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VOTE BUYING AND VIOLENCE IN NIGERIAN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

by Michael Bratton

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by Michael Bratton

June 2008

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¹ A revised version of this paper will appear in *Electoral Studies*, forthcoming 2009. Copyright for the revised version is vested with Elsevier publications.

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Vote Buying and Violence in Nigerian Election Campaigns¹

Abstract

Vote buying and political intimidation are important, if epiphenomenal, dimensions of Nigerian election campaigns. According to survey-based estimates, fewer than one out of five Nigerians is personally exposed to vote buying and fewer than one in ten experiences threats of electoral violence. But when, as commonly happens, campaign irregularities are targeted at the rural poor, effects are concentrated. These effects are as follows: violence reduces turnout; and vote buying enhances partisan loyalty. But, perhaps because most citizens condemn campaign manipulation as wrong, compliance with the wishes of politicians is not assured. Defection from threats and agreements is more common than compliance, especially where voters are cross-pressured from both sides of the partisan divide.



Introduction

In a democracy, an election campaign is supposed to be a peaceful and open discourse of persuasion. Ideally, candidates compete for popular support by presenting reasoned arguments about why they are most qualified for election to office. They stake out rival positions about programs of public goods, all the while being tugged towards the median voter at the center of the political spectrum (Downs, 1957). Voters then choose the contender whose policy positions most closely resembles their own set of preferences.

In Africa, however, elections are struggles over the access to the resources controlled by that state, which are the biggest prize in society. Given these high stakes, politicians resort to a variety of means – whether fair or foul – to attain public office. To be sure, candidates go through the motions of presenting programmatic promises. But the pledges of politicians commonly lack credibility (Keefer 2004), are virtually identical across contending parties (Mohammed and Nordlund 2007), or quickly dissolve into personal attacks (van de Walle 2003). In this context, voters choose among candidates less on the basis of distinctive policy positions than on the candidates' assumed trustworthiness and reliability as prospective patrons (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, Bratton and Lewis 2007, Bratton 2007).

Instead of providing opportunity for public deliberation, African election campaigns are mainly moments for politicians to engage in mass mobilization and manipulation of electoral rules. All too often, campaign strategies feature material inducement and political intimidation. In extreme forms, unconventional modes of electoral practice are manifest in explicit acts of vote buying (Schaffer 2007, Lindberg 2003) and electoral violence (Lebas 2006, Wilkinson 2004). Both kinds of activity, which aim to deny citizens the freedom to express their electoral preferences, are incontrovertibly illegal. But, because persuasion alone seldom generates enough support, candidates nonetheless regularly attempt to purchase or compel votes.

The purpose of this article is to explore the nature, extent and effectiveness of irregular modes of electioneering. What forms – in cash or kind – does voting buying take? What sorts of practices – of threats or action – characterizes election violence? How frequently do these departures from democratic procedure occur? Who are the victims? And, most importantly, do inducements and compulsions work? If they do, which are more effective: the carrots of vote buying or the sticks of political violence?

In order to estimate the effectiveness of different sorts of electoral malpractice, it is necessary to measure their consequences for electoral behavior at the individual level. To this end, I distinguish three alternative courses of action for citizens: to refuse, to defect, or to comply. First, the voter can “refuse.” With reference to vote buying, the individual can decline to enter into an agreement to trade his vote. Or she can seek to avoid violence, for example by publicly shaming the perpetrator or, more likely, exiting the electoral arena. Second, the individual can enter a vote buying agreement or shoulder a threat of intimidation with no intention of complying. When the time comes to cast a ballot, the individual instead “defects” by failing to vote at all or by voting as he or she pleases. Finally, the citizen can “comply” with inducement or intimidation by turning out to vote and voting the “right” way, meaning in accordance with the instructions of the vote buyer or political persecutor. These three possible responses – which echo Hirschmann's (1970) alternatives of exit, voice and loyalty – represent an ascending scale of popular submission to elite efforts to manipulate elections.

In this article, I show that citizens in one African country clearly regard vote buying and electoral violence as infractions of public morality. Most ordinary people resist efforts of political elites to illegally influence voter behavior. But some individuals – especially society's poorest and most vulnerable members – have little choice except to comply. Faced with irregular carrots or sticks during

the course of an election campaign, their only other viable option is to feign compliance while refusing in practice. I show this strategy – which I have called defection – is a commonplace “weapon of the weak” (Scott, 1985).

Importantly, the available evidence suggests that vote buying and political intimidation are ineffective campaign practices. In reality, people who are paid or threatened during the election campaign are actually less likely to turn out to vote on polling day. Threats of violence lead to an especially sharp reduction in voter turnout. Moreover, while voters may be willing to cast their ballots for parties whose candidates have broken electoral laws, many would have expressed such support anyway, that is, without extra-legal incentives or punishments. Most importantly, many who enter vote-buying agreements say they will ultimately defect, that is, by taking the money but voting as they please. Defection is especially likely when voters are cross-pressured from *both sides* of a partisan divide or when exposed to *both* vote buying *and* violence.

The article ends by reviewing the implications of these campaign malpractices for the health of democracy. One particularly interesting result, that deserves further exploration, is that vote buying behavior is determined collectively. People are most likely to defect if they think that others will do so too, thus availing themselves of the protections provided by collective action. But if collective action also shapes norms – that is, people justify wrongful behavior for themselves because everyone else is doing it – then campaign irregularities can corrode the quality of democratic citizenship.

The Campaign Context, Nigeria 2007

Nigeria’s general elections of April 2007 – which featured contests for the federal presidency, state governorships and legislative assemblies at state and national levels – promised a political watershed (Mustapha 2006, Ibrahim 2007, Rotberg 2007). For the first time since independence in 1960, a third round of elections would be held under a civilian regime and one elected president would succeed another. If peacefully and honestly implemented, the elections held out the prospect of legitimizing and strengthening Nigeria’s fragile new democracy. But the serious misconduct observed in Nigeria’s previous 1999 and 2003 polls cast doubt on whether Nigeria would easily attain a free and fair election.

In the event, Nigeria’s 2007 elections were deeply flawed (Human Rights Watch, 2007). Before the campaign even began, seasoned observers correctly predicted that, as “various powerful figures calculate their best interests and shift their factional alignments ...tremendous amounts of largesse will change hands and some of the players will likely resort to force” (Sklar et al. 2006, 108). A bitter feud between outgoing President Obasanjo and Vice-President Atiku Abubakar, an aspirant successor, dominated the election season. Dueling lawsuits, boycott threats, and shifting alliances between opportunistic political parties and factions created a chaotic atmosphere of uncertainty. Election preparations – such as a delayed voter registration exercise – were woefully inadequate and questions soon arose about the impartiality and competence of the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) (Transition Monitoring Group 2007).

These concerns were borne out on polling days, April 14 and 21, 2007. Voting for President and National Assembly failed to take place in certain polling stations in a half dozen states in the southeast and northeast due to the non-delivery of electoral materials. In numerous other locations across the country, ballot papers were misprinted or arrived late. In the southern Niger Delta zone, armed militias brazenly stole ballot boxes or substituted pre-stuffed containers of their own. Despite guarantees from the Inspector General of Police that public security would be assured, opposition candidates were harassed or arrested, voters were turned away from polling places by gangs of young thugs, ballot secrecy was violated by party workers and police, and some 300 persons were killed in election related violence.

INEC announced an overwhelming victory for the ruling Peoples' Democratic Party (PDP), but polling station results often bore little resemblance to actual turnout or voter intentions. All told, the fraudulent election left Nigeria's voters feeling "frustrated" and "disenfranchised" (Economist 2007).

This article seeks to document some neglected aspects of an election campaign awash with oil money and marred by escalating violence. Unlike most political analysts of Nigeria, I focus on ordinary citizens rather than political elites. And unlike most election observers, I concentrate on the election campaign rather than polling and counting procedures.

The object of interest is not wholesale electoral manipulation as represented by legal maneuvers to keep candidates off the ballot or administrative fixes to falsify vote tallies, which also occurred. Instead, I look at campaign abuses at the retail level, one citizen at a time. Who was affected, and how did they respond?

Data are drawn from a pre-election Afrobarometer survey conducted in Nigeria in January and February 2007 with questions about the previous 2003 and upcoming 2007 general elections. With a representative national sample of 2410 adult respondents, it is possible to make inferences to the Nigerian population as a whole with a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2 percent at a 95 percent confidence level.²

The Perceived Morality of Campaign Manipulation

As a first step, I ask whether African citizens regard vote buying and violence as right or wrong. One might expect disagreement on this issue, with at least some survey respondents regarding these tactics as legitimate – or at least acceptable – methods of electioneering. One might expect that voters would ascribe a different moral status to each transgression, with violence being seen as more unambiguously wrong than vote buying. The logic here is that violence visits heavy costs upon unwilling victims, whereas the purchase of votes at least holds out the promise of a material benefit to those who voluntarily participate

A clear majority of the Nigerians we interviewed said that political violence was always wrong. Almost four out of five adult Nigerians (79 percent) see political violence as "never justified," even "in support of a just cause." The same proportions think it better to find lawful solutions to social problems rather than to "use other means" and that "politicians and political parties should not be allowed to form their own private security forces." Only 5 percent of Nigerians strongly support the "necessity" of using violence in pursuit of political goals. As might be expected, younger and less educated people are somewhat more tolerant of this aggressive approach to politics, but the differences are not statistically significant.

Most Nigerians also condemn efforts by politicians to purchase support at the polls. Almost six in ten (58 percent) say that it is "wrong and punishable" for "a candidate or party official to offer money in return for a vote." An additional 30 percent consider vote buying "wrong but understandable," adding the qualifying phrase perhaps because they think that political patrons are obliged to steer kickbacks their clients. Van de Walle has suggested that, in Nigeria, voters take vote buying offers as signals of a patron's wealth and capability of winning elections, features of a leader with which they wish to be associated (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, 64; see also Chabal and Daloz, 39-44). Less charitably, Banégas reports that voters in neighboring Benin see the payment of money for votes as reparation for public funds that politicians are assumed to have stolen (1998, 78).

But, importantly, only 7 percent of Nigerians would go so far as to characterize vote buying as "not wrong at all." In other words, even those who regard vote buying as understandable still regard it as wrong. And education is a powerful solvent to moral acquiescence: even people with primary education are only half as likely as those without formal schooling to see candidates making handouts as "not wrong at all."

But, when they look in the mirror, Nigerians are less critical of their *own* behavior. Barely half (49 percent) think that it is “wrong and punishable” for a *voter* to “accept money in return for a vote.” The other half of the adult population is willing to excuse participation in a vote buying transaction as “wrong but understandable” (35 percent) or “not wrong at all” (10 percent).³ The main extenuating circumstance is poverty. People on the lowest rung of a five point poverty scale are only half as likely as those on the top rung to say that the sale of votes is “wrong and punishable.”⁴

Between the two electoral violations, which is regarded as the greater evil? Nigerians clearly see electoral violence as a larger political problem than vote buying. When asked about the most important issues in the upcoming 2007 national elections, many more Nigerians demanded that “Nigerians should be secure from violence” than that “vote buying should be controlled” (14 versus 2 percent of all election issues mentioned). Taken together, the above findings suggest that Nigerians are resistant to both vote buying and electoral violence on moral grounds. But they worry more deeply about political intimidation and many are inclined to forgive voters for succumbing to campaign inducements.

The Frequency of Campaign Irregularities

This article now attempts to estimate the frequency and distribution of vote buying and violence in Nigerian election campaigns. Data are generated from straightforward survey questions about whether, during national election campaigns in 2003 and 2007, individuals encountered offers of “something...(money, food or a gift)... in return for your vote” or threats of “negative consequences in order to get you to vote a certain way.” We also asked respondents to report whether they thought “other people in your neighborhood or village” had had such encounters.

By February 2007, midway through the general election campaign, some 12 percent of Nigerians interviewed acknowledged that a candidate or a party agent had offered “something in return for your vote.” This level of direct experience with vote buying was slightly lower than that recalled for the 2003 general elections, at 16 percent. But the 2007 figure captured only half the campaign period, whereas the 2003 figure covered the entire campaign. We know from research in Taiwan that the pace of vote buying accelerates as the day of the election approaches (Wang and Kurzban 2007), so it is reasonable to project that vote buying in Nigerian elections was at least as frequent in 2007 as in 2003, and quite possibly more so.

Moreover, vote buying may be more extensive in both campaigns than implied by the figures cited. Experience from Argentina suggests that some people are understandably reluctant to admit that they had been approached with a forbidden offer, especially if they had subsequently entered an agreement and complied with its terms (Brusco, Nazareno and Stokes, 2004). The existence of undercounting in self-assessments is reflected in the respondents’ 2007 estimate that fully 28 percent of *other* voters were offered gifts during the 2003 campaign. I therefore consider that the “true” level of vote buying exists within a zone bracketed by a wide confidence interval. The real frequency of this activity lies somewhere *between* reported levels of personal experience (12 percent in Nigeria in 2007, which may be an *underestimate*), and assumed levels of involvement by fellow citizens (28 percent, which may be an *overestimate*).

In vote-buying transactions in Nigeria, voters are usually offered money (68 percent of all reported attempts in 2007), commodities (such as food or clothing, 26 percent) or jobs (6 percent). In the latest and previous Nigerian elections, the modal (i.e., most common) inducement was 500 naira, or about US\$4. But the median price of a vote payment rose between 2003 and 2007, from 1750 naira to 2250 naira, largely because the proportion of large payments (10,000 naira or more per vote) increased over

time.

Relatively few Nigerians report being directly affected by electoral violence. By February 2007, just 4 percent of survey respondents nationwide said they had received “threats of negative consequences.” To be sure, political intimidation was geographically concentrated in certain electoral “hot spots,” especially the Niger Delta region of the South-South zone, where the Afrobarometer recorded personal and observed experiences with electoral violence at rates more than three times as high as the national average.⁵

The negative consequences of political intimidation include – in approximately equal proportions – threats to personal safety, threats to the safety of family members, and the loss of property. For some reason, respondents thought that intimidation was more likely to take the form of the loss of a job for other voters than for themselves. Reports of violent encounters in 2007, mid-way through the campaign, were almost as frequent as for the whole 2003 campaign (5 percent). If one assumes that the pace of violence also quickens as the vote approaches, one can infer that the actual level of electoral violence was ultimately higher in 2007 than 2003 (see also Human Rights Watch, 2007). And because the gap between reported personal and estimated third-party encounters (6 percentage points in 2007) was smaller for violence than vote buying, we can invest greater confidence in the violence data.

If people have relatively few direct experiences with political intimidation, then why do they see violence as such a pressing campaign concern? My working assumption is that an atmosphere of threat, regardless of whether hostilities are ever directly experienced, has a generally chilling effect on the public mood. In a related survey from January 2007, Nigerian NGOs reported that more than half (56 percent) reported that they were at least “a little fearful” of “becoming a victim of intimidation or violence in the forthcoming elections.”⁶ In the Afrobarometer survey, a similar proportion (54 percent) thought that the previous 2003 elections had been unfree and unfair due to “the use of violence by parties and candidates.”⁷ And an even larger proportion (71 percent) said that competition between political parties “often” or “always” leads to violent clashes. Intriguingly, this widespread expectation of impending conflict was negatively related to actual experiences. But it was nonetheless positively related to the likelihood that a citizen would see violence as a prominent campaign issue.

Who are the Victims?

It seems reasonable to assume that, in seeking to control voter behavior, politicians would focus their efforts on the most vulnerable elements in society. One would therefore expect a disproportionate concentration of bribery and violence on poor and uneducated people. The poor are likely to be victimized by vote buying because their limited means makes them susceptible to material inducements, including offers of basic commodities or modest amounts of money. For their part, people with limited education may be unaware of individual political rights and therefore possess weak defenses against intimidation.

In Nigeria, however, the survey revealed few demographic correlates of exposure to electoral violence. Political intimidation was spread rather evenly across all social groups, whether rich or poor, urban or rural, even male or female. This smooth distribution constitutes further evidence that violence is a general “atmospheric” condition that tends to affect everyone touched by an election campaign. In the only observable statistical effect, education performed as expected: it tended to inoculate Nigerians against explicit threats of “negative consequences” for the making the “wrong” vote choice. Whereas 5 percent of people with no formal schooling experienced such threats, just 2 percent of those with post-secondary education did so. So people who are ill equipped to defend their rights are prone to be victimized, even by their own political patrons. But this conclusion should be treated with caution due to small sub-sample sizes.

By contrast, there were clear demographic correlates of vote buying. In both 2003 and 2007, poor Nigerians were most likely to report an encounter with a politician (or a politician's agent) who offered to buy their vote.⁸ Let us compare people who suffered "many" shortages of basic needs in the previous year with those who covered these needs: the former were over four times more likely than to be "often" approached with a vote-buying offer. But, even if poor Nigerians were more frequently exposed to material inducements, they still drove a hard bargain. They did not quote a lower price than the going rate for selling a vote. Nor were they more likely than anyone else to accept payment in the form of goods-in-kind as opposed to cold, hard cash.

Moreover, in 2007, educated Nigerians were less likely to report that anyone had approached them with a vote-buying offer.⁹ Those with post-secondary education were five times less likely to report such an encounter than those without any formal schooling. I have already shown that educated people are especially inclined to find vote buying morally wrong. A more cynical view would contend that educated people, especially those with paid employment, can afford to be morally upright. To be sure, educated people are not entirely immune from temptation. It is worth noting in this regard that those with education are almost twice as likely as those without formal schooling to think that a vote is worth 10,000 naira or more.

At face value, it is unclear whether vote buying would be more prevalent in urban or rural areas. On one hand, poor and uneducated people are concentrated in rural villages, making these areas prime targets for the distribution of patronage. On the other hand, outlying areas are hard for politicians to reach and monitor, which suggests that rural dwellers can easily refuse or defect from reward-driven agreements. The Afrobarometer data show that, in Nigeria, vote buying is much more common in rural than urban areas by a margin of 7 percentage points in 2003 and 6 percentage points in 2007. These results are consistent with research from East Asia and Latin America (Ramsayer and Rosenbluth 1993, Shugart and Nielsen 1999).¹⁰ Indeed, in 2003, residential location was the most important demographic consideration of all, trumping both poverty and education. By 2007, however, education and urban residence were equally important considerations in reducing the likelihood of vote buying.

Voter Behavior

This article now turns to voter behavior. Two types are examined: voter turnout and partisan choice. Because the Afrobarometer survey was conducted before the election in February 2007, the indicators of these behaviors are proxy measures of voting intentions for the elections scheduled for April 2007.

Voter turnout is measured by a question that asked respondents to situate themselves in relation to a range of behaviors running from "I am not a registered voter and I am not interested in voting" to "I am a registered voter and I will vote." Intended voters are those who chose the last option in 2007. As Table 1 shows, voter interest in elections was higher in 2007 than in 2003, as evidenced by higher reported rates of voter registration and lower levels of planned abstention. Even discounting the block of eligible voters (12 percent) who in February 2007 had not yet decided whether to vote, it appeared that voter turnout, which then stood at an intended 66 percent, was likely to rise above 2003 levels.¹¹

Table 1: Voting Turnout (2003) and Intention to Vote (2007), Nigeria, February 2007

	2003	2007
Don't know	3	3
I am not registered to vote, and I am not interested in voting	11	5
I am not registered to vote, but would like to have voted	13	8
I am registered, but I chose not to vote (2003)/choose not to vote (2007)	11	5
I am registered to vote, but I have not yet decided whether to vote	-	12
I am registered to vote and I voted (2003)/I will vote (2007)	62	66

Cell entries are percentages of survey respondents, i.e. adult Nigerians.

Partisan choice is measured by a question that asked, "If elections were held tomorrow, which party's candidate would you vote for as member of the national assembly?" In summary form, this variable is coded on a three-point scale running from incumbent party partisan, through non-partisan, to opposition party partisan. As Table 2 shows, voters were split in February 2007 between supporters of the incumbent PDP (one third) and supporters of all other opposition parties (a combined two-fifths).¹² But, alone, the largest opposition party, the All Nigeria Peoples' Party (ANPP), did not attract even one quarter of the intended votes, which suggests that neither incumbents nor opposition held a decisive edge in most national races.

Table 2: Partisan Choice, Nigeria, February 2007

	Incumbent Partisan	Non-Partisan (inc. "don't know")	Opposition Partisan
National President	33.3	23.0	43.7
National Assembly	34.1	27.8	38.1
State Governor	36.0	23.0	41.0
State Assembly	32.5	28.6	38.9
Mean	34.0	25.6	40.4

Cell entries are percentages of survey respondents, i.e. adult Nigerians.

How Effective Are Campaign Manipulations?

How do citizens respond to the mix of less-than-legal carrots and sticks employed by politicians in African election campaigns? Are vote buying and violence effective strategies of electoral manipulation?

Voter Turnout

The first object to be explained is voter turnout, measured in Nigeria in 2007 in the manner just described. The key explanatory variables are experiences with vote buying and political intimidation during the 2007 election campaign. Do these malpractices affect turnout? As preliminary controls, I include partisan preference and a standard set of demographic factors.

The results of a logistic regression analysis are shown in Table 3, of which several are noteworthy. Consider the control variables. First, while poverty and education perform as expected – the former is negative for turnout and the latter is positive – neither is statistically significant so can be discounted for the purposes of this analysis. Second, rural residence remains important for turnout, but in the unexpected direction that, in Nigeria as in other parts of Africa and the wider agrarian world, country dwellers are more likely to vote than their urban counterparts (Yadav 2000; Bratton, Chu and Lagos 2006; Krishna 2005). Third, other demographic considerations now enter the analysis: older people are significantly more likely to vote than youngsters; and women are very much less likely to vote than men.

Political partisanship, however, is unrelated to voter turnout. If there is any tendency, it is for supporters

of the incumbent party to be more complacent about bothering to vote than opposition partisans, but the relationship is not statistically significant.

Our main interest is in campaign irregularities. Table 3 shows that individuals who experience a vote buying offer are less likely to vote than those who do not. One possible interpretation is that recipients of such offers feel ambivalent: they agonize whether to comply with the wishes of the vote buyer or to act according to conscience. To resolve this dilemma, individuals sometimes avoid voting altogether. In other words, they engage in a form of defection. An alternative interpretation is that, in some cases, vote buyers succeed in their aim of preventing their opponents' supporters from casting a ballot. This possibility – which then must be interpreted as compliance – arises wherever voters report that they have sold their voter registration cards in return for a payment (Vicente 2007).

But the negative effect of vote buying on voter turnout is small and, in the current analysis, does not attain statistical significance. Thus, the Nigeria data do not validate any claim to the effect that vote buying “works,” at least in the limited sense of boosting voter turnout.

Much more powerful is the effect of threatened campaign violence. As Table 3 shows, the effect is again negative, but now it is strong and statistically significant. For an average Nigerian (say, a female rural dweller) and with other variables controlled at their mean level, a threat of violence reduces the odds of intending to vote by 52 percent.¹³ Moreover, intimidation's effect seems to be long lasting, since the model works almost as well if exposure to violence is measured in 2003 rather than 2007.¹⁴ To all appearances, Nigerians who encounter a threat against voting freely often withdraw from the electoral process entirely, that is, they abstain from voting. So political intimidation apparently has an intended effect: it makes citizens so fearful that they abandon their right to vote.

The question arises whether female voters feel especially vulnerable to electoral violence. We already know that, across all African countries where Afrobarometer surveys have been conducted, women place high value on social peace and political unity; they are more likely than men to express concern that multiparty competition will lead to “conflict and confusion” (Logan and Bratton, 2006). To test whether this tendency carries over to campaign violence, I constructed an interaction term that represents the mediating effect of gender on intimidation's impact on turnout. Although the relevant regression coefficient in Table 3 displays the expected negative sign, it is not statistically significant. Thus, while exposure to campaign violence is an additional deterrent to electoral participation by women, it is not the only or main one.

Table 3: Determinants of Voter Turnout, Nigeria 2007

	B	S.E.	Sig.
Constant	.850	.352	.016
Controls			
Poverty	-.074	.057	.199
Education	.029	.025	.238
Rural	.341	.106	.001
Age	.010	.004	.018
Female	-.463	.102	.000
Incumbent Partisan	-.032	.059	.589
Interaction: Female and Violence	-.084	.094	.370
Campaign Malpractices			
Experience of Vote Buying Offer	-.123	.090	.172
Experience of Threat of Violence	-.797	.184	.000

Partisan Choice

If violence undermines voter turnout, does it also compel partisan choice? In other words, do illicit campaign methods affect not only *whether* people vote, but also *how* they vote? And, with reference to vote buying, can we now discern a clear and substantial effect on voter behavior?

A further distinction is necessary for this inquiry. We need to add information on the valence of campaign malpractices. In other words, from where do such interventions originate: from incumbent or opposition parties? I assume that both sides are implicated. Take vote buying. In total, the Afrobarometer recorded 485 cases of vote buying in 2007 as experienced by 296 respondents out of a random sample of 2410 Nigerians. Because there were more crimes than victims, it follows that many individuals (196, or about two-thirds of all victims) received more than one offer from more than one partisan group. The largest political parties were the most active in vote buying. According to the survey respondents, the ruling PDP made 40 percent of all reported attempts to buy votes, followed by the leading opposition groups: the ANPP at 31 percent and the Action Congress (AC) at 10 percent.

Table 4 displays factors that determine whether an individual chooses the incumbent party at the ballot box. The object to be explained is partisan choice, made operational with a dummy variable; it is scored as 1 if the individual planned to vote for a PDP candidate in the April 2007 National Assembly election.

In this case, being rural or older – or especially if poor or female – had no significant impact on whether an individual would vote for the candidate of the incumbent party. The only significant demographic effect was education, which increased the odds of voting for the PDP.

Interestingly, the incumbent party was apparently much more successful than opposition parties in building support among intended voters. It is unclear whether this advantage was due to an explicit effort on the part of incumbents to concentrate voter registration drives in their own electoral strongholds. Alternatively, well-known candidates may have found it easier to generate popular enthusiasm for voting than opposition candidates, some of whom were fresh faces newly arrived on the political scene. Whatever the reason, the supporters of Nigerian opposition parties were significantly less likely to actually turn out to vote on the day of the election.

But the issue under review is the effectiveness of vote buying and violence. As Table 4 shows, violence was counterproductive for the ruling party. If people felt threatened by political intimidation they were consistently *less* likely to vote for the PDP. We do not have the data to determine whether particular incidents of intimidation originated from incumbents or opposition. But I note the observation of a senior Nigerian political scientist that the PDP unleashed campaign repression mainly as a means to control its own members.¹⁵ Since all political parties in Nigeria have short histories and shallow institutional roots, there is good reason to believe that party leaders might easily resort to heavy-handed measures as a means of overcoming weak party discipline, even in their own electoral strongholds.¹⁶

Importantly, partisan choice is also strongly influenced by vote buying, but this time in a positive direction. In Nigeria in 2007, citizens who received a vote-buying offer from the incumbent party were significantly more likely to express an intention to vote for the PDP in the April elections.¹⁷ For an average Nigerian (say, a female rural dweller) and with other variables controlled at their mean level, vote buying by an incumbent increased the probability of voting for the ruling party by 38 percent.¹⁸ In other words, efforts by rulers to reward loyalists and attract others to the ruling party fold apparently paid off. In this regard, we can see vote buying as one aspect of the larger phenomenon of patronage politics in which leaders exchange material rewards in return for political allegiance. It is unclear, however, whether campaign inducements were essential to cement the loyalty of citizens who already felt an affinity with the PDP or whether these individuals would have voted for the PDP anyway for other reasons, including

ethnic solidarity or policy performance.

Table 4: Determinants of Choosing the Incumbent Party, Nigeria 2007

	B	S.E.	Sig.
Constant	-1.323	.315	.000
Controls			
Poverty	-.005	.053	.925
Education	.053	.023	.019
Rural	.182	.097	.060
Age	-.007	.004	.069
Female	-.017	.094	.852
Intended Voter	.476	.102	.000
Campaign Malpractices			
Vote Buying Offer from Incumbent Party	1.633	.203	.000
Vote Buying Offer from Opposition Party	-.063	.199	.754
Experience of Threat of Violence	-.559	.155	.000

Vote buying by incumbents was clearly more effective than vote buying by opposition parties.¹⁹ It is true that a vote-buying bid by an opposition party is a good predictor of an opposition vote when the latter is used as the dependent variable (not shown).²⁰ But in Table 4, the effect of opposition vote buying looks weak. To be sure, the negative sign on the relevant coefficient correctly predicts the reduced probability that a citizen will vote for the incumbent. But the effect is not statistically significant. One obvious interpretation of this result is that office holders enjoy the advantage of political incumbency. Rulers are able to make more credible and binding offers to voters than the cash-starved opposition because they enjoy access to a larger pool of resources, including the public purse controlled by the state. The resource edge of incumbency is borne out by supporters of the ruling party, who are more likely than opposition partisans to estimate the price of a vote at 10,000 naira or more.²¹

Popular Reactions: Comply, Defect, or Refuse?

Politicians manipulate campaigns in order to maximize votes. So far, I have shown that material inducements are a more effective means to this end than political intimidation. Because threats of violence suppress voter turnout, intimidation is not a useful campaign tactic except perhaps to counteract an impending electoral loss. By contrast, although vote buying also suppresses turnout slightly, it appears to boost partisan support, and therefore can be considered – morality and legality aside – as a campaign tactic that “works.”

But these judgments make sense mainly from the pragmatic perspective of a politician who seeks to obtain or hang onto office. What courses of action are available to voters in the face of vote buying and violence? Do specific forms of campaign manipulation invite different responses? Under what circumstances do citizens comply, defect or refuse?

I concentrate the analysis on vote buying because fuller survey data are available on this subject. The Afrobarometer asked, “what would you do if a candidate or party official offered you money for your vote in April 2007?” Would you “take the money and vote for him/her” (that is, *comply*), “take the money and vote for the candidate of your choice” (that is, *defect*), or “refuse the money and vote for the candidate of your choice” (that is, *refuse*)? Using the same question with the same response categories, the survey also asked respondents to judge the reactions of “other people in your neighborhood or village.”

The distribution of responses is shown in Table 5. Only a small minority said they would comply (8 percent) by taking the money and then casting a ballot for the vote buyer’s party. We can have confidence in the reliability of this estimate since respondents attributed exactly the same level of compliance to other people in their locality. Most people, however, said they would defect (42 percent) by taking the money but voting according to their conscience. A similar proportion said they would refuse from the outset to enter any vote buying agreement (41 percent). One respondent elaborated that he would “drive that person away” and another said that she would “call the police.”

Understandably, citizens were much less certain about responses among the members of their residential community, with a majority saying that they didn’t know what other people would do. Some even admitted that they were unsure of how they themselves would respond (6 percent). Finally, a small proportion volunteered they would “take the money and not vote at all.”

Table 5: Popular Reactions to Vote Buying, Nigeria 2007

	You	Other People
Comply	8	8
Defect	42	28
Refuse	41	24
Other (inc. don’t know)	9	40

Cell entries are percentages of survey respondents, i.e., adult Nigerians.

As might be expected, popular reactions to vote buying depend in part on an individual’s socioeconomic status. Poor people are slightly more likely to comply and educated people, if approached, are slightly more likely to refuse. But residential location again makes the largest difference, with rural dwellers being markedly more likely to comply than urban dwellers (10 percent versus 6 percent). Concomitantly, rates of refusal are significantly higher in towns than in the countryside (47 versus 35 percent). These data suggest that, if there is a culture of vote buying in Africa – in which votes are exchanged for campaign rewards – it is predominantly (though not exclusively) a rural phenomenon.

But the fact that fully 85 percent of urban dwellers would either refuse a vote buying agreement or defect from it suggests that, outside of pockets of reciprocity in the countryside, vote buying may not be a very effective strategy for amassing electoral support.

As Table 6 shows, effectiveness of vote buying also depends in part on the source of the offer. If the PDP in Nigeria is at all representative, then incumbent political parties are apparently more effective at inducing voter compliance. By a small but significant margin (15 percent versus 11 percent), the PDP was more likely to get a Nigerian voter to say that he or she would cast a ballot for a vote buyer. Again, the incumbents’ ability to offer more attractive rewards than their opponents may be part of the explanation, though we should not discount mass political loyalty to ruling parties, which tend to have deeper social roots than insurgent oppositions. Moreover, while citizens are equally likely to refuse vote-buying offers from incumbent and opposition alike, they are also somewhat more likely to defect from the opposition by promising support but then voting freely. Especially where the opposition is unlikely to win, the voter has less reason to fear that defection will result in subsequent retribution from powerful office holder.

I hypothesize that defection is most likely when would-be voters receive (and perhaps even accept) vote-buying offers from more than one party. Under these conditions, voters are faced with cross-pressures. They find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being unable to simultaneously comply with the

preferences of *both* sides. But the data do not reveal this regularity. As Table 6 shows, voters are *equally* likely to defect whether they receive offers from one, or from more than one, political party (58 percent). Instead, voters tend to engage in other behaviors. Either they comply with the wishes of only one party (probably the party they judge most likely to win), hoping that the other party will not be able to punish them. Or they refuse all offers, knowing that it is impossible to keep more than one party happy at the same time.

But there is a third option. As some respondents told us, it is feasible for voters to take the money and not to vote at all. The data reveal that this outcome is especially likely if voters accept inducements from more than one party. We already know that entering a vote buying agreement has a suppressive effect on voter turnout. We now discover that this effect is particularly large when voters face cross-pressures from competing vote buyers. Whereas, in January 2007, 66 percent of Nigerian survey respondents said they intended to vote in the April elections, just 58 percent did so if they had received a vote-buying offer from a political party. But the intention to vote falls even more precipitously – to less than half of all eligible voters (49 percent) -- when individuals entertain vote-buying offers from more than one political party.

In short, the Afrobarometer survey provides compelling evidence to the effect that, when citizens are caught in the cross-pressures of competitive vote-buying, their principal response is to abstain from voting at all.

Table 6: The Source of Vote Buying Offers, by Compliance and Turnout, Nigeria 2007

	Offer from Incumbent Party	Offer from Opposition Party	Offer from Only One Party	Offer from More than One Party
Comply	15	11	14	9
Defect	56	59	58	58
Refuse	29	30	29	34
Intend to Vote			58	49
Intend to Abstain			42	51

Cell entries are percentages of survey respondents, i.e., adult Nigerians (excluding “don’t know”/“other”).

Determinants of Defection

In a democracy, a good citizen would refuse to enter a vote-buying agreement. Most Nigerians acknowledge this moral precept and many adopt it in practice. Citizen compliance with the wishes of vote buyers may be a path of least resistance but it is ethically and legally fraught. It also undermines the development of democratic citizenship. Perhaps the most rational response – though hardly the most honest one – is defection, when citizens take any money that may be on offer but vote as they wish anyway. Some civic educators even encourage this course of action (Shaffer 2007, 161-79). But its implications for democratization are mixed: while citizens retain and exercise their right of free choice at the polls, they also implicate themselves in an electoral malpractice. One possible saving grace is that if enough citizens repeatedly defect, politicians will learn that vote buying does not work.

Because defection is the most ambiguous and interesting option – not to mention the most common one in Nigeria – I conclude the discussion of vote buying by delving into its determinants. If, as shown above, the extent of cross-pressure does not drive defection, then what does? I propose three hypotheses.

First, the prospect of defection from a vote buying agreement raises a collective action problem. In order to avoid revealing that they have acted alone – thus exposing themselves to punishment – citizens will

seek strength in numbers. They will only violate the agreement if they think others will do so too. Hence, one would expect to find a positive relationship between an individual's own reaction to a vote buying offer and his or her estimate of what "other people in your neighborhood or village" would do under the same circumstances. Specifically, they will defect only if they think others will defect too.

Second, it would seem logical that people are more likely to defect if they think that the ballot is secret. If politicians cannot discover how individuals or small groups voted, then the possible costs of defection are greatly reduced. The Afrobarometer currently contains no direct measure of whether voters regard the ballot as secret. But a proxy measure can be constructed from a question about how often "people have to be careful of what they say about politics." Those who say "often" or "always" are deemed to express political fear (66 percent in Nigeria); this group probably also worries that the ballot may not be secret.²²

Third, citizens who are committed to democracy as their preferred political regime are unlikely to surrender the right to vote lightly. Most will refuse offers to buy their votes. But, even if such persons succumb to the temptation of campaign inducements, they are still likely to want to make a free choice in the privacy of the voting booth. I therefore propose that committed democrats are more likely to defect than individuals who harbor nostalgia for authoritarian rule. Commitment to democracy is measured in various Afrobarometer studies by a standard index that combines an expressed preference for democracy with rejection of several alternative authoritarian regimes (Bratton, Mattes and Gyimah-Boadi, 2005). By this criterion, about half (49 percent) of adult Nigerians could be characterized as "committed democrats" in 2007.

These candidate explanations of defection from vote buying are entered, along with the usual controls, into the logistic regression model in Table 7.

Let us dispense quickly with the demographic controls. As expected, poverty, age and female gender all significantly reduce the likelihood that voters will defect. To all appearances, older and poorer women are the most compliant constituency for vote buyers. But, notwithstanding what was said earlier about the sale of votes being a predominantly rural phenomenon, defection rates are some 7 percent higher among rural dwellers. Thus, politicians probably face meaningful obstacles when they try to monitor the behavior of the electorate in outlying areas, especially if, as is common, their party organizations are weak. Nor do we find from the present African case any compensatory support for the argument that "tightly knit, stable, and small communities in which everyone knows one another can generate good information about voter preferences" (Lehoucq, 2007, 43; see also Stokes 2007, 87).

But we wish to know how rural and other citizens arrive at a decision to defect from vote buying. Each of the hypotheses presented above contributes to an ecumenical explanation. I will treat them in reverse order of importance.

To begin with, we can confirm the impact on electoral behavior of a citizen's personal commitment to democracy. A person who sees democracy as the best available regime and also rejects military, one-party and one-man rule is unlikely to sell his or her vote lightly. Even if some of these committed democrats accept payments from vote buyers, they still report that they vote according to conscience. This explanation does not preclude, of course, that such voters might choose the vote buyer's party; but they assert that the preferences underlying this partisan choice are entirely their own.

Moreover, people who are fearful of expressing themselves have a reduced likelihood of defection. Especially if voters suspect that the ballot is not secret – an impression that unscrupulous politicians are in no hurry to dispel – defection will be seen as too risky. The biggest danger is that vote buyers will

discover that voters have not kept their part of the bargain, an outcome that invites retaliation and punishment. So it stands to reason that those who doubt that freedoms of expression and voting will be protected are unlikely to become defectors.

Finally, I can report a definitive result: defection from vote buying depends on solving the collective action problem. Voters defect if they have some assurance that others in their locality will do so too. As revealed in Table 7, the strongest and most significant relationship with defection is voters' own expectations that they are partaking in the collective behavior of a larger group. For an average Nigerian (say, a female rural dweller) and with other variables controlled at mean levels, the expectation that others will defect increases one's own odds of defecting by 59 percent.²³ I do not know for sure whether would-be defectors have reliable information about the planned voting behavior of their friends and neighbors. But such subjects are surely a topic of communal conversation. As such, citizens can probably figure out whether they can subsume their own behavior within that of a larger group, and thus avoid being singled out for retribution. Under these circumstances, they are very much more likely to take the money and run.

Table 7: Determinants of Defection from Vote Buying, Nigeria 2007

	B	S.E.	Sig.
Constant	-.357	.378	.344
Controls			
Poverty	-.146	.061	.017
Education	-.028	.026	.291
Rural	.272	.110	.014
Age	-.014	.004	.001
Female	-.219	.108	.042
Determinants			
Think That Others Will Defect	2.811	.130	.000
Express Political Fear	-.166	.053	.002
Committed to Democracy	.235	.099	.017

Complementary or Alternative Strategies?

In this article, I have treated vote buying and political intimidation as if these electoral strategies were separable. This discrete approach assumes that political campaigners see such interventions as alternatives. Accordingly, politicians who lack sufficient resources to buy off voters will be prone to resort to heavy-handed methods. Or if violence backfires, then they will try to tempt voters with rewards. A third possibility is that voters will experience promises of reward from one side of the partisan divide and threats of violence from another.

In reality, of course, political campaigns reflect a multitude of strategies, often applied simultaneously. It is therefore unexpected that, in Nigeria in 2007, overlap between campaign strategies was empirically quite limited. Among adult Nigerians, just 3 percent reported being victimized by *both* a vote buying offer *and* a threat of negative consequences during the 2007 campaign. This of course exempts those who saw vote buying as an offer they couldn't refuse because it contained an implied threat of extortion. The remainder of the population was divided between the 11 percent who experienced just one of these malpractices and the 86 percent who reported no direct personal experience of either one.

Table 8 teases out the *combined* effects of vote buying and violence on Nigerian voting behavior. It displays a cross-tabulation of two ordinal scales: a scale of exposure (to none, one, or both violations)

and a scale of intended compliance (running from refuse, through defect, to comply). It shows that combining vote buying and violence had little appreciable impact on the likelihood that a voter would refuse to enter an agreement (to vote a certain way) or comply with such an agreement (if they did enter). In other words a threat of violence or an offer of a material inducement alone would be just as effective as a combination of these influences.

But a voter who experienced both vote buying and violence was more likely to defect, either by not voting at all or by exercising a free vote choice. The probability of this outcome rises by six percentage points when he or she is subjected to both treatments.²⁴ In this regard, we confirm that, from a politician’s perspective, employing a complementary campaign strategy is self-defeating. There is no apparent advantage to be had in terms of controlling voter behavior by supplementing vote buying with a threat of violence, or supplementing political intimidation with material rewards. Instead, when faced with a combination of both irregularities, voters are significantly more likely to choose to go it alone. The most extreme scenario involves a voter who is induced to vote one way (say by an incumbent party) but threatened to vote another way (say by an opposition group). According to Table 8, this harsh combination of cross-pressures is also much more likely to induce defection than compliance.

Table 8: Combined Effects of Vote Buying and Violence on Voter Behavior, Nigeria 2007

	Experienced NEITHER Vote Buying NOR Threat of Violence	Experienced EITHER Vote Buying OR Threat of Violence	Experienced BOTH Vote Buying AND Threat of Violence
Refuse	51	30	29
Defect	42	57	63
Comply	8	13	9

Cell entries are percentages of survey respondents, i.e., adult Nigerians (excluding “don’t know”/“other”).
Gamma = .351, sig. = <.001.

Conclusion and Implications

This article has shown that vote buying and political intimidation are important, if epiphenomenal, dimensions of Nigerian election campaigns. According to survey-based estimates, fewer than one out of five Nigerians is personally exposed to vote buying and fewer than one in ten experiences threats of electoral violence. But when, as commonly happens, campaign irregularities are targeted at the rural poor, effects are concentrated. These effects are as follows: violence reduces turnout; and vote buying enhances partisan loyalty. But, in good part because most citizens condemn campaign manipulation as wrong, compliance with the wishes of politicians is not assured. Defection from threats and agreements is more common than compliance, especially where voters are cross-pressured from both sides of the partisan divide.

That vote buying and violence affect relatively few people and rarely work well does not mean that these malpractices are without consequence. As others have noted, the intrusion of money and violence into election campaigns damages the quality of democracy (Schedler 2002, Schaffer 2007). These transgressions undermine democratic norms of political liberty (by depriving voters of free choice) and political equality (by benefiting the rich at the expense of the poor). They diminish the legitimacy of electoral outcomes by giving “losers,” usually opposition parties, reason to think that the vote was fraudulent. Even without other methods of manipulation – such as ballot stuffing, ballot stealing and tampering with vote tallies – Nigeria’s disastrous April 2007 elections suffered precisely this fate.

Negative consequences may be lasting because defective election campaigns set the stage for governance by corruption. As a defeated gubernatorial candidate said in Nigeria: “anyone who is willing to steal a

ballot box will steal public money.”²⁵ Vote buying and violence enable the elevation into elected office of cronies, criminals and strong-arm “godfathers” who are singularly unfit for public service. Low caliber leaders cannot offer political representation to the marginalized majorities whose voices are seldom heard in African politics. Instead, policy debate remains distorted: the views of the poor are muffled and the preferences of the rich are amplified on key issues, such as the desired balance between taxation and services (Stokes, 2007, 91). All told, irregular elections reduce the institutionalization of political accountability.

Campaign irregularities may also infect the quality of democratic citizenship. It is encouraging that most Nigerian citizens see vote buying and electoral violence as wrong. But morality, as well as behavior, may be communally defined. We know that people who enter vote-buying agreements are more likely to defect if they think others will do so too. The normative dimension of this solution to the collective action problem, however, is that participants in vote buying and violence are also more likely to regard these infractions as “wrong but understandable” or “not wrong at all.” If participation in electoral malpractices reduces critical citizenship, it can hardly be healthy for the development of democracy.

So what is to be done? Some requirements are contextual: it makes little sense to convene elections in an environment of political insecurity where armed factions stand ready to intimidate opponents. Disarmament must come first. Other requirements are institutional: there are no substitutes for an independent electoral commission, an honest bureaucracy, and a neutral police force that can guarantee a secret ballot.

But electoral and other institutional reforms are alone insufficient. Also essential is a culture of democratic citizenship that begins with a citizenry ready to insist on clean elections. In this regard, it is encouraging that so many African voters have moral objections to violence and vote buying. They already feel revulsion and indignity when political entrepreneurs and thugs try to manipulate their preferences. Thus there is less need for voter education than for a system of incentives and capabilities that will allow ordinary people to resist these misguided efforts to appropriate their votes. In this regard, the attainment of a measure of socioeconomic development that reduces existing inequalities between political elites and ordinary citizens would surely be one good place to start.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Thanks are due to Fred Schaffer and for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Remaining errors are my own.
- ² For full technical details on Afrobarometer objectives, organization, questionnaires, samples, response rates, and publications, as well as for the data on which this paper is based, see www.afrobarometer.org.
- ³ The remaining 5 percent “don’t know” whether vote buying is right or wrong.
- ⁴ The poverty scale is the Afrobarometer’s Index of Lived Poverty, an average index of shortages of basic needs: food, medical, clean water, cooking fuel and cash income. See “Poverty, Poverty Measurement, and Democracy in Southern Africa”, *Afrobarometer Working Paper No. 4* (2003), www.afrobarometer.org.
- ⁵ Some 13 percent of South-South residents claimed personal experience with intimidation by February 2007 and some 18 percent saw the same among their neighbors.
- ⁶ Alliance for Credible Elections and CLEEN, “Summary Report of National Public Opinion Survey on Preparations for 2007 Elections in Nigeria,” mimeo, March 2007.
- ⁷ Moreover, past experience influences future expectations. Those who saw the last elections (2003) as less than free and fair are likely to project the same for upcoming elections (2007) ($r = .364$, $p < .001$).
- ⁸ As Stokes (2007) reasons, with reference to the diminishing marginal utility of income, “the same outlay of resources...will buy more votes among poor than among wealthy voters.”
- ⁹ This relationship did not hold in 2003.
- ¹⁰ Hicken (2007) suggests that urbanization “destroys the traditional patron-client networks through which candidate funds can be distributed.”
- ¹¹ Because INEC has not published (and may never be able to publish) comprehensive and credible data on Nigeria’s 2007 election, it is not possible to verify these estimates against official statistics. But the reliability of Afrobarometer’s 2007 indicator of intended voter turnout is partly confirmed its strong correlation with reported actual voter turnout by the same individuals in 2003 ($r = .328$).
- ¹² The reliability of the partisan preference indicator is partly confirmed its strong correlation with an individual’s choices for national president, national assembly, state governor and state assembly ($r = .779$ or above).
- ¹³ The predicted probability is 0.5186 with a confidence interval ranging from 0.3667 to 0.6704. Thanks are due to Wonbin Cho and Tse-Hsin Chen for assistance in calculating predicted probabilities.
- ¹⁴ Not shown. The raw correlations with voting in 2007 are $r = -.152$ for exposure to a threat of violence in 2007 and $r = -.24$ for exposure 2003.
- ¹⁵ Private communication from Professor John Ayaode at a workshop on “Institutions for Pro-Poor Growth” at the centre for the Study of African Economies, Oxford University, June 2007.
- ¹⁶ My own observations in Zimbabwe confirm that the ruling ZANU-PF intimidates its own followers as well as those of the opposition MDC.
- ¹⁷ Some 62 percent of persons who received an offer from the incumbent party (versus 38 percent who received no offer) said they would vote for the PDP.
- ¹⁸ The predicted probability is 0.3819 with a confidence interval ranging from 0.3043 to 0.4596.

¹⁹ Only half (50 percent exactly) of those who received an offer from an opposition party (versus the other half who received no offer) said they would vote against the PDP.

²⁰ The relevant statistics are $B = .728$, $\text{sig.} = .000$.

²¹ However, there is no significant difference between partisans of different parties for lower price estimates.

²² This validity of the proxy is strengthened by the observation that individuals who feel a need to “be careful about what you say” are also concerned about declining opportunities of “freedom to choose who to vote for without feeling pressured” ($r = .179$, $p = < .001$).

²³ The predicted probability is 0.5922 with a confidence interval ranging from 0.5543 to 0.6300.

²⁴ The reader is cautioned that this result rests on a small number of cases, just 59.

²⁵ Kayode Fayemi, quoted in *The New York Times*, April 20, 2007.