

Exploring the Sobre Vote-buying in Rural Villages: The Lived Experiences of Poor Voters in the Philippines

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Abstract

Empirical evidence showed the prevalence of vote-buying in the country, particularly in rural areas targeting poor voters. This study explores the lived experiences of poor voters from rural areas on sobre vote-buying, the most prevalent type in the province. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by purposively selecting participants who experienced sobre vote-buying. Data gathered were analyzed through thematic analysis. Seven themes were developed to describe the participants' experience with sobre vote-buying. The study concluded that sobre vote-buying follows an established chain, keeps voters' commitment, and furthers the patriarchal system. It likewise gauges the candidates' seriousness to win. It is socially accepted due to its prevalence and justified by voter's perception of rampant government corruption and inefficiency. To some extent, it remains an adequate inducement as participants lament the lack of trustworthy and competent candidates. The study recommends multisectoral voters' education, focusing on the ill effects of electing corrupt and incompetent officials.

Keywords

elections, vote-buying, thematic analysis, Sorsogon province

INTRODUCTION

Many developing democratic nations grapple with the widespread problem of vote-buying, particularly in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America (Canare & Lopez, 2016). Studies conducted in Argentina (Brusco et al., 2004), Nigeria (Oladoye et al., 2022; Ewum & Obi, 2024), Turkey (Blaydes, 2006), Indonesia (Muhtadi, 2019); and the Philippines (Canare & Lopez, 2016; Magallon-Avenido et al., 2013), revealed the problem's prevalence and pointed at people with low incomes as the willing victims. In these regions, vote-buying and other forms of electoral corruption weaken the democratic process by targeting the poor and vulnerable groups (Jimoh, 2021; Kao et al., 2022; Kwarisima, 2016; Nwagwu et al., 2022; Onuoha & Okafor, 2020; Sengupta et al., 2023). Investigations on vote-buying in nations such as Nigeria, India, and Africa have uncovered the mechanisms through which vote-buying sustains inequality, undermines governance, and nurtures systemic corruption (Erhunmwunse, 2023; Ezeifekwuaba & Nakitende, 2023; Nebeife et al., 2021; Sengupta et al., 2023). Global trends indicate that vote-buying persists where poverty, lax election law enforcement, and lack of civic education all combine and result in an environment where voters and candidates alike participate in this cycle (Carreras & İrepoğlu, 2013; Muli, 2020; Nwabuoku et al., 2023; Uwa & Emeka, 2022; Wagner, 2019).

Empirical research on vote-buying provides insights into how it is conducted and influences voters' decisions (Jimoh, 2021; Olaniyan, 2020; Lucky, 2014; Sule & Tal, 2018). Studies have shown that cash-based vote-buying is a widely used strategy and has become more sophisticated over time to ensure efficiency (Kao et al., 2022; Olaniyan, 2020). Evidently, money plays a dominant position during elections in many developing nations, and it can almost decide who to vote for and who wins (Lucky, 2014).

In the Philippines, buying and selling votes is illegal according to the Omnibus Election Code of the Philippines but remains a pervasive practice (Hicken et al., 2015). The socioeconomic status of most voters in the country exacerbates the persistence of this unlawful act during elections. In a poverty-stricken nation where inequality is prevalent, vote buying and selling during elections remains a vicious cycle. This is confirmed by a survey conducted in 2016, which found that vote-buying among the poor is a widespread practice (Canare et al., 2018). Local studies also revealed the relationship between poverty and vote-buying effectiveness (Canare & Lopez, 2016; Magallon-Avenido et al., 2013). No less than former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared that vote-buying is an "integral part of the elections" in the country (Romero & Regalado, 2019).

Studies similarly pointed to literacy rate and being in rural areas as associated with vote-buying vulnerability (Abocejo, 2015; Magallon-Avenido et al., 2013). In rural areas where poverty is prevalent, people find it hard to resist the allure of monetary incentives during elections. Literacy and educational attainment also matter when deciding to respond to vote-buying offers. Filipinos have been used to the clandestine act of vote-buying in rural areas as it has been a viable political strategy to win elections (Abocejo, 2015). The apparent lack of effective enforcement mechanisms and weak punishments for the illegal act of buying votes exacerbates the prevalence of this covert practice. It is challenging to indict and punish those who practice vote-buying due to structural and political hindrances. Peddlers or intermediaries are at the forefront of vote-buying operations. Thus, it is a challenge to directly attribute the vote-buying activity to a particular candidate because of their non-participation in the actual exchange.

Several studies revealed the prevalence of vote-buying in many parts of the country (Hicken et al., 2015). Canare et al. (2018) attempted to identify the different inducements used as a vote-buying tool. In the study conducted in an urban poor area, all respondents admitted that there were vote-buying offers, and almost all admitted that they accepted the offer. The usual offers were money, food, rice, groceries, and other valuables. On the other hand, the offer not to vote for a candidate is a far less prevalent offer. What is interesting to note is that most of those who accepted the offer voted for the candidate. The study, however, did not attempt to associate those variables. However, it was evident that the vote-buying offers considerably affected voters' decisions (Canare et al., 2018). In Sorsogon province, experimental studies were conducted to measure the influence of vote-buying on voters' decisions. It revealed that voters switch votes when they do not have strong candidate preference and when initially preferred candidates do less vote-buying (Hicken et al., 2015). However, the voters' description of their experience of vote-buying has yet to be considered. The extant literature provides an in-depth description of how vote-buying occurs as experienced by the voters and their perspective on such experience (Adojutelegan, 2018; Appiah, 2023; Borges, 2019; Sengupta et al., 2023).

This study explores the vote-buying experiences of poor residents from rural areas, particularly on their experience of the *sobre* type of vote-buying. Among the different types of vote-buying offers, such as money, food and groceries, help or favor, and other material things (Canare et al., 2018), the distribution of cash through the candidates' middlemen or intermediaries is the most prevalent in the province, much less, in the municipality.

The *sobre* vote-buying is the most accepted and well-practised type as it involves merely a simple client-patron transaction. If a voter commits to voting for a candidate, he or she will be reciprocated with a cash incentive. No pressure, persuasion, deception, or violence is involved. This cash-based type of vote-buying is colloquially known as *sobre*. *Sobre* is derived from the word envelope, typically used for cash distribution.

This study aims to understand the *sobre* vote-buying phenomenon based on the lived experiences of poor residents in rural areas. It provides a context-specific description of how this cash-based vote-

buying is conducted and what that experience means to the residents. The sobre vote-buying may resemble other cash-based vote-buying schemes, but this study hopes to depict the shared experiences and the distinct characteristics of such a phenomenon.

Understanding the complexities and dynamics of the sobre type of vote-buying in rural areas provides a better insight into how ordinary citizens and voters interact with and contribute to the illicit practice. Moreover, exploring the voters' perspective toward the said vote-buying practice would provide significant input on addressing this electoral issue through a more contextualized approach.

METHODS

The study employed a phenomenological research design to capture the lived experience of participants from rural areas on sobre vote-buying. Max Van Manen describes phenomenology as a human science that aims to study the person's world as they live it and what it means to live in that world (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2019). This study aims to describe the vote-buying experience and what such experience means to the participants, specifically in the recent local and national elections last May 2022.

The study's locale is the coastal municipality of Bulan in the province of Sorsogon (shown in Figure 1). Bulan, with predominantly rural areas, is in the south-westernmost tip of the Bicol Peninsula of Luzon Island. It is the most populated municipality in the province (105,190 as of the 2020 Census) and has the most significant number of voters (67,020 as of 2022 Elections) (LGU - Bulan, 2022). Based on local and social media reports, sobre vote-buying was prevalent in the municipality in the recent election. However, no formal cases or complaints were filed due to the perception of a low prosecution rate on vote-buying cases (Brigada News 101.5 FM Sorsogon, 2019; Canon, 2019; Journalists League of Bulan, 2019).

The study participants were selected purposively based on their place of residence, vote-buying experience, and socioeconomic status. Selected participants came from rural villages or barangays in the municipality of Bulan and were from either inland or coastal villages. They admitted they are aware of and experienced the sobre type of vote-buying and were willing to share the said experience. Participants were also selected based on their family's monthly income, as disclosed before the interview. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, low-income families considered poor have a monthly income of Php 12,082 and below for a family of five (Zoleta, 2023). Hence, these were considered prior to participants' selection.



Figure 1. Map of the study site

A total of ten (10) participants underwent interviews; five (5) participants came from the coastal, and the rest came from inland barangays (villages) of the municipality. Table 1 briefly describes the interviewed participants from villages in the coastal and inland areas. The description includes age, sex, marital status, occupation, and role in the vote-buying activity as a family leader, family member, or village leader. The village leader participant was identified through snowball selection.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative descriptions of the participants' sobre vote-buying experiences. Interview questions focused on participants' experience, involvement, and feelings about the sobre vote-buying phenomenon. The interview started with an introduction and rapport-building questions. It followed with questions about their experience and engagement with vote-buying: "How do you receive the cash from the candidate?" "How does the process of sobre vote-buying start?" and "What roles and responsibilities do you play as village leader, family leader, or member?" After the participants had given ample narratives of their experiences, questions related to their feelings towards the phenomenon were asked: "What are your thoughts about the sobre type of vote-buying?" "What makes it prevalent?" and "What are your thoughts about its effect on voter's decision? Does it ensure victory?". The interview ended with questions about their preferred political leaders and what qualities they seek in candidates.

Before the interview, the study was presented to the institution's ethics committee as it underwent an ethical review process. Data gathering commenced after the committee issued ethical compliance. It occurred from August to October 2022.

The interviews were conducted in the vernacular and lasted approximately 30 minutes each. They were held privately, specifically at the interviewees' residences. During interviews, ethical considerations are observed. Participants were briefed on the study's objective and were informed that participation is voluntary and that the data they provided was solely for research purposes. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, their anonymity, and the confidentiality of their shared experience.

The data gathered was analyzed through thematic analysis. [Van Manen \(2016\)](#) explained that the phenomenon can be best described in terms of phenomenological themes. Themes interpret the meaning of the lived experience. The study is guided by a thematic analysis process developed by Braun and Clarke in 2006: data familiarization, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report ([Byrne, 2022](#)). Interview recordings were transcribed, perused, and understood. Significant responses were labeled with codes, which were grouped, and themes were generated. Emergent themes were reviewed and named.

Table 1. *Description of the participants*

Participant #	Residence	Description (age, sex, marital status, occupation, role in vote-buying)
Participant #1	Coastal	42 yrs. old, male, married, casual laborer, family leader
Participant #2	Coastal	24 yrs. old, male, single, fisherfolk, member
Participant #3	Coastal	22 yrs. old, female, married, homemaker, member
Participant #4	Coastal	58 yrs. old, female, married, entrepreneur, family leader
Participant #5	Coastal	52 yrs. old, male, married, fisherfolk, family leader
Participant #6	Inland	54 yrs. old, female, married, homemaker, family leader
Participant #7	Inland	44 yrs. old, male, single, casual laborer/fisherfolk, village leader
Participant #8	Inland	55 yrs. old, male, married, fisherfolk/casual laborer, family leader
Participant #9	Inland	45 yrs. old, female, married, casual laborer, family leader
Participant #10	Inland	28 yrs. old, male, married, casual laborer, member

RESULTS

After conducting semi-structured interviews with ten (10) participants from rural areas, seven (7) themes were developed based on their description of the sobre vote-buying experiences. Emergent themes were the following: 1) An established chain, 2) Sustaining commitment, 3) Maintaining the

patriarchal system, 4) Resentment and distrust, 5) A practical and justified practice, 6) Sign of serious-mindedness to win, and 7) Effective to some extent.

Theme 1: An established chain

Based on participants’ narratives, it can be gathered that the *sobro* vote-buying followed an established process and involved a chain of actors. Participants related uniform experiences on how such an activity is conducted and who the actors involved in the operation are. Figure 2 illustrates the said chain.

Chain of actors. It was evident from the participants’ narratives that such *sobro* vote-buying follows a chain of actors. These actors have distinct roles and functions. Participants identified that the distribution chain involves the following: the candidate; village leaders (colloquially called P.O.s, an abbreviation of Political Officers); family leaders (vernacularly called *lider*); and family members, who are the voters.

The village leaders have direct contact with the candidates (or the candidates' operators). It serves as the intermediary between the candidates and the family leaders. Months prior to cash distribution, village leaders forward the list of names to the candidates, which is submitted to them by the family leaders. During cash distribution, the village leaders are also responsible for distributing the vote-buying cash to the same family leaders assigned to them.

The family leaders’ role involves generating a list of voters to be submitted to the village leaders and distributing the vote-buying cash to the intended recipient on the eve of the election day. A family leader participant mentioned, “We, [being family leaders] submit our list of committed voters to our designated P.O.s, and our P.O. is also the one in-charge in distributing to us the envelopes [with money].” Another participant agreed, “My father [who is a family leader] makes a list of all voters in our family, including our extended family and close relatives.” Family leaders are usually the head of the household. They generate a list of family members and relatives who commit to support their family leader’s candidate. They are also responsible for sustaining the commitment of their members for the entirety of the election period.

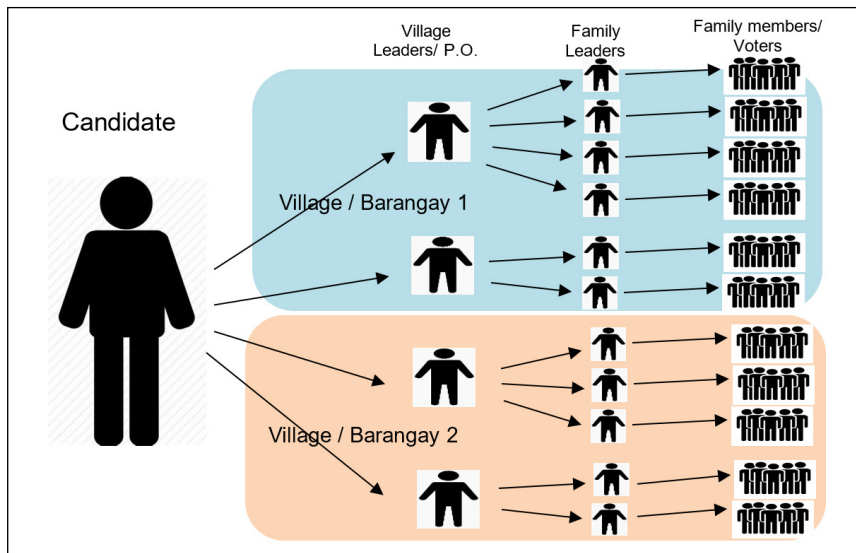


Figure 2. *The sobro* vote-buying chain

The family members are typical voters. They usually come from the family leader’s household. Some are extended family members, close relatives, family friends, and close subordinates who have no family leaders over them.

The number of village leaders or P.O.s in each barangay depends on the barangay's voting size. The larger the voting population, the more P.O.s are designated. Under the village leaders are family leaders, whom they maintain and monitor. The family members are also under the supervision of a family leader. Family leaders mentioned that there is no hard rule on the number of members they can enlist under them as long as it passes validation.

Established operation. Participants' narrative revealed that the Sobre vote-buying chain followed a similar procedure in the last several local elections. Family leader participants articulated that this chain follows an established operation. It has worked for several local elections and has even been practised during barangay elections. A family leader participant mentioned, *"He has worked as a family leader and coordinated with the same P.O. in quite a few elections that occurred."*

The sobre vote-buying operation starts when the family leader, usually the head of the household, generates a list of his family members, relatives, and close subordinates who commit to supporting a particular candidate. A family leader participant said, *"One month before the election, we (family leaders) submit a list of our family members to our P.O.s."* The village leader collates all lists (submitted by family leaders) under his designated area and reports them to the candidate or candidates' task force team. The list of names reported undergoes validation through various means. A village leader participant commented, *"A group of validators sit together and deliberate on the veracity of the names in the list."* The initial validation stage is vernacularly called sikyar. It is when the submitted names are verified vis-à-vis the Official Voters' list, and the candidates' panel of validators deliberates upon the reliability of their commitment. The panel consists of selected village leaders and candidates' vote-buying confidants.

The validation process aimed to eliminate duplication of names, ensure the voters' whereabouts, and approximate the high likelihood of commitment from the names in the submitted list. Participants mentioned that some voters would attempt to enlist their names to another family leader. On the other hand, family leaders mentioned that some family leaders would submit the names of their family members living abroad or living permanently away from the municipality. Some cunning family leaders would also include voters who are supporters of rival candidates in their lists. Hence, the entire validation process is valuable for candidates as it safeguards their election funds from waste. Candidates would always ensure that the cash distributed would translate to votes.

Cash distribution occurs a day before or on the eve of election day. The village leaders disseminate the cash to the family leaders designated under him/her. Family leaders then distribute them to their household members or those on the list they generate.

The candidate gives the go-signal to mark the start of cash distribution. A village leader participant said, *"We usually wait for the rival candidate to start releasing (their vote-buying money) before we start ours."* A family leader participant also mentioned, *"Candidates want to be the last ones to release (vote-buying money) to ensure that voters will not forget them."*

Theme 2: Sustaining commitment

Participants explained that the moment they committed to a candidate, they felt obligated to manifest and sustain their commitment for the election period.

Months before the election day, participants expressed their commitment to supporting a particular candidate by enlisting their names through their family leader. The names are then handed over to their village leaders for consolidation and validation by the candidates' task force. The commitment is given with the covert intention to receive the sobre as a cash incentive from the candidate.

The commitment is not merely lip service. Participants related that the manifestation of that commitment must be sustained throughout the election and campaign period. The commitment must also be manifested through their acts, directly and indirectly. Directly, commitment can be manifested by actively campaigning for the candidate. Another manifestation is the participants' attendance during the campaign sorties of the candidate in their area or barangay. Participants mentioned, *"To ensure that your name will not be removed from the list of recipients, attend their sorties. Never be spotted at the sorties of the rival"*

candidate." Another manifestation is the installation of election tarpaulins and other election paraphernalia on the premises of the committed participants. A participant narrated, "*Hanging their tarpaulins in my fence erases doubts of the candidates' supporters of my commitment.*" Indirectly, commitment is shown through the non-attendance of the participants in the campaign sorties of the opposing candidates. Another indirect manifestation is inactive or non-involvement in groups identified with the opposing candidate. One participant mentioned, "*If you are caught by your P.O. or leader campaigning for an opposing candidate, your name is stricken off the list.*" Another participant said, "*Attending the opposing candidates' sorties can also cost your cash incentive.*" Participants said they covertly attend sorties of rival candidates or listen from their backyard.

According to the village leader, commitment must be explicitly shown, as some voters and even family leaders commit to two rival candidates to get more vote-buying cash. If village leaders slack or become less observant, these voters take advantage of this situation. A village leader participant said, "*If we do not keep an eye on them, we will be wasting our money, which can be better given to real supporters.*"

Theme 3: Maintaining the patriarchal system

Participants' narratives revealed that their choice of candidates, specifically local candidates, is mirrored by their household head choice. They explained that their family has a unified choice of candidates based on their family leader's affiliation or choice.

Family member participants divulged that the head of the household, particularly the father, decides on whom or which party they will support. This applies more to local candidates such as governor, congressman, mayor, vice-mayor, and councilors. Children or members of the households, in many instances, conform to the choice of the head of the family. Participants from rural areas uphold the choice of their family. This is also the reason why the commitment of the family leader is important for candidates, as there is a high likelihood that the members will resonate with the same choice. Participants narrated, "*Whoever my parents support, we will also support.*" Another participant added, "*Our family is known to support a certain candidate, and the whole family votes for him.*" Voters are no longer asked individually about their commitment to a particular candidate. It is implied and assumed that their choice is the same as their families.

Family leader participants explained that it is advantageous for the family to give their unanimous support to a particular candidate. Having mixed choices in the family may raise doubts about their commitment. Further, it may strain the family's relationship with the candidate.

The *sobres* system showed that the patriarchal system remains in rural areas and is intensely practiced during elections. Participants disclosed that their choice of local candidate is usually a personal choice of their family. It was shown that participants do not choose candidates based on platform and ideologies but more on personal standards. Several participants disclosed that regionalism, affinity, and blood relations still matter in their family choice.

Participants related that there are instances when their names are taken off the list or the whole family's list is stricken off from the roster of committed supporters. Besides inadvertent errors, such removal from the list is due to the inability to pass validation. The village leaders or the candidates themselves decide to remove such names on the list who are identified with the opposing candidate and would be less likely to vote for them despite their verbal commitment. A village leader participant disclosed, "*When I found that their family leader or their family is likely to vote for another candidate, I will have to remove their names from my list. Otherwise, I am going to be accountable for it.*" The perception of less likelihood or distrust comes from observed acts of the voters and their personal and professional affiliations.

Theme 4: Resentment and distrust

The problem narrated by the participants in their experiences is their feeling of distrust towards their village leaders or sometimes their family leaders. Participants feel that they were taken advantage of by them by not wholly giving them what is supposed to be given. A participant said, "*If you do not claim your*

money or your *sobro*, it is less likely to be given to you." Another participant concurred, "Some leaders are nowhere to be found when you are about to claim your cash incentive."

Another suspect for such an incident, which many participants would like to believe, is the dishonesty of village leaders and family leaders. These agents of *sobro* vote-buying or candidates' intermediaries also take advantage of this opportunity to double-cross the trust of the candidate and the voters. The majority of participants disclosed this cunning practice, particularly of village leaders, as they leveraged the inability of one party to validate the transaction with the other party. One participant mentioned, "With thousands of envelopes being distributed, how can the candidate know that it reached the unaware recipient?"

The perception of distrust emanates from the fact that the cash distributed has increased every election. One family leader participant said, "If P.O. would tell you that your submitted list did not pass validation and was stricken off from the roster of recipients, we are talking here of a few to ten thousand pesos that he can take away." The removal from the list and the inability to receive cash incentives from vote-buyers resulted in disappointment and resentment of many participants. This resentment often deters the voters from choosing the candidate they initially committed to voting for, or much less, deters them from going to the polls.

Theme 5: Practical and justified practice

Participants recognize that, morally, vote-buying is not ideal and is unethical. Nevertheless, many participants viewed the *sobro* vote-buying, particularly the straightforward receipt of cash from candidates, as practical and justified. According to participants' narratives, it is justified because it is a common practice during elections and the opportune time for people to take what is theirs. It is also justified by a practical view that money is not easy to earn, and refusing money from a politician is hypocritical.

Common practice. Participants justify the reasonableness of vote-buying as it is a common and known practice in several elections. It can be gathered from the participants that the *sobro* vote-buying is an open practice. Participants mentioned that residents may be discreet in receiving the cash, but the neighborhood openly discusses such practices. As practiced every election and openly discussed in the community, such a manner of vote-buying has been tolerated and accepted by the community. It was not even difficult to look for participants who would willingly share their vote-buying experience. Participants never hesitated to discuss and would laugh about the experience. Participants admitted that *sobro* vote-buying is already anticipated during elections. A family member said, "Elections may be boring without the *sobro* [vote-buying]." It indicates that *sobro* vote-buying is highly prevalent that most participants are aware of and would anticipate its occurrence every election.

Getting what is ours. Another justification that participants related with the *sobro* vote-buying is that they view it as merely taking what is theirs. They justify that the cash used by the candidate for vote-buying came from the government's coffers. They deem that politicians are generally corrupt and dishonest. They take advantage of the people's money during their term of office. Thus, voters might as well take what is given to them during the election. One participant said, "It is only during the election period that ordinary citizens like us can take advantage of the politicians." Another participant narrated, "Politicians enrich themselves during their term. People can reclaim a little only during elections."

Participants reasoned that the election is a time to get even with the politicians. One participant expressed his disappointment, saying, "This is the time we can get back from the politicians for their inefficiency. Because once they are in office, they are ineffective and would not listen to our needs." The statement tells of participants' dissatisfaction with government service. Participants observed that they cannot rely on government services when needed. Thus, taking politicians' money is the least they can do to get even or benefit from them.

Participants' narratives displayed that the prevalence and toleration of vote-buying stemmed from participants' disappointment with the government's inefficiency. It shows that, as an outcome, they do not perceive elections as the solution to such disappointment. As one participant narrated above, once a candidate is in office, they do not serve the people but themselves. Thus, instead of considering elections

as a democratic process that would bring progress by electing new leaders, they see it as the time to get even with politicians and get what is theirs.

Being practical. Participants justified the practicality of vote-buying by demonstrating the difficulty of earning money. One narrated, *"It is difficult to earn easy money nowadays, and refusing to accept a candidate's vote-buying incentive is hypocrisy."* Participants also highlighted the fact that it was given and received without physical or emotional force. It was never begged nor demanded. Thus, amid poverty and life's hardships, refusing to accept a blessing in disguise is foolishness.

Participants no longer consider the ethical dimension of vote-buying, as cash is offered to them freely, and the likely source of money is public funds. Accepting it amidst life's hardship and difficulty earning money is justifiably practical. Some participants reasoned that voting for someone who deserves their vote is important.

Theme 6: Sign of candidates' serious-mindedness to win

Participants have equated vote-buying, particularly giving out considerable amounts of money, to measure the candidates' eagerness to win. They reckon that cash giving is a trend during elections; candidates, particularly local candidates, must join the trend to show their readiness to win. One participant narrated, *"If you want to win, you should be ready to spend a huge amount [of money]."* This is echoed by other participants explaining that people would see other candidates who do not engage in vote-buying as either a pushover or a money-maker.

Vote-buying and exorbitant spending during the election created a perception of winnability. This moved the voters to support the winnable candidate and dropped their support for the less winnable candidate. The village leader participant said, *"Voters nowadays sought after candidates whom they know would engage in vote-buying."* This means that vote-buying makes vote-buyers winnable as it creates a bandwagon of supporters. Conversely, participants perceive that voting for a less winnable or less serious candidate is a vote wasted.

Moreover, participants narrated that there are candidates who join the election to earn money through campaign donations and party funds. A family leader explained, *"There are astute candidates who employ a lose-win strategy to benefit from the elections financially."* Participants cited examples of local candidates who promised to distribute cash to their supporters. However, on the eve of the election, they hide to evade the supporters expecting cash incentives. Participants believed that such behavior is exhibited by those who do not intend to win an election but rather gain from the election. Thus, if the candidate does not spend much, particularly for vote-buying, he/she is not eager enough to win the election.

Theme 7: Effective to some extent

This theme describes the participants' view of the impact of vote-buying on their voting decision. It can be gathered from the participants' narratives that the vote-buying type of vote-buying has influenced their decision, as reciprocity factors in after receiving the vote-buying cash. However, such an effect remains limited to some extent. Participants maintained that such reciprocity can be overlooked if there are qualified and competent candidates.

Token of appreciation. Participants consider the vote-buying practice a token of the candidate's appreciation. They view the cash incentive more as a gesture of gratitude than a vote-buying cash. It means something to the participants when candidates give them incentives for the support they extend. Beyond that transactional vote-buying action, participants see the gesture as a reward for choosing and trusting the candidate. One participant said, *"It is a treat from the candidate for throwing our support."* Another participant used the vernacular, *pandulce*, to describe the cash incentive given by candidates. *Pandulce* is a vernacular for candy given as a treat. Thus, to some participants, vote-buying grants voters a nominal amount to manifest candidates' gratitude.

The vote-buying cash, perceived as a token of appreciation, appeared to be an effective tool to solicit voter support. When a voter received the "token of appreciation", voters felt the moral obligation to return the favor by giving their support. One participant said, *"A candidate who remembers me during elections gets*

my vote." On the other hand, without receiving any "token" from the candidate, it signals to the voters that candidates do not consider them as their supporters. Hence, voters would never reward them with their votes.

Furthermore, participants believe that the cash received from the candidate is a token of appreciation that motivates voters to cast their votes at the polls. They related that some voters would not go to the polls if they did not receive cash incentives. As voters anticipate vote-buying cash during elections, participants believe that candidates who fulfill this anticipation can be reciprocated with their votes.

Limited to some extent. While participants' narratives revealed that vote-buying influences voting decisions, they believe the impact is somewhat limited. While narratives would tell that the token of appreciation matters to voters, participants also believe that it does not guarantee votes. This perception is the caveat to the effectiveness of vote-buying.

Participants explained that vote-buying matters when there seems to be no other significant basis for choosing. When participants were asked if the cash incentive is their compelling basis for supporting a candidate, they retorted that it is not the sole basis of preference. They mentioned that, as much as possible, they based their votes on the candidate's character, background, and ability to make a difference. However, when all candidates have doubtful integrity and competence, they resort back to reciprocating the candidates' apparent generosity. As one participant mentioned, "*All candidates are corrupt. There are no better choices but the lesser evil.*"

Participants lamented the dearth of trustworthy and qualified candidates during elections. They perceive that the majority of candidates are politicians, who are generally corrupt and untrustworthy. They run not to genuinely serve the public but their self-interest. One participant expressed, "*Politicians enrich themselves during their term [in office].*"

Participants believe that voters fundamentally consider the competence and integrity of the candidate. Participants hinted that they remain hopeful for candidates who can make a difference. It means that the choice or non-choice of candidates would count on the voter's perception of the candidate. On the other hand, the effectiveness of vote-buying applies when there is no other basis for choosing. A participant explained, "*If the candidate is corrupt and inefficient, I would take his money and will never vote for him/her.*" It demonstrates that voters, in the final analysis, sought after candidates who are competent and dependable.

Referring to the last local election in the municipality, several participants divulged that they accepted the cash incentive of the vote-buyer but voted for the other candidate, even though the latter did not buy votes. They said that their choice of candidate was based on his leadership performance in his current position. Other participants, on the other hand, said that no candidates are competent and trustworthy enough for them to choose, irrespective of the cash received.

It can be gleaned from the participants' narrative that candidates' character, competence, and governance platform are essential election considerations. However, they have not become an election issue in recent local elections. Despite their yearning for a better government, they believe that candidates and politicians are generally dishonest; once elected, they serve their interests, not the people's.

DISCUSSION

The study aimed to describe the experiences of poor voters in the *sobre* type of vote-buying. It describes how that experience unfolds and what it means to the voters from rural areas. As unanimously shared by participants, the experience of *sobre* vote-buying is simply the receipt of a cash incentive, a few days before the election or on the eve of the election day, from the candidate they committed to voting.

From the participants' shared narratives, it was revealed that the *sobre* vote-buying follows an established chain that has been practised in several elections. There were identified actors playing as intermediaries to complete the distribution process. What is distinct in the chain is the existence of the P.O.s (village leaders), who are the candidates' representatives. Being an intermediary for the candidate endowed them with authority and influence in the vote-buying process. They were part of the validation process and served as candidates' eyes to ensure voters' commitment. They were seen as shrewd and

believed they would make money due to the informality of the process. This framework resembles the Ekiti model vote-buying chain in Nigeria described by [Amaechi and Stockemer \(2022\)](#). It involves a distribution chain from the political parties and candidates to their vote brokers and voters. Although the Ekiti model is broad or national in scope, the sobre vote-buying chain operates merely on a municipal level.

Findings divulged that village leaders' reputation seems undesirable to many participants. They expressed ill feelings towards the village leaders due to their untrustworthiness. They believe they make money in the vote-buying process by deceiving voters into saying that their names are taken off the list or by distributing the envelopes with reduced cash. The participants' resentment derived from the perception that the money (that P.O.s took advantage of) belongs to the people and is given back to them during elections.

One interesting subtlety in the sobre vote-buying process is the furtherance of the patriarchal system in the family dynamics. Participants seemed to unquestionably submit to the decision of their patriarch or the head of the family in their choice of candidates, specifically local candidates. Thus, families with large numbers of members are attractive to candidates. Candidates would handle such a relationship with the family, particularly with the father or their head. This is consistent with Cruz's findings (2019), which state that political candidates prefer targeting voters with extensive social networks. This is so because voters with vast social networks can better reach other voters who may be influenced through vote-buying and socialization. The tendency to target those with significant social networks can result in other voters not receiving money in exchange for votes. Some candidates or their intermediaries target voters with expansive social networks and larger families as they possess more significant potential to provide more votes to the candidate. In contrast, individuals with limited family members or smaller social networks often need to receive monetary incentives from politicians or remain uninvolved in exchange transactions during election periods.

The sobre system showed that the patriarchal system remains practised in rural areas and is intensely exercised during elections. Participants admitted that their choice of local candidate is usually a personal choice of their family. It was shown that participants do not choose candidates based on platform and ideologies but more on personal standards or family values. Several participants disclosed that regionalism, affinity, and blood relations still matter in their family choice.

Generally, the sobre vote-buying practice is socially accepted and tolerated, even though it is illegal and immoral. The tolerance of such practice stemmed from the fact that it is widely participated in, and poor people had developed a seemingly logical justification for receiving such an incentive. Participants argue that: first, it is a common practice; second, election is the time that people can get even from the government's inefficiency; and third, life is challenging to decline money given away without violence or pressure.

It can be observed that vote-buying prevailed due to corruption and inefficiency. In a study of vote-buying in Thailand and the Philippines, [Hicken \(2007\)](#) found that vote-buying is fueled by the government's neglect of the poor and rural areas. When people feel that governmental institutions are not working for them, they see vote-buying as reprisal. Participants said, "This is the only time for us to get even with the government's inefficiency and incompetence." This finding resembles the chicken-and-egg situation wherein participants feel corruption and inefficiency propagate vote-buying. However, as studies reported, it is, in reality, the practice of vote-buying that has resulted in corruption and inefficiency. With the vast sums of money spent, vote-buyers are given the propensity to deliver a substandard performance ([Nwagwu et al., 2022](#)).

[Lucky \(2014\)](#) confirmed the above findings when he investigated the impact of money politics on good governance in Nigeria. He inferred that an elected public official engaged in vote-buying is prone to corruption and promotes private interests. He then noted that when people do not consider performance or quality a critical factor in an election, the incentive to perform or provide quality service is also weak ([Lucky, 2014](#)). [Khemani \(2015\)](#) also concluded in his study on vote-buying and public services that the former strongly correlated with under-investment in pro-poor programs. [Nwagwu et al. \(2022\)](#) also

supported this finding in their study in Nigeria. They concluded that vote-buying, in effect, compromises the well-being of the people through poor governance and inferior service delivery. Furthermore, vote-buying also weakens accountability, which is central to democracy (Hicken et al., 2018).

One interesting finding in the study is the participants' perception of vote-buying as the gauge for candidates' eagerness to win. It is, however, due to the long exercise of money politics. Money politics has become part of the culture and an integral part of the electoral process (Cruz et al., 2016), so much so that participants would take vote-buying as a societal gauge of candidates' serious-mindedness in winning elections. Participants reluctantly admitted that money became the measure of willingness to survive a money-driven election. Candidates can hold back voters' decisions by not engaging in vote-buying or offering an amount way less than other candidates. During Taiwan's election, Wu and Huang (2004) noted that vote-buying may not guarantee winning, but losing is guaranteed if candidates do not spend on vote-buying.

The impact of money given by candidates sends a signal to the voters that they are appreciated, and voters give their votes in return. A social contract is forged between the candidate and the voter. Participants expressed that when the voter receives a cash incentive from the candidate, especially when the amount is relatively significant, there is a feeling of indebtedness to the candidate or some debt of gratitude. Thus, voters would be likely to reciprocate it with their votes. This reciprocity is also found in the studies of Canare et al. (2018), Aboejo (2015), and Finan & Schechter (2011), where candidates exploit the social norm of reciprocating the seeming generosity.

When participants were asked whether vote-buying assures electoral victory, they needed to be more confident in asserting whether it is undoubtedly effective. Participants would unanimously say it influences their choices. The token of appreciation bestowed by the candidate as a cash incentive obliged them to return the favor with electoral support. However, it showed that the efficiency of vote-buying stemmed from the perception that there are no better options. Such perception is a caveat to the effectiveness of vote-buying.

Participants expressed that recent elections give them no room to choose a better and more qualified candidate. As one participant lamented, "All candidates are corrupt. There are no better choices but the lesser evil." It can be observed that when voters are left with no qualified or trustworthy candidate, they become passionless or insincere with their choices. Thus, they resort to basing their votes on those who offer them valuable amounts. The social norm of reciprocity sets in with the candidate-voter relationship. Moreover, when voters are handed a token of appreciation, beneficiaries feel obligated to reciprocate with support (Muhtadi, 2019).

The problem with vote-buying is that it allows corrupt and incompetent politicians to hold office and promote their self-interest. This persists when vote-buying is perceived as an effective means to electoral victory. However, the unfortunate consequence is that corrupt practices and lousy governance persist (Kwarisima, 2016). Sule & Tal (2018) noted that politics had become the sanctuary of the corrupts and scoundrels to protect them from the wrath of the law. Thus, vote-buyers should never be given the chance to hold office.

The above findings imply that the perception of vote-buying effectiveness left qualified and competent candidates with no room to run for public office. When money is the gauge for seriousness to run and reciprocity works, qualified candidates who intend to refrain from engaging in vote-buying inhibit themselves from running as there seems no apparent chance of winning. Politics is left to the incompetent and opportunists (Ewum & Obi, 2024).

This study, however, revealed that within participants' hearts, there remains idealism in aspiring to vote for a qualified and competent candidate. They still hope that a trustworthy and competent leader can deliver better service and alleviate them from their life's ordeal. Jimoh (2021) and Canare et al. (2018) noted in their study that the majority would choose a candidate because of their qualifications and not merely based on the money they received or offered to them. Shaffer (cited in Canare & Lopez, 2016) also discovered that voters only partially base their decision on the amount received from the candidate.

However, participants believe that ideal and quality candidates abjure elections, as they have a slim chance of victory, based on the current election dynamics.

Participants expressed frustration and disillusionment with the political system, saying it is dominated by corrupt and self-centered elites who use vote-buying to maintain control. These indicate that participants would fundamentally dream of and prefer a good leader to serve the government and not entirely after the money. It is the increased prevalence and mundaneness of the practice that made vote-buying accepted and tolerated, and the hopes of good leadership are sidelined.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the sobre vote-buying phenomenon in rural areas, a deeply rooted practice in Bulan. Findings show it runs through a well-established chain involving candidates, intermediaries (village and family leaders), and voters. This is sustained through the systematic preparation of lists, validation, and cash distribution to ensure efficiency and secrecy in executing vote-buying transactions. This has normalized and socially accepted practice, especially in economically deprived rural communities.

Central to the sobre vote-buying system is the need to maintain voter's commitment throughout the entire election period. Candidates, through intermediaries, monitor voter actions closely to ensure compliance by requiring attendance at campaign sorties, displaying candidate tarpaulins, and avoiding rival candidates' events. This expectation reinforces voters' obligation to reciprocate the cash incentive with their electoral support.

The results also indicate how patriarchal family structures influence the decision-making process. In most cases, the head of the house, usually the father, determines the choice of candidates for the family. Such patriarchal influence unifies the family vote, thus making large families attractive targets for candidates. The practice further entrenches traditional power dynamics, reducing the individual agency within families to make choices but rather aligning their political choice with the family rather than individual preference.

Despite the apparent acceptance of vote-buying, participants expressed resentment and mistrust toward intermediaries involved. This is due to perceived dishonesty, such as embezzling money or altering lists to exclude some voters. These feelings reflect the informal and unregulated nature of the system, which creates tensions between stakeholders while further normalizing unethical practices.

Voters rationalize their involvement in vote-buying as practical and justifiable, citing economic hardship and dissatisfaction with government inefficiency. Most participants view cash incentives as a rare opportunity to "reclaim" resources they believe have been misused by corrupt officials. Although rooted in socioeconomic realities, this justification perpetuates a cycle of corruption and weakens electoral integrity.

Interestingly, the study reveals that voters view vote-buying as a gauge of candidates' seriousness to win. Candidates who invest significant resources in vote-buying are considered serious and winnable, while those who abstain are less viable. This perception motivates candidates to engage in money politics, discouraging honest individuals from participating in elections and reinforcing a political culture dominated by financial influence.

However, vote-buying impacts voters to a certain extent, for they still yearn for candidates with integrity and competence. Participants accepted that cash incentives do create a sense of obligation but are not absolute determinants of their votes. In other words, voters may set aside monetary inducements for competent and trustworthy candidates, though a limited pool of options is perceived.

The sobre vote-buying phenomenon revealed in this study is context and time-specific. Generalization of its findings to other rural communities or with poor residents may not apply. The experience of vote-buying and their view towards the experience may vary in other contexts. Thus, this study recommends replication in other areas to understand the complexities of vote-buying as experienced by the community similarly. Furthermore, behavioral research on reciprocity norms that reinforce vote-buying and vote-selling practices could be further explored.

The study also recommends continuously implementing aggressive and long-term voter education in rural areas, targeting poor voters. A multisectoral effort involving local civil society groups, religious groups, and the academe must actively participate in the voters' education and strongly denounce all forms of vote-buying. Influential personalities and civil society groups in the community should support and campaign for a competent and trustworthy candidate who would not resort to vote-buying, as his winning sends a strong signal to candidates and voters that vote-buying is a less effective means and certainly not the only way to win elections.

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