

Vote Buying Among First-Time Voters in Ghana: A Theory of Planned Behavior Analysis in Comparative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dynamics of vote buying among first-time voters in the Effutu Municipality in the Central Region of Ghana, situating the analysis within the broader comparative literature on electoral clientelism in the Global South. Anchored in the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), it assesses how attitudes toward inducements, subjective norms mediated by trusted intermediaries, and perceived behavioral control shape the likelihood that first-time voters will accept and act upon electoral incentives. A descriptive survey design was adopted, targeting the first-time voters in the 2024 general election. Through multi-stage sampling, 98 first-time voters were drawn from two randomly selected zonal councils in the Effutu Municipality. The data was collected using a structured questionnaire and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26) to generate descriptive statistics. The findings revealed high acceptance rates of short-term material incentives, the dominance of party agents and assembly members as brokers, and the use of staged payments to ensure compliance, compromised voter autonomy. These practices normalize transactional politics, erode civic ideals, and condition electoral participation of first-time voters on material gains rather than civic duty. The researcher recommends a cognitive dissonance-based intervention by the National Commission for Civic Education.

Keywords: Vote buying, First-time voters, Theory of Planned Behavior, Electoral clientelism, brokers

INTRODUCTION

Elections remain a cornerstone of representative democracy, offering citizens the opportunity to select leaders, influence policy direction, and legitimize political authority (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018; Kennedy et al., 2018). Yet, in many emerging democracies, the credibility of electoral processes is compromised by practices such as vote buying, whereby political actors provide material or monetary incentives in exchange for electoral support (Kramon, 2018). This practice erodes the autonomy of voters, distorts competition, and undermines democratic consolidation. Vote buying is neither new nor confined to developing states. Historical accounts document its prevalence in 19th-century Britain and the United States (Aidt & Jensen, 2017), while contemporary studies reveal its persistence across Latin America (Justesen & Manzetti, 2023), Southeast Asia (Muhtadi, 2019), and sub-Saharan Africa (Gallego et al., 2023). However, the intensity, form, and social acceptance of vote buying vary according to institutional strength, socio-economic context, and political culture (Guardado & Wantchekon, 2022).

In West Africa, particularly Ghana, the practice has become a recurrent electoral feature despite constitutional safeguards and periodic electoral reforms (Baidoo et al., 2018). Ghana's competitive multiparty environment, coupled with socio-economic disparities, creates fertile ground for electoral inducements. Civil society organizations such as the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) have repeatedly documented the exchange of cash, goods, and promises of development projects in the weeks preceding elections (CDD-Ghana, 2016; Baidoo et al., 2018). While existing research has examined the general electorate's exposure to and participation in vote buying (Agyepong et al., 2021; Kramon, 2018), less is known about how this practice specifically targets first-time voters, individuals participating in the electoral process for the first time. First-time voters often lack deep

political socialization, making them more receptive to short-term benefits (Lee et al., 2012). Their decisions can influence election outcomes, particularly in tightly contested constituencies. In Ghana, where youth constitute a substantial share of the voting population, their vulnerability to transactional politics has significant implications for electoral integrity and democratic consolidation.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), developed by Ajzen (1991), is one of the most widely applied models for predicting and explaining human behavior in a variety of contexts, including political participation (Bosnjak et al., 2020). It proposes that an individual's behavior is directly influenced by their behavioral intention, which in turn is shaped by attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. Attitudes refer to an individual's overall evaluation, positive or negative of performing a given action, subjective norms capture the perceived social pressure from important others to perform or avoid the action, and perceived behavioral control reflects the individual's assessment of their ability to carry out the action, taking into account internal resources and external constraints. Conceptually, The Theory of Planned Behavior projects that, behavior is a function of intention and perceived behavioral control, with intention itself being a product of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived control. While the theory was originally applied to everyday behaviors such as health practices and consumer choices, it has increasingly been used in socio-political context to examine voter turnout (Conner, 2020), protest participation (Ulker-Demirel & Ciftci, 2020), and even electoral malpractice.

In the context of vote buying, the Theory of Planned Behavior offers a systematic way to explain why individuals, especially first-time voters might accept incentives and adjust their voting behavior. For some, accepting money, goods, or promises from a political actor is seen as morally acceptable, even expected, particularly in environments where economic hardship is prevalent and the immediate material gain is attractive (Bahrun et al., 2025). For others, it is regarded as morally wrong because it undermines democratic integrity. Beyond personal attitudes, social expectations strongly shape behavior. Family members, peers, community leaders, and party agents can exert significant influence, with their approval or disapproval affecting whether a voter accepts or rejects inducements. In places where respected local figures endorse candidates and facilitate incentive distribution, refusal can carry social costs, while in communities where vote buying is stigmatized, social norms may discourage participation (Cruz, 2019).

Even when inducements are accepted, whether a voter follows through by voting for the inducement-giving candidate depends on their perceived behavioral control. A person may feel confident in their ability to vote according to conscience if they believe the ballot is secret and unmonitored. However, perceived behavioral control can be diminished where parties employ monitoring strategies for confirmation. Such tactics increase the perceived risk of defecting from the agreement and can lock voters into compliance. Comparative analysis reinforces these patterns. In the Philippines, subjective norms embedded in community networks have been found to influence compliance more than personal attitudes (Conner, 2020), while in Indonesia, sophisticated monitoring strategies have been shown to lower perceived behavior control and increase the likelihood of voters honoring the clientelist bargain (Muhtadi, 2019).

By using the Theory of Planned Behavior, this study is able to move beyond simple description of the incentives and their distribution to explain the psychological and social mechanisms that shape voter responses. This framework integrates individual decision-making with community-level norms and broker-mediated exchanges, allows for cross-country comparison of the relative influence of attitudes, norms, and control, and offers clear policy entry points. This makes it a valuable tool for understanding not only whether first-time voters participate in such practices, but also the motivational pathways through which they arrive at their decisions, and the points at which interventions might most effectively be targeted to discourage the behavior. In embedding the case of Effutu within this behavioral model, the study contributes both to the empirical literature on Ghana's electoral politics and to a broader theoretical understanding of clientelism in competitive democracies.

This study addresses three interrelated questions:

1. What types of incentives do politicians offer to first-time voters in the Effutu Municipality to buy their votes?

2. Who are the actors facilitating vote buying among first-time voters in the Effutu Municipality?
3. What are the voting choices of first-time voters after receiving vote-buying incentives?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Elections and Vote Buying

Elections are widely regarded as the institutional bedrock of representative democracy, serving both to select leaders and to legitimize political authority (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2024; Kennedy et al., 2018). In well-established democracies, competitive elections allow for peaceful transitions of power, hold leaders accountable, and provide channels for citizen participation (Gardner & Charles, 2023). In emerging democracies, however, electoral processes often coexist with practices that undermine their democratic value, such as electoral violence, voter intimidation, and vote buying (Henry, 2023). The legitimacy of elections is determined not only by their frequency but also by their integrity. Scholars have shown that elections can exist without democracy, but democracy cannot exist without meaningful elections (Chetri, 2017). In the African context, elections played a key role in transitions from colonial rule to independence (Garcia, 2024), yet the persistence of patronage politics and clientelism has often eroded their democratic function (Harding, 2020). Ghana is frequently cited as one of Africa's electoral success stories, but recurring allegations of inducements and corruption in campaigns have raised questions about the resilience of its democratic institutions (Baidoo et al., 2018).

Vote buying, often conceptualized as a form of clientelism, involves the exchange of private material benefits for political support (Shchukin & Arbatli, 2022). While traditionally defined as the provision of money in exchange for votes, the practice encompasses a wide range of inducements, including goods, services, and promises of future benefits (Guardado & Wantchekon, 2022). In some contexts, vote buying is aimed not at changing vote choice but at ensuring turnout among loyal supporters, a strategy Nichter (2008) terms "turnout buying." The practice is widespread in electoral contexts where poverty, weak institutions, and entrenched patronage networks create fertile ground for transactional politics (Rahmatunnisa, 2022). In sub-Saharan Africa, evidence from Kenya (Kramon, 2016), Nigeria (Uwa & Emeka, 2022), and Ghana (Baidoo et al., 2018) reveals that political actors routinely deploy both monetary and non-monetary incentives to secure electoral advantage. Similarly studies indicate that, the forms and effectiveness of vote buying vary across regions. In Latin America, Stokes et al. (2013) document sophisticated monitoring systems in Argentina that reduce the risk of defection by bought voters. In Southeast Asia, Muhtadi (2019) shows that in Indonesia's competitive multi-party environment, vote buying persists because even small margins of swayed voters can be decisive. Such patterns are echoed in the Philippines, where Hicken et al. (2015) highlight the role of long-standing patron-client ties in sustaining the practice.

The effects of vote buying on electoral behavior are contested. Some studies suggest that it can significantly alter voting choices in competitive races (Vicente, 2014; Muhtadi, 2019), while others argue that many recipients accept inducements but vote according to pre-existing preferences (Gonzalez-Ocantos et al., 2012). Nonetheless, even when vote buying fails to change votes, it can affect turnout patterns, reinforce clientelist networks, and undermine citizens' perceptions of electoral fairness (Nwankwo, 2018; Guerra & Justesen, 2022). Importantly, the persistence of vote buying erodes democratic accountability. When voters are mobilized through short-term transactions rather than programmatic appeals, elected officials face weaker incentives to deliver public goods (Stokes, 2007). This dynamic can create a self-reinforcing cycle of low-quality governance and voter dependency, particularly in economically marginalized communities.

First-Time Voters as a Vulnerable Demographic

First-time voters, whether newly enfranchised young adults or previously disengaged older citizens represent a unique and often decisive segment of the electorate. Their limited electoral experience, combined with a lack of entrenched partisan loyalties, can make them more susceptible to inducements (McGregor et al., 2024). Studies from the United States (Pew Research Center, 2016) and Europe (Bhatti & Hansen, 2012) suggest that first-time voters may exhibit higher political idealism but also face logistical and informational barriers to

participation. In low- and middle-income democracies, economic vulnerability often compounds this susceptibility. In Nigeria, Olanrewaju and Coastman (2023) note that first-time voters in urban poor areas are more likely to accept vote buying due to immediate material needs. Similar findings in Indonesia (Halida et al., 2022) show that political inexperience, coupled with peer influence, shapes first-time voters' receptivity to inducements. In Ghana, anecdotal evidence from CDD-Ghana pre-election surveys suggests that political campaigns specifically target new voters with gifts, promises of educational support, and symbolic tokens.

Incentives Utilized by Politicians to Buy Votes

According to Vande (2020), understanding the incentives used by organizations to gain members' cooperation can shed light on the strategies political parties employ to maintain members' engagement. Clark and Wilson (1961), as cited in Agyepong et al. (2021), argue that the internal and external dynamics of organizations can be explained through their incentive systems. They emphasize that successful organizations must offer both tangible and intangible incentives to motivate optimal member participation. The definition of an "incentive" is broad and can be context-specific. In the realm of vote buying, an incentive is a formal mechanism used by political agents during elections to encourage certain actions or behaviors. These incentives are external measures designed by political parties or candidates to sway voter behavior (Agyepong et al., 2021; Vande, 2020). The structures used for vote buying consist of a mix of various incentives.

Banerjee (2020) conducted a systematic review indicating that money is a primary incentive used by parties and candidates to influence voters. This review highlighted that monetary incentives are key factors driving voters' decisions. Similarly, Kramon (2018), in his study on the causes and consequences of electoral clientelism in Africa confirms that, politicians frequently distribute money to voters during campaigns. A study by Baidoo et al. (2018) on vote buying in the Shama District of Ghana employed both quantitative (300 respondents via questionnaires) and qualitative (20 purposively selected interviewees) methods, supported by interviews with two party activists. Non-probability sampling techniques were used to select the district, communities, and respondents. The study found that vote-buying items ranged from money and household goods to party-branded paraphernalia, with party-branded items being the most common.

The empirical evidence provided above indicates that politicians use both monetary and non-monetary incentives to influence voters. Agyepong et al. (2021) note that these incentives often target the poor or less educated opposition supporters to deter them from voting. Vote-buying incentives typically offer short-term, private goods with a high degree of certainty, which poor voters value highly due to the low uncertainty of compensation. The two main goals of distributing these incentives are to ensure positive or participatory vote buying (encouraging party supporters and swing voters to vote) and to achieve negative turnout (reducing the opposition's voter turnout) (Agyepong et al., 2021; Vande, 2020). The poor and less educated are frequent targets of vote-buying incentives because gifts have a greater impact on them. Parties prioritize buying votes from the poor before attempting to buy votes from wealthier individuals, who would require higher compensation. This economic strategy ensures that parties maximize their votes with minimal expenditure by targeting poorer voters first. This approach allows parties to secure more votes at a lower cost among the poor compared to wealthier voters, whose support would demand higher payments. Consequently, political parties focus their resources on poorer voters to enhance their chances of winning elections.

Political Intermediaries and the Social Networks of Vote Buying

According to Cruz (2019), the social networks of voters in established democracies facilitate political collaboration and information exchange. However, these networks also create opportunities for politicians to engage in illicit activities like vote buying. Cruz's study, which examined survey data from the Philippines, found that individuals with a larger number of familial and friendly connections are more likely to be targeted for vote buying. This implies that politicians or candidates may exploit their connections with political parties to facilitate vote buying through friends and family members who have direct ties to them. Several studies, including that of Hicken et al. (2022), have shown that political brokers, often community leaders with strong local connections, play a crucial role in enabling candidates and parties to engage in vote buying. These brokers act as intermediaries, mobilizing voter support by strategically distributing targeted benefits. Their social capital and community influence are essential in sustaining this practice. Politicians frequently depend

on political brokers to facilitate vote buying, using social networks to effectively target specific voters. These brokers are instrumental in mobilizing voters and disseminating politically relevant information within their communities. Through learning dynamics and resource allocation, politicians can evaluate the mobilization capacity of brokers and adjust payments accordingly, which leads to increased voter turnout.

According to Gingerich (2020), political brokers come from various segments of society but share the ability to mobilize and influence a significant portion of the electorate. Their effectiveness depends on their local credibility, social capital, and ability to deliver votes for political candidates through personal connections and community standing. These brokers can be Local Leaders, including Community and Traditional Authorities; Social and Religious Figures, such as Religious Leaders and Heads of Social Organizations; Business and Economic Actors, like Local Business Owners and Market Leaders; Political Figures, including Party Operatives and Local Politicians; Informal Sector Actors, such as Youth Leaders and Gang Leaders; Educators and Health Workers, like Teachers and Health Workers; and Media and Communication Figures, including Local Journalists and Social Media Influencers.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research approach was adopted to facilitate the collection and analysis of standardized data from a relatively large group of respondents. Quantitative methods allow for the examination of trends and relationships across variables, and support generalization within the study population (Kuranchie, 2021). This study employed a descriptive survey design to investigate the forms, actors, and influence of vote buying among first-time voters in the Effutu Municipality. Descriptive surveys are well-suited to capturing attitudes, perceptions, and self-reported behaviors at a specific point in time (Ary et al., 2019). The design allowed for systematic documentation of the incentives offered, the intermediaries involved, and the degree of influence on voting decisions.

The target population consisted of the eligible first-time voters in Effutu Municipality who participated in the 2024 general election. First-time voters were defined as individuals casting a ballot for the first time in their lives. The accessible population comprised those residing in the municipality and available in their homes during the data collection period. A multi-stage sampling technique was used: The sampling was conducted in three stages. First, two zonal councils, Kojo-Beedu North/Low Cost Zonal Council and South-East Winneba Zonal Council were randomly selected from the municipality's four zonal councils using the lottery method. Second, households within the jurisdictions of these selected councils were visited, and individuals meeting the inclusion criteria were identified. Third, in each eligible household, the available first-time voter was selected on a census basis for participation. In total, 98 participants were involved. This sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, applying a 10% margin of error, which yielded a target of 98 respondents from the 4,659 first-time voters registered during the limited voter registration exercise on 29 May 2024.

Data was collected through a structured questionnaire, enabling the researcher to directly capture respondent perspectives on vote buying experiences during recent election. The researcher administered the questionnaires in person, explaining the study's purpose and obtaining informed consent from participants. Questionnaires were completed and collected on the same day to maximize response rates and reduce the risk of data loss. Data were coded and analyzed using SPSS (Version 26). Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were employed to summarize patterns in incentive types, actors involved, and the influence of vote buying on voting behavior. The study adhered to established research ethics protocols. Participation was voluntary, with respondents informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was preserved by excluding names and other identifying details from questionnaires. Data were stored securely and not shared with third parties.

RESULTS

This section presents the study's empirical findings, organized according to the three research questions:

1. Types of incentives offered to first-time voters.

2. Actors involved in facilitating vote buying.
3. Influence of vote buying on voting choices and compliance mechanisms.

Types of Incentives Offered to First-Time Voters

The analysis revealed that political engagement with first-time voters often involves the strategic use of incentives designed to secure electoral support. These inducements operate not only as material benefits but also as symbolic gestures that signal party presence and influence at the grassroots level. To unpack this dynamic, the findings are examined through three interrelated dimensions: the prevalence of incentive offers within the study population, the proportion of first-time voters who accept such offers, and the specific categories of incentives provided. Together, these elements offer insight into both the scale and nature of material inducement as a tool of political mobilization.

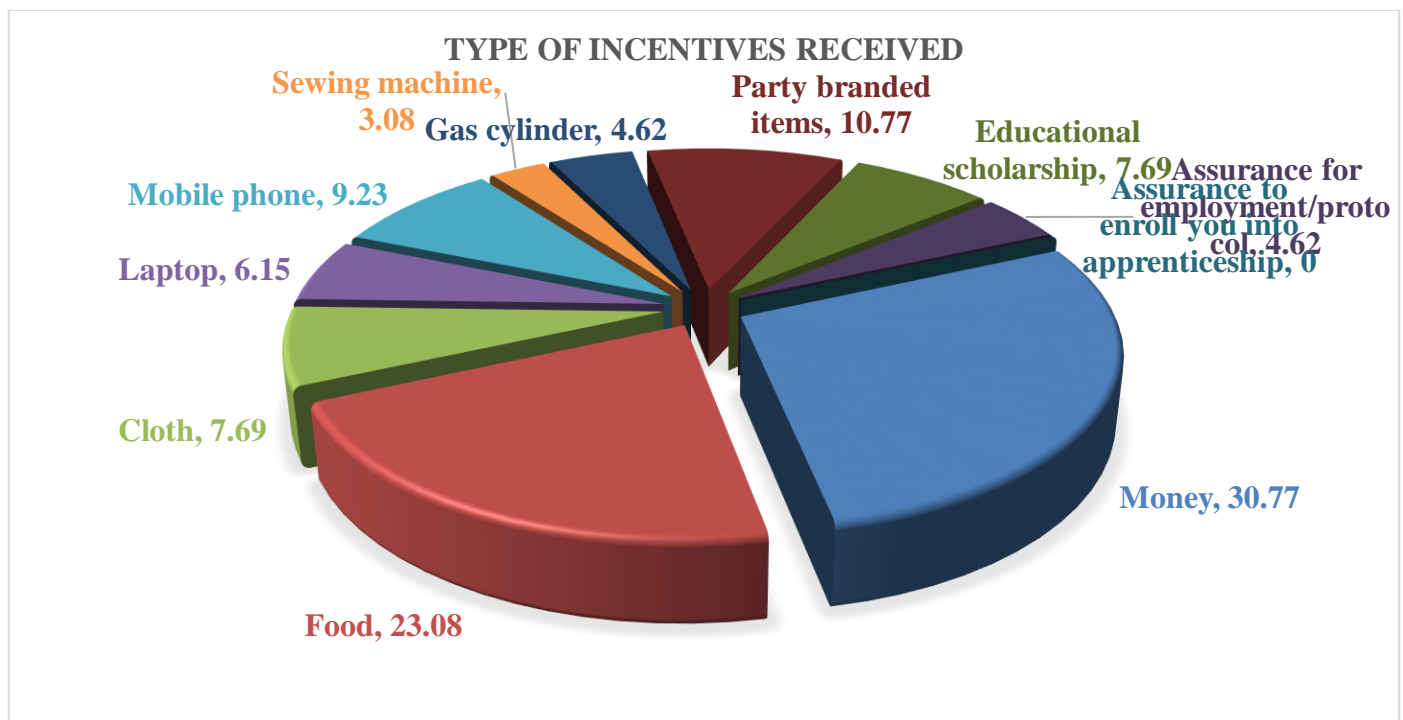


Figure 1: Incentives received

Source: Field data (2025)

Figure 1 shows that money was the most frequently offered incentive, reported by 30.77% of respondents. Within the TPB framework, monetary inducements hold strong potential to generate favorable attitudes toward acceptance because of their flexibility and immediate utility, enabling recipients to address a variety of personal needs. Food, received by 23.08% of respondents, similarly possesses a high potential to elicit positive evaluations due to its universal necessity and direct contribution to meeting basic needs. Both types of incentives are broadly relevant across socioeconomic contexts, increasing their capacity to entice recipients to accept them. Party-branded items (10.77%) and mobile phones (9.23%) combine functional benefits with symbolic value. These incentives have the potential to appeal by fostering positive attitudes toward tangible, usable goods, while also aligning with subjective norms in settings where displaying political affiliation or possessing certain consumer goods is socially valued. Educational scholarships and assurances of apprenticeship enrollment (7.69% each) target aspirations for personal advancement. Such incentives can enhance the perceived behavioral control associated with accepting them by suggesting access to opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach, thereby increasing their attractiveness.

Cloth (7.69%) and laptops (6.15%) offer practical benefits but are likely to appeal to more specific needs, which may limit their overall enticement potential. Gas cylinders and assurances of employment (4.62% each) similarly address targeted necessities and could be particularly enticing to individuals whose immediate

circumstances make these resources desirable. Sewing machines, the least common incentive at 3.08%, represent a highly specialized benefit, with limited potential to entice acceptance beyond those who can readily use them. From the perspective of theory of planned behavior, the potential of these incentives to encourage acceptance lies in how they may shape positive attitudes, align with socially endorsed behaviors, and suggest enhanced personal capability or opportunity. Their capacity to entice first-time voters depends on the degree to which they resonate with widely shared needs, social expectations, or perceived access to valued resources.

Table 1: Acceptance of incentives by respondents

	Freq	%
Accepted	80	82
Rejected	18	18
Total	98	100

Source: Field Data (2025)

In this regard, Table 1 presents the acceptance rates for these incentives, showing that a substantial majority of respondents (82%) reported accepting at least one incentive offered in connection with the election, while 18% indicated they declined such offers. This high acceptance rate suggests that, for most first-time voters in the study, the combination of favorable attitudes toward the offered incentives, alignment with prevailing social norms, and perceived capacity to accept without adverse consequences may have created strong potential for forming an intention to accept. The relatively small proportion who rejected incentives may reflect the presence of less favorable personal evaluations, stronger counter-normative pressures, or perceived constraints such as ethical objections or lack of interest in the items offered that could weaken intention. Collectively, these results reflect the significant enticement potential of electoral incentives, particularly when they address common needs, carry social legitimacy, or signal opportunities that recipients perceive as attainable and valuable.

Actors Involved in Facilitating Vote Buying

The analysis reveals that the facilitation of vote buying among first-time voters is embedded within a network of actors operating across political, social, familial, and occupational domains. These actors function not only as conduits for the distribution of inducements but also as symbolic representatives of authority, trust, and legitimacy within their respective spheres of influence. Their involvement reflects both strategic outreach by political organizations and the leveraging of existing social ties to normalize and reinforce transactional electoral practices at the grassroots level.

Table 2: Actors Involved in Facilitating Vote Buying among First-time Voters

Actor Category	Involved %(n)	Not Involved %(n)
Political actors		
Party agents	92.5 (91)	7.5 (7)
The candidate	31.2 (31)	68.8 (67)
Assembly member(s)	67.3 (66)	32.7 (32)
Community/social		
Friends	6 (6)	94(92)
Neighbors	5(5)	95(93)
Association executive	2(2)	98(96)

Family connections		
Relatives (party-linked)	9(9)	91(89)
Parents	2(2)	98(96)
Siblings	2(2)	98 (96)
Work-related		
Employers	2.5 (2)	97.5 (96)

Source: Field Data (2025)

The empirical evidence presented in Table 2 demonstrates that political actors constitute the principal agents facilitating vote buying among first-time voters. Party agents (92.5%) and assembly members (67.3%) were the most frequently identified facilitators, while direct involvement of the candidate was reported in only 31.2 % of cases. Interpreted through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior, these findings indicate the pivotal role of political operatives in shaping favorable attitudes toward the act of vote selling. By providing direct inducements. These actors normalize and legitimize the practice as an expected component of electoral engagement, embedding such transactional orientations within the political consciousness of voters at the earliest stage of their democratic participation.

Community and social actors were observed to have substantially lower rates of involvement, with friends (6%), neighbors (5%), and association executives (2%) only occasionally participating in facilitation. While their overall numerical impact appears limited, their significance lies in the reinforcement of subjective norms. Even sporadic engagement by socially proximate individuals can serve as a powerful legitimizing signal, framing vote selling as an accepted, if not endorsed, behavior within one's immediate social milieu. Family-linked actors exhibit a similar pattern of selective but normatively potent involvement. Although parents and siblings were rarely implicated (2% each), politically affiliated relatives accounted for 9% of facilitation, suggesting that family ties, when embedded in political networks act as channels through which social approval for vote selling is transmitted.

Influence of Vote Buying On Voting Choices and Compliance Mechanisms

Table 3: Voting Behavior after Receiving Incentives

	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Voted for inducement-providing party	37	38
Voted for highest bidder (multiple offers)	25	25
Voted for preferred party regardless	26	27
Did not vote (offers unsatisfactory)	10	10
Total	98	100

Source: Field Data (2025)

The results demonstrate that electoral incentives influenced voting decisions among first-time voters in varied ways. As shown in Table 3, the largest share of respondents (38%, n = 37) reported voting for the party or candidate that provided them with the incentive. A further 25.0% (n = 25) stated that they voted for the highest bidder when multiple offers were presented, reflecting the competitive nature of inducement-based mobilization. Meanwhile, 27.0% (n = 26) maintained allegiance to their preferred party irrespective of incentives, and 10.0% (n = 10) abstained from voting altogether, citing dissatisfaction with the offers available. Interpreted through the lens of the Theory of Planned Behavior, these outcomes suggest that inducements can act as a strong attitudinal cue for some voters, shaping intentions and ultimately influencing behavior. However, the results also highlight the persistence of value-driven decision-making, as seen in respondents who either upheld pre-existing party loyalties or rejected participation entirely. Such variation underscores that

inducement strategies, while effective for a substantial proportion of first-time voters, operate alongside other determinants such as entrenched political preferences, normative pressures, and perceived autonomy that facilitate the extent to which material benefits translate into electoral support.

Compliance Mechanisms in Vote Buying

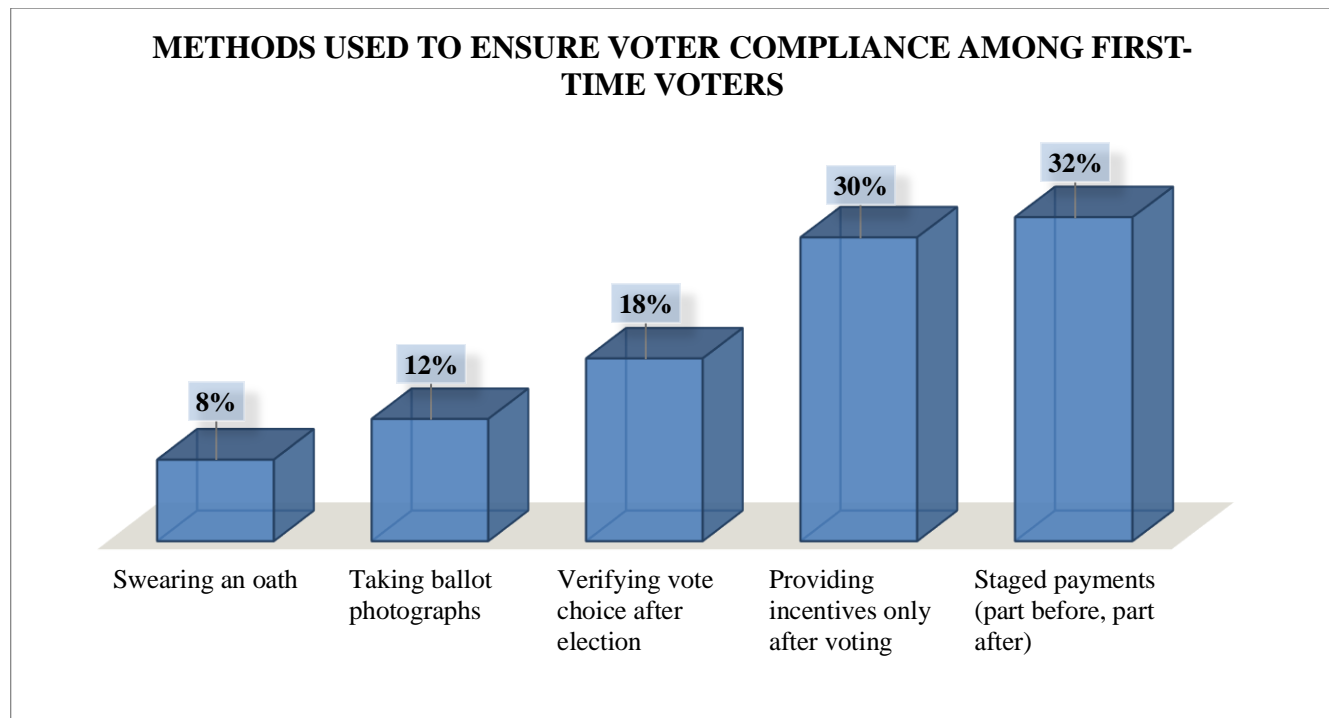


Figure 2: Compliance mechanisms

Source: Field data (2025)

Figure 2 outlines the strategies employed by political actors to secure compliance from first-time voters who had received electoral inducements. The most frequently reported mechanism was staged payments, where a portion of the incentive was provided before the election and the remainder after voting had occurred (32%). Closely following this was the practice of providing incentives only after voting (30%), a method designed to ensure that the promised reward was conditional on demonstrated participation. Other approaches included verifying vote choice after the election (18%), which relied on post-electoral confirmation through community networks or intermediaries, and the use of ballot photographs (12%) to provide proof of compliance. The least common method reported was swearing an oath (8%), which sought to bind the voter's decision through traditional or religious sanctions.

These findings illustrate that compliance in vote buying is rarely left to trust alone; instead, it is reinforced through a variety of mechanisms that combine transactional control with social enforcement. From the perspective of the Theory of Planned Behavior, such mechanisms directly target perceived behavioral control, constraining the range of choices available to the voter by increasing the perceived costs of non-compliance. By embedding incentives within conditional frameworks, whether through delayed payment, staged disbursement, or surveillance, political actors strengthen the likelihood that inducements translate into actual votes, thereby maximizing the efficacy of material exchanges in electoral mobilization.

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study provides insights into how vote buying operates among first-time voters, revealing substantial interaction of incentives, social influence, and compliance mechanisms that can be meaningfully understood through the theory of Planned Behavior. The high acceptance rate of inducements indicates a clear predisposition to prioritize immediate material benefits over abstract civic considerations. For many first-time voters, the anticipated advantages of accepting money, food, or other tangible resources

outweighed concerns about electoral integrity, aligning with Ajzen's (2020) assertion that favorable attitudes toward a behavior substantially increase the likelihood of its occurrence. Similar patterns have been documented in Kenya (Guerra & Justesen, 2022; Kramon, 2016) and the Philippines (Cruz, 2019; Hicken et al., 2015), where inducement acceptance is often framed as "taking what is owed." Notably, the few first-time voters who reported voting for their preferred party regardless of inducements illustrate that acceptance was rarely perceived as incompatible with voter autonomy, suggesting that many believed they could accept incentives while still exercising independent choice at the ballot box. This perception reflects a heightened sense of perceived behavioral control, in which voters overestimate their ability to remain unaffected by inducements, thereby increasing the intention to accept them

The structure of incentive distribution in the Effutu municipality reinforces this attitudinal predisposition through dense social networks and trusted intermediaries. Party agents and assembly members, identified by majority of the respondents as facilitators emerged as central actors in linking candidates to voters. Their involvement does more than enable the transfer of goods, it lends political transactions a veneer of legitimacy by embedding them within the fabric of community relationships. In the context of the theory of planned behavior, such intermediaries amplify subjective norms, framing inducement acceptance not as an act of personal opportunism but as a socially acceptable, sometimes expected response to community-endorsed behavior. This broker-driven system is not unique to Ghana, with parallels in Latin America (Stokes et al., 2013), Indonesia (Muhtadi, 2019), and Nigeria (Nwagw et al., 2022), revealing how intermediaries function simultaneously as distributors and moral guarantors, assuring both sides of the transaction's reliability.

The central role of party agents and assembly members in facilitating vote buying in Effutu can be better understood through Ghana's political and institutional framework. Party agents are officially deployed by political parties to represent their interests at polling stations, giving them access to voter rolls, campaign resources, and election-day logistics. This insider position allows them to identify and target voters who are strategically important, including swing voters and first-time registrants. Assembly members, though elected as ostensibly non-partisan representatives in the local government system, often maintain strong party affiliations and serve as political mobilizers in their electoral areas. Their influence stems from their visibility in community development activities and their authority to convene local gatherings, which makes them ideal intermediaries for distributing inducements.

Control over voter behavior is further reinforced through strategic compliance mechanisms that reduce the perceived autonomy of recipients. Staged payments and post-vote disbursements were the most common, ensuring that full benefits were contingent upon inferred compliance. While Ghana's secret ballot technically safeguards independent choice, such arrangements simulate accountability, creating a psychological perception that deviation from the agreed behavior could be detected and penalized. Similar enforcement strategies have been documented in Argentina's punteros system (Stokes et al., 2013) and in the Philippines through proxy vote verification (Hicken et al., 2015). In the Effutu municipality, however, the combination of partial pre-vote rewards with post-vote completion appears particularly effective among electorally inexperienced voters, who may lack familiarity with the protective features of the electoral process and overestimate the risks of non-compliance.

The persistence and effectiveness of compliance mechanisms in Ghana point to broader institutional weaknesses in electoral governance. While the Electoral Commission enforces rules that guarantee ballot secrecy, the absence of strict monitoring of campaign activities at the community level allows brokers to credibly signal that they can verify voting behavior. In practice, this credibility is reinforced by the dense social networks in which brokers operate and by the lack of sanctions for post-election inducement distribution. Moreover, the decentralized nature of Ghanaian politics gives local brokers considerable autonomy in tailoring enforcement tactics to their communities, making staged payments and ballot-photo requests both feasible and believable. For first-time voters, especially those with limited civic education, the boundary between legitimate electoral mobilization and illicit vote-buying enforcement is blurred, making these compliance strategies a potent instrument of political control.

From a theoretical standpoint, the findings of the study reinforce the application of the theory of planned behavior in explaining political clientelism. They suggest that in high-poverty environments, positive attitudes

toward accepting inducements can readily override normative resistance, which subjective norms gain extraordinary influence when intermediaries straddle both political and community authority structures, and that perceived behavioral control is not fixed but can be intentionally manipulated by the very actors seeking to influence voting behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

From the findings, it can be concluded that the formative electoral experiences of young Ghanaians in the Effutu municipality are increasingly mediated through transactional exchanges rather than grounded in civic ideals, thereby undermining the ethical foundations of political participation. Staged payments and post-vote rewards subtly diminish voter autonomy, transforming what should be a free democratic choice into a managed transaction. Beyond distorting electoral integrity, vote buying operates as a social mechanism that breeds corruption among these young voters, instilling a mindset where political engagement is primarily a means to secure personal gain rather than to uphold democratic responsibility. By premising their motivation to vote on material benefits instead of civic duty, the practice gradually erodes their sense of political accountability and the moral obligation to act in the collective interest. This normalization of clientelist politics among politically inexperienced voters risks entrenching a generation whose political choices are habitually conditioned by material inducements. Such conditioning perpetuates a corrupt political culture in which leaders are valued for their capacity to distribute resources rather than for their competence, vision, or commitment to public service. As a social problem, vote buying among first-time voters not only distorts electoral outcomes but also weakens institutional trust, undermines fairness, and entrenches governance systems where accountability is owed to brokers and benefactors rather than the electorate at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings and conclusions, it is evident that first-time voters in the Effutu municipality struggle to navigate the ethical dilemmas inherent in vote buying, often rationalizing the practice through immediate material gain rather than long-term civic responsibility. To address this, a cognitive dissonance-based intervention is recommended, as it provides a theoretically grounded means of reshaping attitudes by confronting the internal conflict between self-interest and democratic integrity. Thus, the National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) should intensify its messaging by framing vote buying not only as morally unacceptable but also as economically and politically self-defeating, perpetuating cycles of poor governance, economic stagnation, and weakened accountability. This reframing should be embedded within sustained partnerships between the NCCE, the University of Education, Winneba, vocational and technical institutes, and youth associations, aimed at integrating electoral ethics into youth engagement programs through experiential learning, civic simulations, and youth-led electoral monitoring. Such a coordinated approach would target the root attitudinal drivers of vote buying, cultivating a generation whose electoral participation is anchored in responsibility, accountability, and commitment to the collective good rather than in transactional gain.

Beyond voter education, addressing vote buying also requires institutional reforms. Strengthening the Electoral Commission's authority to monitor campaign spending and enforcing stricter penalties on party agents or assembly members who act as brokers would reduce the credibility of inducements. Likewise, demonstrating ballot secrecy more effectively at the community level could weaken the perception that brokers can enforce compliance. Together, these measures complement civic education by tackling the structural incentives that make vote buying possible.

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