

The Political Economy of Elections in Uganda:

Vote-Buying and Selling

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Introduction

Contemporary political thought argues that elections are core indicator of democracy especially if they are conducted under multi-party political dispensation. The practice of acquiring power through an election is assumed to make government accountable to citizens, and thereby to confer legitimacy (Collier and Vicente). However the past two elections in Uganda seem to suggest a departure from this argument. The citizens who have been participating in the elections have virtually no power to hold leaders accountable instead it seems to be the other way round. The legitimacy of elections in Uganda continued to be the subject of debate. The experiences of 2001, 2006 and 2011 are clearer manifestation of the fact that elections in Uganda are characterised by violence, bribery and fraud. Voter bribery which is the main focus of this discussion paper, manifests in form of vote-selling and vote-buying. Critics have argued that the state under the incumbent president Gen Yoweri Museveni has been reduced into a vestige of the ruling party and used to protect narrow, personal and in some cases, ethnic interests. Whatever the argument, there may be no contestation of the statement that the power of incumbency has been central to building networks of clientelism and neopatrimonialism, and it is to these two concepts that I now turn.

Clientelism and Neopatrimonialism

Clientelism is defined as the exchange of goods and services for political support, often involving an implicit or explicit quid-pro-quo. It is a political system at the heart of which is an asymmetric relationship between groups of political actors described as patrons and clients who feed off the system. Contemporary scholars like define neopatrimonialism as the vertical distribution of resources that gave rise to patron-client networks based around a powerful individual or party. Neopatrimonialism thrives in most cases on the power of incumbency and it affects policy making, especially development projects, and is responsible for the misuse of aid and state budgets.

Power of Incumbency in Uganda

Elections in Uganda have been characterised by violence, bribery and fraud exercised in varying proportions. The intensity of these three will largely depend on the power of incumbency, and this power has been growing from strength to strength. In the context of this paper, I shall concentrate on market for votes where voter bribery manifests in form of vote-buying and vote-selling.

Monitoring Reports from 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections reveal that the use of money to influence the electoral process and outcome of elections was a reality. These reports were corroborated by petitions filed in courts of law after declaration of 2006 general election results, citing massive bribery of voters across a number of constituencies.

Notable of these cases was: Retired Col. Dr. Kizza Besigye vs. President Yoweri Museveni and Electoral Commission, where three out of five judges ruled that, whereas bribery of voters took place it was not significant enough to alter the outcome of elections. Civil society election monitors and media practitioners argue that the “unfair” advantage of using money to sustain state patronage networks, voter bribery and misuse of state resources for campaigns are core strategies of the incumbent NRM party to entrench its stay in power.

Voter Bribery

Section 64 of the Presidential Elections Act 2005, and Section 68 of the Parliamentary Elections Act 2005 both as amended, make it illegal for political candidates to offer money or gifts to another person to either directly or indirectly influence someone to vote or not to vote in a particular way. The laws define voter bribery as the giving or causing to be given or provided any money, gift or other consideration to another person with intent either directly or indirectly to influence another person to vote or refrain from voting for any candidate. But this illegality remains prevalent without any serious ramifications to culprits. Voters at the grass root level reveal that political candidates across political parties including the incumbent party are guilty of this practice. The question is why do they continue to do so with impunity? As a consequence voter bribery has become a major part of Uganda’s political culture with citizens getting accustomed to being bribed for the vote. Members of parliament reveal that on polling day there is a section of voters who will adamantly choose not move out of their homes to exercise their constitutional right of casting the ballot until they are bribed to do so.

Market for Votes

Vote-buying and vote-selling remains major impediment to democracy in Uganda. Some of the activities that take place in the market for votes include:

- a) Direct cash to voters
- b) Gifts in form of home items, hand tools and groceries
- c) Donations in churches, mosques
- d) Poverty alleviation programmes
- e) Turnout buying
- f) Voter hospitality
- g) Voter tourism

The practice undermines the democratic process by weakening the provision of public goods and the ability of citizens to hold elected officials accountable. Voters who see politicians, having won office by buying, ignoring their preferred policies are already showing signs of loss of trust in the Electoral Commission and feel disenfranchised from the political process. Given the chequered political history of Uganda, the feeling of disenfranchisement can increase the likelihood of civil violence and regime change. Vote

buying and selling has escalated the cost of competing for elective positions in Uganda. The direct effect of this is that conditions for political competition that are critical for democracy are grossly undermined hence scaring away well intended people and living elective politics to unscrupulous politician who on many occasions are up to no common good. A scenario like this will most likely be advantage to incumbency that leverages the national treasury and other government resources.

Root Causes of Vote-Selling and Buying

a) Poverty

Some schools of thought argue that the poor will take anything offered. The first and most important point is to examine whether people do actually vote as they are bribed. There are examples to show that on some occasions they do not. A case in point is the bye election in Luweero for the District Woman MP. The incumbent party open the flood gates of money in anticipation that the people of Luweero will return the favour. The results showed that as much as voters had pocked the money, they voted for the opposition candidate Nabukenya who had not bribed them.

b) Politics of clientelism, neopatrimonialism

Since it is money that is used to build and sustain networks of patronage and clientelism, the government in power may assume that they will buy their way through out. On many occasions money has been seen to influence the outcome of elections. The experiences of 2011 presidential and parliamentary elections when money exchanged hands *enmasse* remain fresh in the minds of voters. Campaign agents made a fortune and were seen putting up new houses. During the pre-election period 2015, the general perception from voters is that in February 2016 they will vote candidates that will have parted with more money.

c) Ideological deficiencies / malaise

The lack of substantial ideas to sell the political candidate to voters is a major driver for vote buying. The strategy of some political candidate is that "if you cannot convince them with ideology, confuse them". This strategy is a creature of ideological deficiency that seem to have crept into the political class in Uganda.

d) Commercialisation of politics

The general perception of voters at grass root level is that election campaigns provide them an opportunity to extract resources from candidates because they feel it is the only way they can gain from their vote. Money has deprived Ugandans of the power to objectively determine their political leaders as manifested in previous two elections where it has been the candidates with "big money" that have bribed and carried the day.

Experiences of ACFIM on Vote Buying and Selling in Uganda

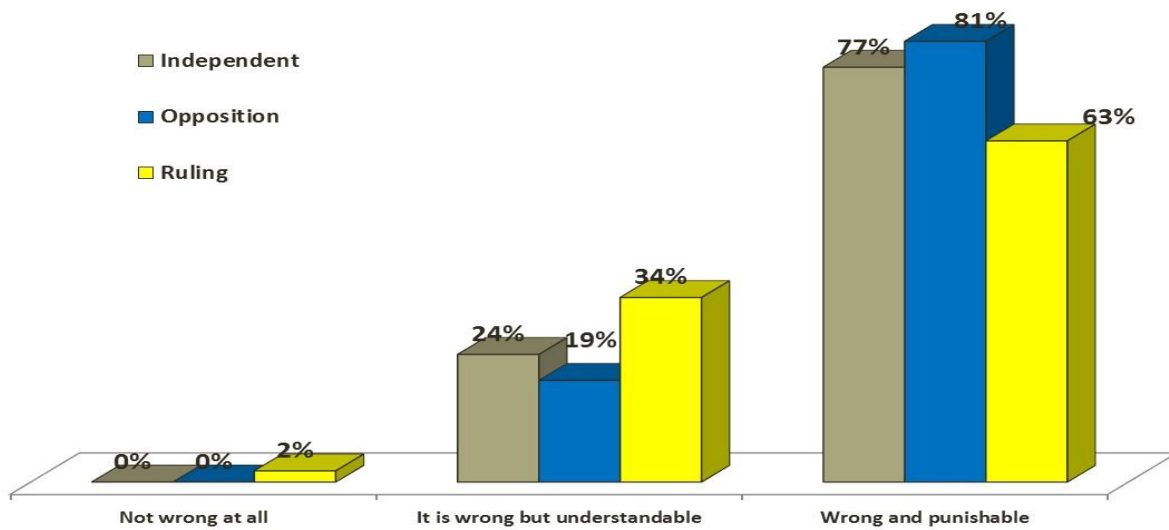
Over the past 10 months the Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring (ACFIM) has conducted studies on vote buyers (MPs) and vote sellers the citizens at village level. For the vote-sells we conducted 48 extensive focus group discussions during which we were careful not to mention the words: vote-selling or vote-buying. The aim was to assess the extent of vote selling and buying as well as how vote-buying and selling practices are implemented. Key findings were as follows:

- a) There is deep seated cynicism about the political processes in Uganda. Citizens do not believe that casting their vote can transform into improvement in their living conditions. There is little or no trust in elected leaders to act for and on behalf of the people.
- b) Those who give more are the ones that have actually stolen more. Voters are determined to get as much as they can from the candidates because they suspect that big spenders on the election campaign are probably those that have access to government coffers and can abuse the public funds
- c) People are currently more than happy to take the money. Over the past 5 years, voters have been wallowing in poverty, services are poor. On the other hand they have been following happenings in parliament and here reports about MPs increasing their emoluments and receiving financial rewards from the president to pass certain legislation.

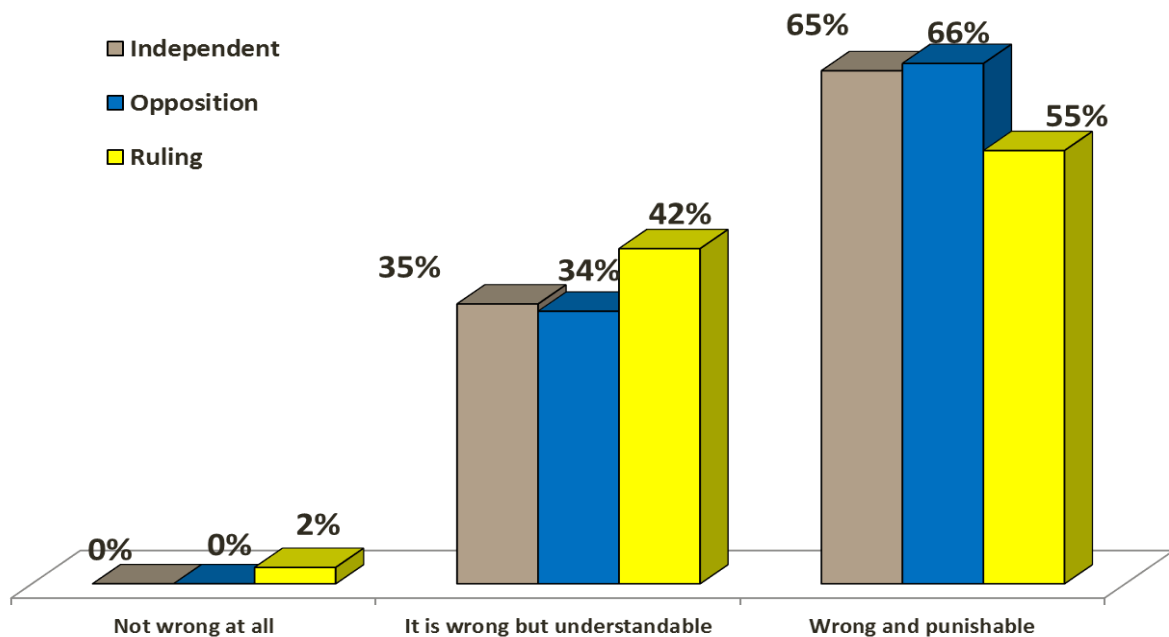
ACFIM Survey of Members of Parliament: The Vote Buyers

In a survey of 147 members of parliament conducted by the Alliance for Campaign Finance Monitoring, MPs were asked this question: *“In some places in Uganda candidates for political office or people from political parties sometimes offer money to voters in return for their votes. Do you think it is: not wrong at all, it is wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable for a candidate or party official to offer money in return for a vote?”*

The graph below shows responses of MP s on the above question:



A slightly similar question was asked: *“Do you think it is: not wrong at all, it is wrong but understandable, or wrong and punishable for a voter to accept money in return for his/her vote? Again majority know that it is wrong and punishable.*

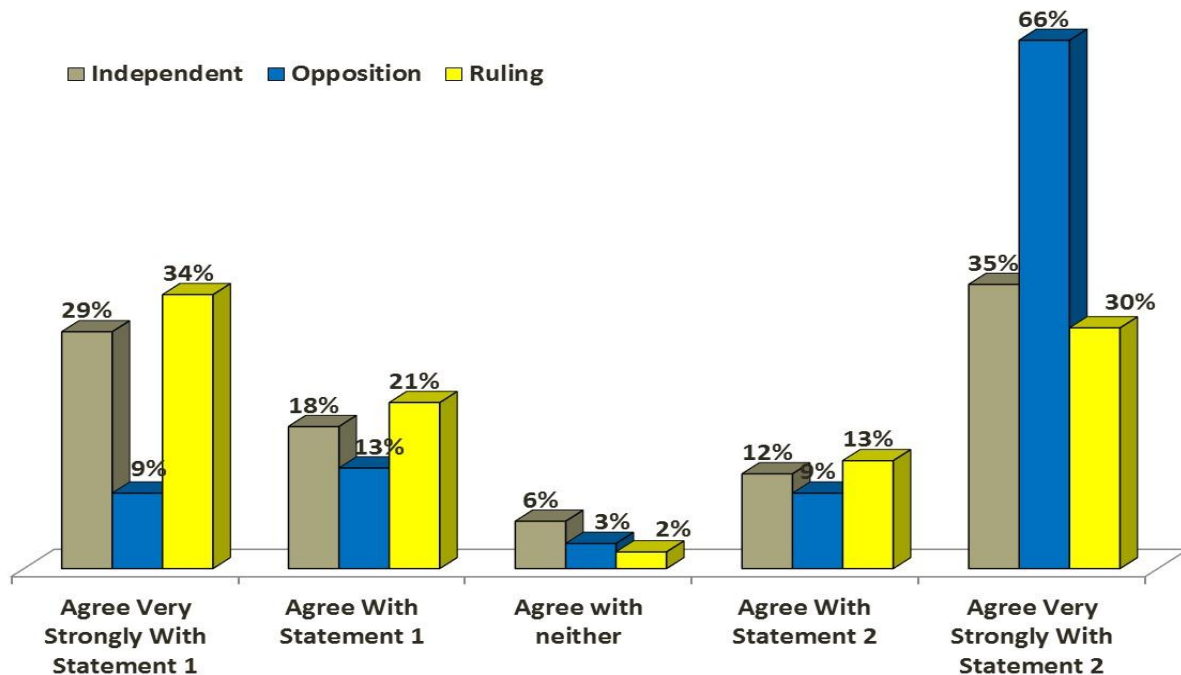


These responses show that majority of them said know it is wrong and punishable. The question is why then to they do it. The answers to this question are grounded in the levels of impunity that have been propagated through patronage and clientelism.

We then put vote buying into context and asked the following two statements:

Statement 1: Vote buying during campaigns is wrong but because a candidate’s opponents are doing it, and the voters expect it, a **candidate must do it** too.

Statement 2: Vote buying during elections is wrong and a **candidate should not do it** even if their opponents are doing it and the voters demand it.



ACFIM Survey of voters: The Vote Sellers

Having surveyed the vote buyers (Members of Parliament) we then turned attention to the vote sellers (the citizens). We have conducted studies on vote-sellers, the citizens at village level. We conducted 48 extensive Focus Group Discussions in March and April 2015, to assess the extent of vote selling and buying as well as how vote-buying and selling practices are implemented. Vote selling and buying in Uganda takes the following forms:

- 1) Direct cash to voters
- 2) Gifts in form of home items, hand tools and groceries
- 3) Donations in churches, mosques
- 4) Poverty alleviation programmes
- 5) Turnout buying
- 6) Electoral hospitality and tourism

Views of Ugandans on Election Campaigns

The focus group discussions highlight the role of campaign activists as key brokers of vote-buying and selling votes using some or a combination of the above to bring voters to the polls. Citizens think that campaign brokers are the main beneficiaries of campaign spending by keeping the biggest percentage on the resources to enrich themselves. This certainly points to potential principal-agent problems. Overall, the following observations can be made from the views shared by the vote-sellers in Uganda.

- 1) There is deep seated cynicism about the political processes in Uganda
- 2) People are currently more than happy to take the money from political candidates.
- 3) Those who give more are perceived as the ones that have actually stolen more.

Can Vote-Selling and Buying be Stopped?

Vote-buying and vote-selling obstruct the democratic process, yet they remain pervasive in many developing democracies. Vote-buying is so multifarious that it requires a mix of approaches including robust legislation, commensurate sanctions and civic interventions. Too often the approach is to simply "criminalise" it. Strategies aimed at using the law to stop politicians from offering money in exchange for votes may not work in Uganda due to the national record of poor implementation and weak enforcement of laws. This is not to discount the importance of the law, but the argument is that it may be meaningful to focus anti-vote-buying efforts on voters themselves. This may involve asking voters to make promises or sign pledges to not accept money from politicians or their agents prior to elections. Another approach encourages voters to take the money being offered, but still "vote their conscience." The [Afrobarometer Survey](#), Round 6, July 2015 reveals that 86% of respondents want to see people convicted of vote buying banned from standing in elections in the future. Civic education may for now be a more effective means to combat vote-buying.

Conclusion

Elections in Uganda have not been effective in enhancing democracy partly because of lack of effective legal and institutional framework as well as the political will to regulate the behaviour of electoral candidates. As a result, incumbents are able to win using illicit strategies like voter bribery, ballot fraud, and misuse of government resources and sometimes use of violence. Elections are yet to empower citizens to hold accountable the leaders for whom they have voted. One can argue that elections in Uganda do not provide mechanisms for accountability of government to citizens. By accepting money or gifts in exchange for their votes, citizens forfeit the power bestowed upon them by article 1 of the constitution of Uganda which vests all power in the people. In such circumstance the political class that has bought its way to elective positions usurps all the power subjecting citizens to their mercy.

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