDD's Nigeria Election Violence Tracker documented hundreds of election-related violent events in the run-up and during the 2023 cycle; ACLED produced dedicated situation summaries and an analysis of political violence during the 2023 elections.
- Vote buying & inducement: Observers and civil-society monitors reported widespread vote buying nationwide, with adaptive shifts (digital transfers, vouchers, commodity distribution) following temporary cash shortages associated with currency redesign policies. "See-and-buy" techniques were reported in multiple states.

Source ACLED and Dataphyte

Analysis

The 2023 cycle illustrates how vote buying has matured into a dominant, technologically adaptive industry. Cash shortages briefly disrupted the classic cash-at-polling-unit model, pushing actors to adopt bank transfers, POS payments, vouchers, and commodity handouts innovation that makes inducement harder to detect and regulate

Simultaneously, election-related violence and localized attacks on INEC infrastructure and staff continued in many states. Low national turnout amplified the political value of targeted inducement: when few voters participate, bought votes can have an outsized influence in marginal constituencies.

Implication

2023 highlights the convergence of multiple threats to voter freedom: sophisticated inducement economies, ongoing election-related violence, and weakened turnout. Effective responses must integrate financial transparency, digital-trace forensics, strengthened INEC protection, and community-level resilience.

Cross-case Synthesis: What the Case Studies Show

Institutional fragility of the 1999 election created conditions where non-legal mechanisms (patronage, coercion) could grow. The 2007 election established a low-water mark for fraud that catalyzed later reform efforts. Evidence of mass fatalities in 2011 underlines the lethality of contested elections and the social fault lines that can be exploited. 2015 demonstrated that procedural/technological reform can raise credibility, but did not eliminate inducement.

2019 and 2023 show the evolving tactics of coercion, security-force partiality, party-affiliated armed groups, and increasingly sophisticated vote buying (including digital methods).

Turnout decline (2023 ~26.7%) increases the relative impact of bought votes and targeted manipulation. Low participation is both a consequence and a driver of diminished voter freedom.

6 NIGERIA VOTERS' FREEDOM INDEX

Methodological Approach for the Voters' Freedom Index (NVFI)

One of the central challenges in assessing elections in Nigeria is that existing evaluations tend to emphasize procedures, such as whether voting took place or results were announced, while paying insufficient attention to the actual freedom with which voters make their choices. To address this gap, this study proposes the Nigeria Voters' Freedom Index (NVFI) as a structured yet flexible framework for examining voter autonomy beyond the narrow lens of electoral administration.

The NVFI is designed as a multidimensional diagnostic index, focusing on both democratic theory and Nigeria's lived electoral realities. It recognizes that voter freedom is not a single condition but the outcome of several interrelated factors that shape how citizens experience elections. Accordingly, the index is organized around five aggregate dimensions, each capturing a critical aspect of voters' ability to exercise independent political choice. Each dimension is assigned a maximum of 20 points, reflecting the view that all five are equally essential to meaningful electoral freedom.

To institutionalize the measurement of voters' freedom, this publication proposes a Nigeria Voters' Freedom Index with five aggregate dimensions:

6.1 NVFI Indicators

1. Freedom From Inducement (0-20 points)

- Prevalence of vote buying
- Strength of monitoring and penalties
- Citizens' reported freedom in decision-making

Freedom from Inducement examines the extent to which voters are able to cast their ballots without material or financial pressure. In the Nigerian context, where vote buying has become increasingly normalized, this dimension is particularly important. It considers the prevalence and visibility of vote-buying practices, the effectiveness of monitoring mechanisms, and the seriousness of penalties imposed on offenders. Equally important is the degree to which citizens themselves report feeling free to vote according to their conscience rather than economic necessity. A high score in this category would indicate that inducement is rare, socially discouraged, and credibly punished, while a low score reflects an electoral environment dominated by transactional politics.

2. Freedom From Coercion (0-20 points)

- Incidence of intimidation, violence, threats
- Security agency neutrality

Freedom from Coercion, focuses on the physical and psychological conditions under which voting occurs. This includes the incidence of intimidation, threats, and electoral violence, as well as the conduct and neutrality of security agencies deployed during elections. In environments where voters fear harassment, retaliation, or violence, freedom of choice is compromised long before a ballot is cast. This dimension therefore assesses whether security presence reassures voters or instead contributes to fear and compliance. High scores indicate peaceful elections with professional, impartial security conduct; low scores reflect environments marked by violence, intimidation, or partisan enforcement.

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3. Access to Information (0-20 points)

- Voter education programs
- Media pluralism
- Exposure to misinformation

Access to Information addresses the informational foundations of voter freedom. Meaningful choice requires access to accurate, timely, and diverse information about candidates, parties, and the electoral processes. This dimension evaluates the reach and quality of voter education programs, the level of media pluralism, and the extent to which voters are exposed to misinformation or disinformation. In contexts where false narratives, propaganda, or identity-based manipulation dominate public discourse, voter freedom is undermined not through force but through distortion. Strong performance in this area suggests an informed electorate capable of independent judgment.

4. Institutional Integrity (0–20 points)

- INEC independence
- Transparency of processes
- Reliability of electoral technology

Institutional Integrity, examines the role of electoral and governance institutions in safeguarding voter autonomy. It focuses on the independence and credibility of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the transparency of electoral processes, and the reliability of electoral technologies such as accreditation and results transmission systems.

Where institutions are perceived as biased, opaque, or incompetent, voters may lose confidence that their choices matter, increasing susceptibility to inducement or disengagement. High scores in this dimension reflect trust in institutions and confidence in the integrity of electoral outcomes.

5. Enabling Socioeconomic Conditions (0–20 points)

- Poverty levels
- Voter turnout
- Citizens' trust in democracy

Enabling Socioeconomic Conditions, recognizes that voter freedom does not exist in isolation from broader social and economic realities. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and social insecurity reduce the capacity of citizens to resist inducement and coercion. This dimension therefore considers poverty levels, voter turnout as an indicator of engagement or disillusionment, and citizens' overall trust in democracy. Where basic needs are unmet and democratic institutions are viewed with skepticism, the freedom to make long-term political choices is severely constrained.

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6.2 Scoring Categories

To translate these dimensions into meaningful assessments, the NVFI employs four broad scoring categories. Scores between 80 and 100 indicate high levels of voter freedom, where elections are largely free from inducement, coercion, and institutional failure. Scores between 60 and 79 reflect moderate voter freedom, suggesting partial protections alongside notable weaknesses. Scores between 40 and 59 indicate low voter freedom, where manipulation and constraint are widespread. Scores below 40 represent severely restricted voter freedom, where elections function largely as controlled or transactional exercises.

- **80–100 (High Voters' Freedom)**
- **60–79 (Moderate Voters' Freedom)**
- **40–59 (Low Voters' Freedom)**
- **0–39 (Severely Restricted Freedom)**

Based on existing scholarly literature, election observation reports, and documented field trends, Nigeria currently falls within the Low Voters' Freedom category.

This assessment is driven primarily by the persistence and normalization of vote buying, the politicization of security deployment, and enduring institutional weaknesses that limit accountability.

The NVFI does not claim to offer a definitive numerical judgment, but rather provides a structured framework for diagnosing problems, comparing trends across election cycles, and informing policy responses aimed at restoring genuine voter freedom.

Policy & Solutions RECOMMENDATIONS

Restoring voters' freedom in Nigeria requires more than periodic electoral reforms or technological fixes. It demands a coordinated set of legal, institutional, social, and community-level interventions that address both the immediate practices undermining elections and the deeper conditions that sustain them. The following recommendations are proposed as practical steps toward strengthening voter autonomy and democratic legitimacy.

7.1 Strengthen Electoral Laws and Enforcement

Nigeria's electoral legal framework is relatively robust on paper, but its effectiveness is weakened by inconsistent enforcement. Campaign finance regulations must therefore be enforced more rigorously, with clear monitoring of spending limits, mandatory disclosure of campaign finances, and meaningful sanctions for violations. When political actors operate with the expectation of impunity, financial excesses and inducement become rational strategies rather than risks.

To support enforcement, a Rapid Electoral Offences Taskforce should be established ahead of elections, bringing together INEC, security agencies, financial intelligence units, and the judiciary. Such a taskforce would focus on timely investigation and prosecution of electoral offences during and immediately after elections, rather than allowing cases to languish indefinitely. Swift accountability is critical for deterrence.

In addition, the digitization of party primaries can significantly reduce the monetization of candidate selection. Transparent, technology-driven internal party processes would limit the influence of money and godfathers at the entry point of electoral competition, addressing manipulation before it reaches voters.

Policy & Solutions RECOMMENDATIONS

7.2 Disrupt Vote-Buying Networks

Vote buying has evolved into an organized system involving brokers, agents, and enforcement mechanisms. Disrupting these networks requires targeted interventions rather than symbolic condemnations. One practical step is the restriction of mobile phone use in voting cubicles, which would help curb “see-and-buy” practices that rely on photographic proof of votes cast.

Electoral security strategies should also move beyond visible deployment to include covert and intelligence-led monitoring. Carefully regulated undercover surveillance at polling units and known inducement hotspots can increase the likelihood of detection without intimidating voters. These measures must be guided by clear rules to prevent abuse.

Furthermore, election-period financial flows should be subject to enhanced scrutiny. Digital tracking of suspicious transactions, particularly large or unusual cash movements around election periods, can help identify inducement networks. Collaboration with financial institutions and anti-corruption agencies is essential to making vote buying a high-risk activity rather than a routine campaign tactic.

7.3 Reduce Voter Vulnerabilities

Electoral manipulation thrives where voters face severe economic and informational vulnerabilities. Long-term protection of voter freedom therefore requires investment beyond the electoral cycle. Voters' freedom education should be integrated into the national curriculum, beginning at early levels, to build a culture of democratic rights, critical thinking, and resistance to manipulation.

At the socioeconomic level, expanding conditional cash transfer and social protection programs can reduce the desperation that makes vote selling attractive. When basic survival is less precarious, citizens are better positioned to prioritize long-term governance outcomes over short-term inducements.

Civil society organizations also play a crucial role and should be further supported to conduct sustained voter enlightenment, especially in rural and marginalized communities. Continuous engagement, not just election-season campaigns helps shift norms and expectations around elections and citizenship.

Policy & Solutions RECOMMENDATIONS

7.4 Enhance INEC Capacity

INEC remains central to protecting voter freedom, but its effectiveness depends on capacity, autonomy, and public trust. One recurring source of voter frustration is logistical failure, particularly delays in material delivery and accreditation processes.

Improving last-mile logistics would reduce confusion, long queues, and voter fatigue conditions that often create openings for inducement and manipulation.

INEC's financial and operational autonomy should also be strengthened to insulate it from political pressure. Predictable funding and administrative independence enable better planning, staff training, and institutional confidence.

Transparency is equally important. The introduction of real-time transparency dashboards for election results, logistics updates, and campaign finance disclosures would enhance public confidence and reduce speculation. When voters can independently verify information, trust in the electoral process improves.

7.5 Strengthen Community-Based Accountability Systems

Finally, voter freedom is most sustainable when accountability is rooted at the community level. Training community-based election monitors equips citizens to observe, document, and report irregularities in ways that complement formal oversight mechanisms.

To encourage participation without fear, citizens should be empowered to report malpractice through secure and anonymous digital reporting channels. When voters believe their voices and observations matter, they become active stakeholders in electoral integrity rather than passive recipients of manipulation.

Taken together, these recommendations emphasize that protecting voter freedom is not a single reform but a continuous process. Legal enforcement, institutional strength, socioeconomic resilience, and community engagement must work in tandem to transform elections from transactional exercises into genuine expressions of popular will.

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CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that while Nigeria has sustained uninterrupted electoral democracy since 1999, the substantive freedom of its voters has steadily eroded. Elections have remained regular and competitive in form, yet increasingly compromised in substance by monetized politics, coercive environments, institutional weakness, and deep socioeconomic vulnerability. Across six electoral cycles, voter manipulation has evolved from overt ballot fraud and physical intimidation into more subtle, normalized, and technologically adaptive systems of inducement that undermine genuine political choice.

The evidence from 1999 to 2023 reveals a troubling pattern: procedural reforms and electoral technologies have improved administrative credibility, but they have not dismantled the underlying political economy that rewards vote buying, patronage, and impunity. Instead, manipulation has adapted. As ballot stuffing became harder, inducement became smarter; as cash became scarce, digital transfers and brokered exchanges emerged; as turnout declined, the political value of purchased votes increased. In this environment, voters often appear to choose freely, but their choices are shaped by fear, poverty, social pressure, and weakened trust in institutions.

The normalization of inducement represents one of the most profound threats to Nigeria's democracy. When vote buying becomes culturally accepted and economically rational, elections shift from expressions of popular will to transactional events embedded in survival strategies. This transformation weakens accountability, entrenches corruption, and distances governance from citizen consent. At the same time, the politicization of security forces, inconsistent enforcement of electoral laws, and weak judicial redress reinforce a system where manipulation carries low risk and high reward.

The proposed Nigeria Voters' Freedom Index (NVFI) responds to a critical analytical gap by shifting attention from whether elections occur to how freely voters are able to choose. By examining freedom from inducement, freedom from coercion, access to information, institutional integrity, and enabling socioeconomic conditions, the NVFI offers a structured framework for diagnosing democratic deficits that procedural assessments often overlook. Based on documented trends, Nigeria currently falls within the category of low voter freedom, underscoring the urgency of reform.

Ultimately, protecting voters' freedom is not merely an electoral concern; it is central to democratic legitimacy, political stability, and inclusive governance. Without voter autonomy, elections lose their capacity to discipline power, renew consent, and safeguard liberty. Restoring this freedom requires more than technological fixes or episodic reforms. It demands sustained enforcement of electoral laws, disruption of inducement networks, strengthened institutions, socioeconomic investment, and cultural reorientation toward rights-based citizenship.

Nigeria's democratic future depends on whether elections can once again serve as authentic expressions of the people's will rather than negotiated exchanges shaped by desperation and fear. Voter freedom must therefore be treated not as an abstract ideal, but as a measurable, protectable, and indispensable foundation of democratic governance.

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Through rigorous research, education, and advocacy, IFREME advances policy ideas that support individual freedom, entrepreneurship, and free-market principles. The Institute focuses on reducing barriers to enterprise, improving the policy environment for business growth, and encouraging cross-border trade and economic cooperation across the region. IFREME also places strong emphasis on educating young entrepreneurs and policy advocates, equipping them with the knowledge and skills required to engage constructively in economic and policy debates.

In pursuit of its mission, IFREME engages with policymakers, business leaders, academics, and civil society actors to facilitate open dialogue on market-driven solutions to societal challenges. By promoting the vision of a borderless and opportunity-driven West Africa, IFREME seeks to contribute to system-level change that enables individuals and businesses to thrive, innovate, and create shared prosperity.

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