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# UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE IN NIGERIA: DEMOCRACY'S DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper critically examines the concept of universal suffrage in Nigeria, highlighting its role as a double-edged sword in the country's democratic process. While the right to vote is a constitutional guarantee for all Nigerian citizens above the age of 18, its implementation has exposed significant vulnerabilities, particularly among economically disadvantaged and uneducated populations. The paper explores how poverty, vote buying, and underage voting undermine electoral integrity, compromising the true representation of the people's will. It argues that these challenges hinder the development of an accountable political system and perpetuate poor governance, as elected leaders are more often beholden to financial backers than to the electorate. The doctrinal method of research is adopted for this study. Furthermore, the study also investigates the role of local governments and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in addressing these issues through stricter voter verification processes, improved voter education campaigns, and poverty alleviation programs. The study found out that vote buying remains one of the most pervasive threats to electoral integrity, as politicians exploit the economic vulnerabilities of citizens to secure votes through financial inducements and thus inter alia recommended that a comprehensive reform of Nigeria's electoral system, emphasizing the need for greater transparency, enforcement of electoral laws, and initiatives that reduce socio-economic vulnerabilities be put in place to curtail these vices. Again, the paper advocates for responsible universal suffrage to safeguard Nigeria's democracy from manipulation and ensure that every vote truly counts.*

**Keywords**: Universal suffrage, Nigeria, electoral integrity, vote buying, voter education, democracy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Universal suffrage is widely regarded as a foundational element of modern democracies, enshrining the right of every eligible citizen to participate in the electoral process regardless of their socio-economic status, education, or personal circumstances.[1] In Nigeria, the principle of universal suffrage is firmly rooted in the country's constitutional framework. Specifically, Section 77(2) of the 1999 Constitution guarantees the right to vote for all

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1 J Smith & L Brown, 'Universal Suffrage and the Democratic Ideal. *Journal of Democracy* [2018](29)(4) 45-58.

Nigerian citizens who are 18 years of age and above, thus underscoring the democratic values of inclusivity and equality.[2] This legal provision is complemented by the Electoral Act 2022, which reinforces the right of every registered voter to participate in elections, further entrenching the universal nature of suffrage in the country's electoral system.[3] However, while these provisions reflect Nigeria's commitment to democratic ideals, they also expose significant vulnerabilities within the electoral process, particularly concerning the participation of disadvantaged groups such as the poor, uneducated, and mentally disabled citizens.

The inclusivity of Nigeria's voting framework, while noble in intent, raises critical questions about the capacity of certain segments of the electorate to make informed voting decisions. In practice, many voters in Nigeria, particularly those from vulnerable demographics, lack the necessary knowledge or understanding of political policies, which compromises the quality of their electoral choices.[4] This is particularly evident during elections, where immediate material incentives often overshadow considerations of long-term national interests. For instance, during the 2019 and 2023 general elections, reports of widespread vote buying highlighted the susceptibility of economically disadvantaged voters to manipulation.[5] This phenomenon not only distorts electoral outcomes but also perpetuates a cycle of poor governance, as leaders elected through such practices are often more interested in maintaining power through similar manipulative tactics rather than addressing the nation's pressing challenges.[6]

In addition to vote buying, the issue of underage voting further undermines the integrity of Nigeria's electoral process. Despite the constitutional stipulation that only citizens who are 18 years and above are eligible to vote, there have been numerous documented cases of underage voting, particularly in rural areas where voter verification systems are less robust.[7] The failure to enforce these age restrictions not only violates the law but also compromises the credibility of electoral outcomes, contributing to a broader erosion of public confidence in the Democratic process. In many instances, underage voters are manipulated by adults and political actors who exploit them to inflate vote counts, further distorting the true will of the people.[8]

Given these challenges, the concept of universal suffrage in Nigeria can be viewed as a double-edged sword. While it seeks to promote inclusivity and ensure that every citizen has a voice in the democratic process, it simultaneously opens the door to widespread manipulation and electoral malpractice. Vulnerable groups, particularly the poor and uneducated, are often ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of political decision-making,

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2 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999.

3 S Adejumobi & A Momoh, 'The Right to Vote in Nigeria: A Critical Commentary on the Open Ballot System.' *Journal of African Law* [2021](65)(2) 123-145.

4 LD Gilbert, & CB Barigbon, 'The Politics of Poverty in Democratic Participation: Nigeria in Perspective.' *Developing Country Studies* [2015](5)(18) 114.

5 H Onapajo, S Francis & U Okeke-Uzodike, 'Oil Corrupts Elections: The Political Economy of Vote-Buying in Nigeria. *African Studies Quarterly* [2014](15) 1–21.

6 C. Agu, 'The Consequences of Vote Buying on Democratic Governance in Nigeria.' *Journal of Political Science and International Relations* [2022](6)(1) 1-12.

7 PJ Ukpong & MA Udoh, 'Voting system and Electoral Malpractices in Nigeria: A Case Study of the Fourth Republic of Nigeria.' *Public Policy and Administration Research* [2023](13)(4) 33.

8 Ibid.

leaving them open to exploitation by unscrupulous politicians.[9] Consequently, the Democratic process in Nigeria, rather than being a tool for genuine representation and national development, is frequently undermined by practices that prioritise immediate personal gains over long-term national interests. This situation calls for a critical re-examination of the mechanisms in place to ensure that universal suffrage, while inclusive, does not compromise the integrity of Nigeria's democracy.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

This section provides a foundational understanding of the key concepts critical to the discussion of universal suffrage in Nigeria. These concepts are essential for understanding the challenges in Nigeria's electoral system.

### 2.1 Universal Suffrage

Universal suffrage is the right of all adult citizens to participate in the electoral process by voting, regardless of factors such as race, gender, social status, income, or education. This concept is rooted in the belief that every individual, as a member of a democratic society, should have the right to influence decisions that affect the governance of their Country.[10] The idea of Universal Suffrage is closely tied to the principles of democracy, where the government derives its legitimacy from the consent of the governed, as expressed through free and fair elections.[11] Historically, the journey toward Universal Suffrage has been a progressive one, with different groups of people gradually being enfranchised over time.

The evolution of universal suffrage has varied globally, with many Countries implementing suffrage in phases, often beginning with Landowners or other privileged groups before gradually extending the right to all adults. For instance, in the United Kingdom, suffrage was initially restricted to wealthy male Landowners and was gradually expanded through a series of reforms, culminating in the Representation of the People Act 1928, which extended the right to vote to all adults over the age of 21, regardless of gender or property ownership.[12] Similarly, in the United States, voting rights were extended incrementally, with African Americans being enfranchised after the Civil War through the 15th Amendment to the Constitution in 1870, and Women gaining the right to vote through the 19th Amendment in 1920.[13] The above examples highlight the long struggle toward achieving inclusive democratic participation.

### 2.2 Democracy

Democracy is commonly defined as a system of government in which power is vested in the hands of the people, either directly or through elected representatives. The foundational principle of democracy is that governance should reflect the collective will of the citizens, as

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9 SI Ebirim, 'The Effects of Electoral Malpractices on Nigeria Democratic Consolidation (1999-2013).' *Public Policy and Administration Research*, (2014)(4)(2) 49.

10 RA Dahl, *On Political Equality* (Yale University Press, 2006).

11 D Beetham, *Democracy: A Beginner's Guide* (Oneworld Publications 2004).

12 M Phillips & M Wetherell, *A History of Modern Britain: 1900 to the Present* (Blackwell Publishing, 2017).

13 A. Keyssar A, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (Basic Books 2009).

expressed through free and fair elections.[14] This notion is rooted in ancient Greek political thought, where the term "*demokratia*" meant rule by the people. Over time, modern democracy has evolved to include not just electoral participation but also the protection of Fundamental Rights, adherence to the rule of law, and the inclusion of diverse political voices.[15]

In its purest form, democracy requires not only the legal right to vote but also the existence of political equality, meaning all citizens must have equal access to political processes and decision-making power. This requires institutions that safeguard these rights and ensure that individuals are free to express their views without coercion.[16] Electoral democracy, specifically, depends on Universal Suffrage, transparent election procedures, and accountable governance. Elections, however, are not the sole defining feature of democracy. Scholars argue that the health of a democracy also depends on factors like press freedom, active civil society participation, and the presence of checks and balances within government.[17]

### 2.3 Vulnerable Groups

The concept of vulnerability refers to the susceptibility of certain individuals or groups to harm or exploitation due to specific characteristics such as socio-economic status, lack of education, Disability, or Minority status. In the context of political participation, vulnerable populations are those who are most likely to be excluded from or manipulated within the electoral process. These groups often include the Poor, Uneducated, Elderly, Disabled, and, in some cases, Ethnic or Religious Minorities. In electoral terms, vulnerability can manifest as a lack of access to political information, susceptibility to coercion or vote-buying, or the inability to fully comprehend the importance of electoral choices.[18]

## 3. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE IN NIGERIA

The development of universal suffrage in Nigeria has been a gradual process, shaped by the Country's colonial history, struggles for Independence, and subsequent efforts to build a stable democracy. Nigeria's pre-colonial systems of governance were primarily based on Monarchical and hierarchical structures, where political participation was limited to the Elites within traditional institutions. The idea of electoral participation was introduced by the British colonial Administration, although it was initially restricted to a small, privileged segment of the population.[19] The path toward universal suffrage in Nigeria began in earnest with the establishment of colonial constitutions that gradually extended the right to vote to a larger portion of the population, culminating in the post-independence Constitution, which guaranteed voting rights for all Nigerian adults.

The first significant step toward electoral participation in Nigeria occurred under the Clifford Constitution of 1922, which introduced a limited franchise for elections in Lagos and

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14 RA Dahl, *On democracy* (Yale university press, 2020). P23

15 D Held, *Models of democracy* (Stanford University Press, 2006).

16 D Beetham, 'The Quality of Democracy: Freedom as the Foundation.' *Journal of Democracy*, [2004](15)(4) 61-75.

17 Dahl, (n 10).

18 F Macioce, 'The Enabling Value of Group Vulnerability.' *Contemporary Political Theory* [2022]22(2) 209-229.

19 T Falola & MM Heaton, *A history of Nigeria* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Calabar.[20] However, this was highly restrictive, as voting was based on property qualifications, and only a small number of educated Nigerians were eligible to vote. The franchise was further expanded under the Richards Constitution of 1946 and the Macpherson Constitution of 1951, which extended voting rights to more Nigerians, though still primarily restricted to men who met specific income and property requirements.[21] These early Constitutions laid the groundwork for electoral participation, but they did not establish Universal Suffrage in the true sense.

The transition to full universal suffrage began during the decolonisation period in the 1950s, as Nationalist movements gained momentum and demanded more inclusive political rights. The Lyttleton Constitution of 1954 marked a significant shift, as it introduced a Federal Structure and increased Nigerian participation in governance, albeit still with limited electoral rights.[22] By the time of Nigeria's independence in 1960, the Independence Constitution granted the right to vote to all adult males, while the franchise for women was still restricted to certain regions.[23] In Southern Nigeria, women gained the right to vote in 1959, while in Northern Nigeria, women were not enfranchised until 1976, following the Military Government's decision to extend voting rights to all adults.[24]

Following Independence, Nigeria's electoral system underwent significant reforms, particularly after periods of military rule. The 1979 Constitution, which followed the return to civilian rule, enshrined Universal Adult Suffrage, granting all Nigerian citizens aged 18 and above the right to vote, regardless of gender or socioeconomic status.[25] This represented a major milestone in the Country's democratic evolution. However, the practice of Universal Suffrage has been fraught with challenges, including electoral violence, vote-buying, and manipulation, which have often undermined the Democratic process.[26]

The 1999 Constitution, which remains in effect today, reaffirmed the principle of Universal Suffrage by guaranteeing the right to vote to all Nigerian citizens who are at least 18 years old. This period marked the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, which has seen the Country make significant strides in electoral participation, though issues such as Voter Apathy, Electoral Malpractice, and the Exclusion of Vulnerable populations continue to pose challenges to the full realisation of Universal Suffrage.[27] Additionally, the Electoral Act of 2022 further reinforced these rights by detailing the processes of Voter Registration, Election Administration, and the protection of voting rights, making Nigeria's legal framework one of the most comprehensive in Africa.

Despite the Constitutional guarantees, the effective implementation of Universal Suffrage in Nigeria remains a work in progress. The Country has faced numerous challenges in ensuring that elections are free, fair, and accessible to all eligible voters. Issues such as

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20 JS Coleman, *Nigeria: Background to Nationalism* (University of California Press, 1958).
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 EE Osaghae, *Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence* (Indiana University Press, 1998).
24 DT Agbalajobi, 'Women's Participation and the Political Process in Nigeria: Problems and Prospects.' *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* [2010](4)(2) 75-82.
25 EO Ojo, *'Vote Buying in Nigeria' in Money, Politics and Corruption in Nigeria* ( IFES, Abuja 2006).
26 EJ Nwagwu & Others, 'Vote Buying during 2015 and 2019 General Elections: Manifestation and Implications on Democratic Development in Nigeria.' *Cogent Social Sciences* [2022](8)(1) 1995237.
27 O Ibeanu, 'Elections and the Paradox of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria.' *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* [2007](1)(2) 19-31.

Economic Disenfranchisement, Political Manipulation, and Inadequate Voter Education have impeded the ability of many Nigerians to fully exercise their right to vote.[28] Moreover, electoral violence and intimidation have historically affected voter turnout and the credibility of election results, further complicating the achievement of a truly inclusive democratic system.[29]

## 4. LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE IN NIGERIA

The legal framework governing universal suffrage in Nigeria is rooted in the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended) and further supported by the Electoral Act 2022. These legal instruments provide the foundational basis for the Country's electoral system, ensuring that every Nigerian citizen who meets the prescribed criteria has the right to vote.

### 4.1 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended)

The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), which came into force following the end of Military Rule and the Country's transition to Democratic Governance, established a robust framework for Universal Suffrage.[30] Section 77(2) of the Constitution explicitly provides for the right of every Nigerian citizen who is 18 years or older to vote in elections. This section stipulates, "Every citizen of Nigeria who has attained the age of 18 years residing in Nigeria at the time of registration of voters for the purposes of election to a Legislative House shall be entitled to be registered as a voter for that election." This provision reflects the commitment of Nigeria's legal system to inclusive suffrage, ensuring that all adults, irrespective of gender, socio-economic status, or educational background, have a constitutionally guaranteed right to participate in the electoral process.

The right to vote as enshrined in Section 77(2) of the 1999 Constitution is further reinforced by other provisions that promote the integrity and fairness of elections. Section 14(2)(a) of the Constitution declares that sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria, from whom the Government derives its power and authority through democratic elections. This section underscores the democratic foundation of the Nigerian state, highlighting the central role that citizens' participation in elections plays in legitimising Government Authority.

In addition to the right to vote, the Constitution also provides mechanisms to ensure the fairness and transparency of the electoral process. Section 132 outlines the procedures for the election of the President of Nigeria, while Section 178 establishes similar provisions for the election of Governors. These sections mandate that elections be conducted "in accordance with the provisions of this Constitution and the Electoral Act", thus ensuring that Electoral Processes are subject to Constitutional and Statutory safeguards. These Constitutional provisions not only define the scope of universal suffrage but also serve to protect the electoral process from manipulation and abuse by setting clear standards for the conduct of elections.[31]

Furthermore, the Constitution also contains provisions aimed at preventing electoral discrimination and protecting the political rights of all citizens. Section 42(1) of the

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28 Ojo (n 25).
29 Nwagwu (n 26).
30 EO Oni and Others, 'Nigeria's Fourth Republic: Electoral Administration and the Challenge of Democratic Consolidation.' *African Journal of Governance and Development* [2017](6)(2) 39-73.
31 Ibid

Constitution prohibits discrimination based on ethnic group, place of origin, sex, religion, or political opinion, thus reinforcing the principle of equal access to the right to vote. This section plays a crucial role in protecting vulnerable groups within Nigerian society, ensuring that they are not excluded from the Democratic process based on arbitrary distinctions. By embedding these anti-discrimination principles into the Constitution, Nigeria's legal framework seeks to promote a truly inclusive system of universal suffrage.

### 4.2 Electoral Act 2022

The Electoral Act 2022 is a critical Legislative Instrument that supports the Constitutional framework for Universal Suffrage in Nigeria. It serves as a comprehensive legal guide for the conduct of elections, establishing clear rules and procedures for voter registration, electoral processes, and the enforcement of voting rights. The Act builds on the foundations laid by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended), ensuring that every Nigerian citizen who has attained the age of 18 is eligible to vote, and further strengthens the mechanisms for free, fair, and credible elections.[32] The Electoral Act plays a crucial role in defining the practical application of universal suffrage and addresses key challenges that have historically undermined the integrity of elections in Nigeria.

One of the most significant contributions of the Act is its detailed provisions regarding voter registration. The Act mandates Continuous Voter Registration, allowing eligible Nigerians to register to vote at any time, outside of the immediate election period.[33] This is intended to make the electoral process more inclusive and accessible, particularly for marginalised groups, including rural populations, the Economically Disadvantaged, and Youths who have just reached voting age. Section 10 of the Act emphasises the need for every citizen to have an equal opportunity to register and participate in the electoral process, thus reinforcing the principle of Universal Suffrage by minimising bureaucratic barriers to voter registration.

Additionally, the Act introduces several important reforms aimed at enhancing the transparency and credibility of elections in Nigeria. One such reform is the incorporation of electronic transmission of results, which is detailed in Section 50(2) of the Act. This section empowers the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to transmit election results electronically, thereby reducing the opportunities for manipulation or tampering during the collation of votes. This technological advancement is seen as a major step forward in curbing electoral fraud, which has historically been a significant problem in Nigerian elections.[34]

The Act also addresses the persistent problem of electoral violence and vote buying, both of which have historically threatened the Democratic Process in Nigeria. Section 121 of the Act specifically criminalises Vote Buying and sets out strict penalties for individuals or political parties found engaging in the practice. Vote Buying undermines the principle of Universal Suffrage by allowing wealthier political actors to influence the outcome of elections through financial inducements, particularly targeting economically vulnerable

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[32] S Oniye and Others, 'Appraisal of the Electoral Act 2022: A Curse or Blessing to the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria.' *International Journal of Innovative Research & Development* [2022](12)(5).

[33] Electoral Act, 2022, S. 10.

[34] UI Abubakar & AM Yahaya, 'Public Relations Perspectives on Electoral Reforms as a Panacea for Consolidating Nigeria's Democracy.' *Journal of Social and Administrative Sciences* [2017](4)(4) 370-381.

voters. By prohibiting this practice and strengthening penalties, the Electoral Act seeks to protect the independence of voters and ensure that their choices are based on genuine political preferences rather than financial coercion.[35]

Furthermore, the Act provides for stricter measures to prevent underage voting, which has been a recurring issue in Nigeria's electoral history. Section 12 of the Act stipulates that only citizens who have attained the age of 18 are eligible to register to vote, and INEC is required to ensure that all voters meet this age requirement. The Act empowers INEC to deploy Biometric Technology, including Fingerprint and Facial recognition, to verify the identities of Voters during registration and on election day. This measure is designed to prevent electoral fraud and to ensure that only eligible citizens participate in the voting process. By strengthening voter verification mechanisms, the Act reinforces the Constitutional mandate of Universal Suffrage, ensuring that the electoral process remains fair and representative.[36]

## 5. CHALLENGES OF UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE IN NIGERIA

Universal Suffrage, while an essential component of democratic governance, faces several challenges in Nigeria, particularly in ensuring that the electoral process is genuinely reflective of the will of the people. Despite the Constitutional guarantee of voting rights for all citizens aged 18 and above, various factors undermine the integrity of the electoral process.

### 5.1 Vote Buying

Vote buying refers to the practice where voters are offered money, goods, or favours in exchange for their votes.[37] It is a form of electoral corruption that distorts the democratic process by compromising the principle of free and fair elections. In Nigeria, vote buying has become a widespread practice, particularly during general elections, where political parties and candidates attempt to secure votes through financial inducements. Vote buying in Nigeria is deeply rooted in the country's socio-economic conditions, where widespread poverty makes many voters vulnerable to financial manipulation. In exchange for small amounts of money, food, or material items, voters are persuaded to cast their ballots for certain candidates, undermining the integrity of the electoral process.[38]

The prevalence of vote buying in Nigeria was starkly illustrated during the 2019 and 2023 general elections. Reports by YIAGA Africa and Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) highlighted the widespread use of financial inducements by politicians to influence voters.[39] These reports documented cases where political agents distributed cash or essential items like rice, spaghetti, and cooking oil to voters, particularly

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35 EJ Nwagwu and Others, (n 26).

36 E Solomon, 'Nigeria's Electoral Act 2022: Of Electoral Politics, Litigations and Matters Arising.' *Carnelian Journal of Law & Politics* [2022](3)(2) 166.

37 FL Baidoo and Others, 'Culture of Vote Buying and its Implications: Range of Incentives and Conditions Politicians offer to Electorates.' *International Journal of Developing and Emerging Economies* [2018](6)(2) 1-20.

38 M Bratton, 'Vote Buying and Violence in Nigerian Election Campaigns.' *Electoral studies*, [2008](27)(4), 621-632.

39 Yiaga Africa, 'Dashed Hopes? Yiaga Africa Report on the 2023 General Election' (2023) <https://yiaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Dashed-Hopes-Yiaga-Africa-Report-on-the-2023-General-Election_.pdf> accessed 10 September 2024.

in economically disadvantaged communities. The phenomenon of vote buying disproportionately affects poor and rural populations, where economic hardships make the immediate material benefits offered by politicians more attractive than the long-term promises of political reform. This form of electoral manipulation thus subverts the concept of Universal Suffrage, as it distorts the free will of voters by making their decisions contingent upon short-term financial gain.[40]

Vote buying has significant implications for the quality of governance in Nigeria. Politicians who win elections through vote buying are often more accountable to the patrons who finance their campaigns than to the electorate. This fosters a system of clientelism, where political loyalty is traded for material benefits rather than policies aimed at improving the welfare of the broader population.[41] As a result, elected officials may prioritise the interests of the political elites who fund their campaigns, rather than addressing the needs of their constituents. This erodes public trust in Democratic Institutions and perpetuates a cycle of poor governance, where political leaders are incentivised to maintain the status quo of vote buying rather than implementing meaningful reforms.[42]

Furthermore, Vote buying undermines the fundamental principle of political equality. In a democratic system, every vote should carry equal weight, and citizens should be free to make informed choices about their leaders. However, in Nigeria, the practice of vote buying effectively nullifies this principle, as votes are purchased rather than freely given. This creates a disparity between those who can afford to engage in Vote buying and those who cannot, further entrenching socio-economic inequalities in the political process. Vote buying not only distorts electoral outcomes but also diminishes the legitimacy of elected officials, as their victory is not based on popular support but on financial manipulation.[43]

The Electoral Act 2022 addresses the issue of vote buying through legal provisions aimed at curbing electoral corruption. Section 121 of the Act explicitly criminalises the practice of offering or accepting money or other benefits in exchange for votes. Violators of this provision are subject to significant penalties, including fines and imprisonment. However, despite these Legal provisions, the enforcement of anti-vote buying measures remains weak. Election monitoring organisations, such as YIAGA Africa, have noted that while the law provides a framework for prosecuting vote buying, the political will to enforce these laws is often lacking, particularly when political elites benefit from the practice.[44]

### 5.2 Participation of Uninformed Voters

One of the major challenges facing universal suffrage in Nigeria is the participation of uninformed voters, which undermines the quality of electoral choices and the Democratic process. Uninformed voters are those who lack adequate knowledge about political candidates, party policies, and the implications of their votes. This issue is prevalent in

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40 M Abdullahi & MG Dass, 'Politics of Vote-Buying in Contemporary Nigeria: An Analysis of 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Bauchi State.' *Journal of Political Discourse* [2023](1)(4), 135.

41 F Christopher and Others, 'Vote-Buying and Democratic Governance in Nigeria.' *Advances in Politics and Economics* [2022](5)(2) 81.

42 Ibid.

43 Bratton (n 37).

44 BO Agbo and Others, 'Influence of Yiaga Africa Vote-Buying Media Campaign on the Attitude of Voters in Enugu State.' *International Journal of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Essays* [2023](8)(1) 27-50.

Nigeria, where a large portion of the electorate, particularly in rural areas, has limited access to education and information about governance. As a result, many voters are unable to make informed choices based on policies or candidates' qualifications, leading to elections that do not accurately reflect the will of the people.[45] Political illiteracy remains a significant issue in Nigeria, with many voters relying on ethnic, religious, or financial incentives to guide their voting decisions, rather than on an understanding of policy positions or leadership competence.[46]

The lack of voter education is a significant contributor to this problem. Studies have shown that in many parts of Nigeria, particularly in rural and impoverished areas, voter education programs are insufficient or non-existent.[47] As a result, many voters are unaware of their rights, the importance of their votes, or the long-term consequences of their electoral choices. Political parties and Candidates often exploit this lack of knowledge by using simplistic and populist messages, or by appealing to ethnic and religious identities rather than engaging in meaningful policy debates. This creates an environment where voters are easily manipulated, as they have little information to base their decisions on.[48]

Furthermore, political elites often take advantage of uninformed voters by spreading misinformation or disinformation. This is particularly evident during election campaigns, where political actors manipulate facts to deceive voters or incite tribal or religious sentiments. The lack of political education makes it easier for politicians to exploit voters' ignorance, offering false promises or making unrealistic pledges to win their votes. Such tactics distort the democratic process, as uninformed voters are less likely to scrutinise candidates' track records or assess the feasibility of their promises.[49]

The effects of uninformed voting on Nigeria's democracy are profound. Elections in which a significant portion of the electorate is uninformed are more likely to result in the election of unqualified or corrupt leaders, as voters cannot critically evaluate candidates. This perpetuates the cycle of poor governance, where elected officials are less likely to be held accountable by an electorate that does not fully understand the political process.[50] Additionally, the participation of uninformed voters exacerbates the issue of electoral fraud, as these voters are often more susceptible to manipulation through vote buying or coercion.[51]

### 5.3 Socio-economic Vulnerability and Political Manipulation

Socioeconomic vulnerability is another major factor that undermines universal suffrage in Nigeria. Poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to basic services create an environment where voters are more likely to be manipulated by political actors who exploit their economic hardships. The economically vulnerable are particularly susceptible to vote buying, as the

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45 I von Borzyskowski & PM Kuhn, 'Dangerously Informed: Voter Information and Pre-Electoral Violence in Africa.' *Journal of Peace Research* [2020](57)(1) 15-29.

46 CF Nwankwo, 'The Spatial Pattern of Voter Choice Homogeneity in the Nigerian Presidential Elections in the Fourth Republic.' *Bulletin of Geography. Socio-economic Series* [2019](43) 143-165.

47 YI Ayinde, 'Voters' Education: A Tool for Credible Election in Nigeria.' *Zaria journal of Educational Studies (ZAJES) M [*2019)](20)(1) 54-60.

48 Ibid.

49 JS Omotola, 'Elections and Democratic Transition in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic.' *African Affairs* [2010](109)(437) 535-553.

50 W Adebanwi & E Obadare, *Democracy and Prebendalism in Nigeria: Critical Interpretations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

51 Bratton (n 37).

immediate benefits of financial or material inducements often outweigh the perceived value of long-term policy promises. Poverty is a key driver of political manipulation in Nigeria, where many voters see elections as opportunities to secure short-term economic relief rather than as avenues for electing capable and accountable leaders.[52]

The Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) reported that in Nigeria's 2019 and 2023 general elections, political actors strategically targeted impoverished Communities, offering money, food, and other goods in exchange for votes. These practices, while not unique to Nigeria, are particularly prevalent in regions where economic vulnerability is high and the state has failed to provide adequate social welfare.[53] In such contexts, elections become transactional, with voters casting their ballots for the highest bidder, rather than for the candidates with the best policies or leadership qualities.[54] This undermines the concept of universal suffrage by distorting voters' choices and making elections less about democratic participation and more about survival.

Additionally, political elites often manipulate socioeconomic vulnerabilities to maintain power. For instance, Politicians may deliberately maintain the status quo of poverty and economic underdevelopment in certain regions to ensure that they can continue to use material inducements as a tool for electoral success. This creates a vicious cycle where poverty is perpetuated by a political system that benefits from it. The exploitation of socioeconomic vulnerabilities is not only an electoral issue but also a broader governance problem, as it allows corrupt and ineffective leaders to remain in power without addressing the root causes of poverty or improving the living conditions of their constituents.[55]

The effects of socioeconomic vulnerability on electoral integrity are significant. Voters who are economically disadvantaged are less likely to engage critically with political campaigns or to hold their elected representatives accountable after elections. This reduces the overall quality of democratic governance, as elected officials are more focused on appeasing the political elites and maintaining their hold on power than on enacting policies that benefit the broader population[56]. Furthermore, the focus on short-term material gains during elections diverts attention away from crucial policy debates and long-term development goals, further entrenching Nigeria’s socioeconomic challenges.

## 6. CASE STUDIES OF RECENT NIGERIAN ELECTIONS

Nigeria’s general elections in 2019 and 2023 provide critical insights into the challenges facing the implementation of Universal Suffrage, including issues such as Vote Buying, Voter Suppression, and the Manipulation of socioeconomic vulnerabilities.

### 6.1 2019 General Elections

The 2019 general elections in Nigeria were one of the most anticipated in the Country’s recent history. The elections featured a contest between the immediate past President,

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52 NC Dickson and Others, ‘Poverty and the Prevalence of Vote Buying in Nigeria.’ *International journal of academic multidisciplinary research (IJAMR)* [2019](3)(6) 72-81.

53 Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project, 'Tracking SERAP’s Public Interest Litigations, Policy Drive' This Day Live (2023) <https://www.thisdaylive.com/index.php/2023/09/13/tracking-seraps-public-interest-litigations-policy-drive/> accessed 10 September 2024.

54 Bratton (n 37).

55 AA Agbaje, ‘Poverty and Political Manipulation in Nigeria: A Historical Perspective.’ *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* [2014](32)(1), 67-87.

56 Ibid.

Muhammadu Buhari, of the All-Progressives Congress (APC), and the then main opposition candidate, Atiku Abubakar, of the People's Democratic Party (PDP). While the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and International Observers declared the elections largely free and fair, they were marred by several irregularities, including widespread incidents of Vote Buying, Voter Intimidation, and Logistical challenges that hampered the credibility of the process.[57]

One of the most concerning aspects of the 2019 elections was the scale of vote buying. Reports by YIAGA Africa and the Socio-Economic Rights and Accountability Project (SERAP) documented instances where political agents distributed cash and goods to voters in exchange for their support.[58] These acts of electoral manipulation were particularly prevalent in economically disadvantaged regions, where voters were offered small sums of money or food items to sway their votes.[59] The Electoral Act of 2010,[60] which was in force at the time, explicitly criminalised vote buying, but weak enforcement of these laws allowed the practice to persist. As a result, many voters, particularly in rural areas, were influenced by financial incentives rather than political policies or the qualifications of candidates, undermining the principle of free and fair elections.

### 6.2 2023 General Elections

The 2023 general elections marked another pivotal moment in Nigeria's democratic journey. Like the 2019 elections, they were viewed as a test of the Country's commitment to democratic principles and the ability of its electoral Institutions to conduct credible elections. While the Electoral Act 2022 introduced key reforms aimed at improving the transparency and fairness of the electoral process, many of the challenges that plagued previous elections remained prevalent, including Vote Buying, violence, and Logistical issues.[61]

Vote buying continued to be a significant issue during the last 2023 elections, despite the legal provisions aimed at curbing it. Observers reported that Political parties and Candidates continued to distribute money and goods to voters, particularly in rural areas. The economic hardships faced by many Nigerians, exacerbated by inflation and unemployment, made them particularly vulnerable to these inducements. In many instances, voters were offered as little as 2,000 to 5,000 naira in exchange for their votes, reflecting the deep entrenchment of Vote buying in Nigeria's political culture.[62]

The 2023 elections were also marred by violence in several parts of the country. According to reports from Human Rights Watch, political thugs attacked polling units, intimidated voters, and in some cases, prevented the INEC from distributing election

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57 O Awofeso, 'Observers Report and the 2019 General Elections in Nigeria: A focus on Electoral Violence and Lessons for Future Elections.' *Global Journal of Political Science and Administration* [2020](8)(4) 21-32.

58 B Sule, 'The 2019 Presidential Election in Nigeria: An Analysis of the Voting Pattern, Issues and Impact.' *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, [2019](15)(2), 129-140.

59 Ibid.

60 Electoral Act 2022, s 124.

61 UG Ojukwu and Others, 'Democracy and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria: Retrospect and Prospects.' *Direct Research Journal of Social Science and Educational Studies* [2023](11)(4) 54-66.

62 Punch, 'Vote-Buying Increased by 5% in 2023 Election, Says NBS' Punch Newspapers (20 July 2024) <https://punchng.com/vote-buying-increased-by-5-in-2023-election-says-nbs/> accessed 10 September 2024.

materials in time.[63] These above incidents of violence further undermined voter confidence in the electoral process, with many citizens expressing fear and apprehension about going to the polls.

## 7. IMPACT ON GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

The challenges surrounding Universal Suffrage in Nigeria, such as Vote buying, Voter manipulation, and Electoral Violence, have profound implications for governance and Democracy.

### 7.1 Cycle of Poor Governance

One of the most significant impacts of compromised elections is the perpetuation of poor governance. Poor governance arises when leaders elected through fraudulent means lack the legitimacy and accountability that would otherwise compel them to address the needs of the populace. This issue is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where Vote buying and the exploitation of socio-economic vulnerabilities frequently distort the democratic process. Politicians who win elections by buying votes are often more concerned with maintaining their political power than implementing policies that foster national development and improve the welfare of citizens.[64] This creates a situation where Leaders prioritise patronage and personal gain over public service, perpetuating a cycle of ineffective governance.

Furthermore, the manipulation of the electoral process contributes to a governance system that is reactive rather than proactive. Elected officials, rather than focusing on long-term development policies, are often more interested in short-term gains that secure their hold on power. This leads to policy inconsistency and an inability to address systemic issues such as poverty, unemployment, and insecurity. Leaders who are products of electoral fraud are more likely to pursue policies that benefit their political allies and financial backers rather than the general populace. This ultimately results in governance that is unresponsive to the needs of citizens, further alienating the electorate and eroding trust in democratic institutions.[65]

### 7.2 Erosion of Electoral Integrity

The erosion of electoral integrity is one of the most profound consequences of the challenges plaguing Nigeria's universal suffrage system. Electoral integrity refers to the Fairness, Transparency, and Credibility of elections, which are essential for ensuring that elections accurately reflect the will of the people. In Nigeria, however, electoral integrity has been repeatedly compromised by factors such as Vote buying, Electoral Fraud, Violence, and Manipulation, which severely undermine the democratic process. The widespread use of

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[63] Vanguard, 'Violence That Marred 2023 Elections' Vanguard News (25 March 2023) <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2023/03/violence-that-marred-2023-elections/> accessed 10 September 2024.

[64] DA Yagboyaju & AO Akinola, 'Nigerian state and the crisis of governance: A critical exposition.' *Sage Open* [2019](9)(3), 2158244019865810.

[65] I Amundsen, P'olitical Corruption and Vote Buying in Nigeria: Implications for Governance.' *African Affairs*, [2022](121)(1) 67-89

financial incentives to sway voters, along with the manipulation of election results, significantly weakens the legitimacy of elections and, by extension, the elected government.[66]

Vote buying is perhaps the most direct assault on electoral integrity in Nigeria. As documented in multiple elections, political actors have resorted to offering cash, goods, and other material benefits to voters in exchange for their support.[67] This practice not only distorts the electoral process but also creates a situation where elections are decided by financial inducements rather than by genuine political choices. The Electoral Act includes provisions aimed at curbing vote buying, but enforcement remains weak, allowing the practice to persist and erode public trust in the fairness of elections. Vote buying and other forms of electoral corruption have led to widespread scepticism about the integrity of Nigeria's elections, with many citizens believing that their votes have little impact on the final outcome.[68]

### 7.3 Long-Term Effects on Democratic Stability

The long-term effects of compromised elections on Nigeria's democratic stability are profound. When electoral integrity is repeatedly undermined, it creates a governance system that is fragile and prone to instability. Over time, the failure to address the root causes of electoral malpractice—such as vote buying, electoral fraud, and voter intimidation—contributes to a growing sense of disillusionment among citizens, leading to decreased political participation and increased tensions between political actors and the electorate. The erosion of trust in the electoral process can lead to political apathy, where citizens feel that their votes do not matter and disengage from the political process entirely.[69]

One of the most significant long-term effects of compromised elections is the weakening of democratic institutions. When elections are not free and fair, political leaders are often more focused on consolidating power than on strengthening democratic governance. This can lead to the entrenchment of authoritarian practices, where checks and balances are undermined, and opposition voices are marginalised. Electoral fraud and political manipulation create a situation where elected officials are more beholden to the interests of political elites than to the will of the people. This diminishes the effectiveness of democratic institutions such as the Judiciary, the Legislature, and Civil Society, which are essential for maintaining Democratic stability and ensuring accountability.[70]

The long-term impact of compromised elections on Nigeria’s democratic stability is also evident in the continued dominance of corrupt political elites. When elections are manipulated, it becomes difficult for new political actors or reform-minded individuals to enter the political system. This creates a closed political environment where the same elites maintain control over the levers of power, often perpetuating the very issues—such as Poverty, Corruption, and Insecurity—that undermine Nigeria’s development. The entrenchment of corrupt political elites through compromised elections hinders the country’s

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66 SO Oduola, 'Voter Suppression and Electoral Integrity Crisis in Nigeria’s 2023 General Elections' Kujenga Amani (20 July 2023) <https://kujenga-amani.ssrc.org/2023/07/20/voter-suppression-and-electoral-integrity-crisis-in-nigerias-2023-general-elections/> accessed 11 September 2024.

67 Nwagwu (n 26).

68 Ibid.

69 Bratton (n 37).

70 PM Lewis, ‘Nigeria: Assessing Electoral Integrity and Political Stability.’ *Journal of Democracy* [2011](22)(4) 94-107.

ability to achieve meaningful reforms, further exacerbating social and economic inequalities and contributing to political instability.[71]

## 8. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While Universal Suffrage is a critical element of Nigeria's democratic framework, its implementation faces significant challenges that undermine the integrity of elections and the quality of governance. Issues such as Vote Buying, Electoral Fraud, Violence, and the exploitation of socio-economic vulnerabilities have distorted the democratic process, making it difficult for elections to genuinely reflect the will of the people. These challenges have eroded public confidence in the Electoral System, weakened Democratic Institutions, and perpetuated a cycle of poor governance. Without addressing these issues, Nigeria's democracy will continue to be fragile, with limited opportunities for genuine political reform or development.

Vote buying remains one of the most pervasive threats to electoral integrity, as politicians exploit the economic vulnerabilities of citizens to secure votes through financial inducements. This practice undermines the principle of free and fair elections and leads to the election of leaders who are more accountable to their Financiers than to the electorate. The erosion of electoral integrity is further exacerbated by electoral fraud, voter manipulation, and violence, which discourage political participation and reduce the legitimacy of elected officials. In the long term, these challenges threaten the stability of Nigeria's Democratic System, as they foster political instability, erode the legitimacy of democratic institutions, and fuel public disillusionment with the political process.

The challenges surrounding universal suffrage in Nigeria require a dynamic approach to strengthen the integrity of the electoral process and enhance democratic governance. The following recommendations are critical to addressing these issues:

A stricter and more robust system to verify voter eligibility is essential. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must implement stringent voter registration procedures. This should include the deployment of biometric and age verification tools, such as the National Identification Number (NIN), to prevent underage voting and ensure the electorate is genuinely representative of the adult population. These measures will safeguard the integrity of elections and restore public trust in the democratic process.

There is a pressing need to address the lack of understanding among Voters about the impact of their electoral choices. INEC should partner with State and Local Governments to launch extensive public awareness campaigns that educate citizens on the significance of informed voting. These campaigns must highlight the long-term consequences of vote buying and emphasise voting based on policies rather than short-term incentives. By implementing grassroots voter education initiatives, local governments can play a pivotal role in empowering vulnerable populations to make more informed decisions.

The link between economic vulnerability and electoral manipulation cannot be ignored. Governments at all levels must prioritise poverty alleviation programs to reduce the economic desperation that drives vote selling. When citizens are less concerned about their immediate survival, they are more likely to focus on policies that offer sustainable long-term benefits. This would diminish the influence of corrupt political actors who exploit poverty to manipulate election outcomes.

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[71] EE Isife, 'Political Instability in Nigeria: Causes, Impacts and Philosophic Solutions.' *AMAMIHE Journal of Applied Philosophy* [2020](18)(6).

Local Governments must take a more active role in monitoring and enforcing electoral laws, particularly at the grassroots level. This includes stricter oversight of voter registration and election processes to ensure that underage voting and other forms of electoral malpractice are curbed at the source. Effective oversight will require Local Governments to collaborate closely with INEC to ensure transparency and compliance with electoral laws.

While universal suffrage is a fundamental democratic right, its unchecked application poses risks to the integrity of the electoral process. It is essential that the Nigerian Government, at all levels, ensures this right is exercised responsibly. This includes taking proactive steps to ensure that the Electoral System is safeguarded against abuse, manipulation, and fraud, thus preserving the core democratic principles that underpin the right to vote.