

# When Democracy Costs Too Much: Vote Buying, Clientelism, and the Indonesian Governance Paradox

Gunawan Undang<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Universitas Pembinaan Masyarakat Indonesia, Medan, Indonesia

\*Email: [gunawanundang@upmi.ac.id](mailto:gunawanundang@upmi.ac.id)

**Abstract.** This article investigates the paradox of Indonesian democracy, namely the intensification of vote buying in direct elections despite gradual improvements in macro governance indicators such as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). Employing a scoping review and cross-country comparison (United States, Nigeria, Ghana, the Philippines, and Thailand), the study integrates three theoretical lenses: Rational Choice Theory, Clientelism, and the Market for Loyalties. Findings reveal that high political costs, weak party financing, and decentralized patronage networks encourage candidates to adopt vote buying as a rational electoral strategy. Simultaneously, macro-level institutional reforms have improved Indonesia's international corruption perception scores. This paradox highlights a persistent gap between procedural and substantive democracy. The article proposes an integrative model and policy implications concerning political finance reform, electoral oversight, voter education, and future research agendas on digital-era vote buying.

**Keywords:** Vote buying; Indonesian democracy; Electoral corruption; CPI; Clientelism; Electoral reform

## INTRODUCTION

Modern democracy is often regarded as the political system most capable of guaranteeing citizen participation, accountability, and legitimate governance. Yet, across democratic regimes, a persistent paradox emerges: the more open and procedural electoral mechanisms become, the greater the opportunities for transactional practices that undermine substantive democracy. This phenomenon is widely documented in the literature on vote buying and money politics, where citizens' votes are commodified and exchanged. Indonesia, the world's third-largest democracy after India and the United States, provides one of the most striking cases of this paradox.

Since the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, Indonesia entered a new democratic phase by adopting direct elections (*one man, one vote*) for both presidential and local executive positions. This reform was expected to sever money politics from elite-controlled parliamentary processes (via the People's Consultative Assembly/MPR) and to strengthen legitimacy based on citizen participation. However, more than two decades later, a paradoxical reality has emerged: Indonesia consistently organizes elections, achieves high levels of voter turnout, and maintains elite circulation—yet, at the same time, vote buying has become institutionalized as a core electoral strategy.

Historically, Indonesia's electoral system has undergone three major phases. During the Old Order (1945–1966), the 1955 parliamentary election—often considered the most democratic in Indonesian history—was held, though presidents were not directly elected; instead, the MPR selected the head of state through deliberation. Under the New Order (1966–1998), elections were regularly held but consistently dominated by Golkar, with the president again chosen by the MPR. Political money operated primarily in elite spaces through co-optation, rent distribution, and bureaucratic control. When Transparency International first introduced the CPI in 1995, Indonesia scored only 1.94/10 ( $\approx 19/100$  in the revised scale), one of the lowest worldwide, reflecting high corruption. In the Reform Era (1998–

present), direct presidential elections were introduced in 2004 and direct local elections in 2005, expanding citizen participation but simultaneously escalating political costs, as candidates had to directly mobilize mass voter support.

Electoral contestation in Indonesia is among the most expensive globally. The Cost of Politics Indonesia 2024 report revealed that more than 79% of campaign expenses were financed personally by candidates, while party contributions remained minimal. This imbalance compels candidates to rely on vote buying as the most effective mobilization strategy. Muhtadi (2019) estimates that between 25–33% of voters in the 2014 elections were exposed to vote buying, with an electoral impact of up to 10 percentage points. In highly competitive districts, this margin often determined outcomes. Consequently, vote buying is no longer a marginal or illicit practice but a rational electoral calculus embraced by candidates and pragmatically accepted by segments of the electorate.

An intriguing paradox arises: despite the pervasiveness of vote buying, Indonesia's CPI trend has shown gradual improvement since the Reform Era, rising from 19/100 in 1995 to 37/100 in 2024. Although still low globally, the improvement suggests better macro-level governance and international perceptions of corruption. This contradiction encapsulates the paradox of Indonesian democracy: direct elections have fostered mass participation and improved global governance indicators, yet simultaneously entrenched "democratic corruption" at the micro-electoral level through vote buying and patronage.

Indonesia's experience is not isolated. Nigeria suffers systemic vote trading involving voters, brokers, and candidates, undermining democratic consolidation. Ghana treats vote selling as pragmatic reciprocal contracts, weakening accountability. The United States, though less affected by literal vote buying, struggles with the distortive influence of campaign finance, super PACs, and "cash-for-donations," which legally embed money in politics. These comparisons highlight Indonesia's unique paradox: procedural democracy has strengthened while substantive democracy remains hollowed out by entrenched clientelism.

Most studies of vote buying in Indonesia focus on classical determinants such as poverty, patronage, weak law enforcement, and low political literacy. Yet, few have explicitly linked systemic transformations in electoral design (indirect → direct elections) with CPI/WGI trends. Bridging these two dimensions is critical to comprehensively explaining Indonesia's democratic paradox. Furthermore, cross-national comparisons seldom place Indonesia alongside African and Western cases (Nigeria, Ghana, US), focusing instead on Southeast Asia. This article addresses this methodological and theoretical gap.

This article aims to analyze Indonesia's electoral system transformation across eras and its implications for vote buying, explain the paradox of Indonesian democracy by integrating theory with CPI/WGI data, compare Indonesia with Nigeria, Ghana, and the United States to underline its uniqueness, and propose policy implications for political finance reform and electoral oversight. Thus, this study contributes not only to the literature on vote buying and electoral democracy but also to broader debates on how procedural democratization can coexist with entrenched electoral corruption.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Study Design and Rationale**

This study adopts a mixed-method design combining a scoping review and comparative analysis. This approach aligns with tier-1 publication standards as it allows the researcher to:

1. Map determinants of vote buying across eras and countries (Indonesia, Nigeria, Ghana, United States, Philippines, and Thailand).
2. Construct a conceptual framework linking theory (Rational Choice, Clientelism, Market for Loyalties) with empirical data (CPI/WGI trends, campaign costs, and patterns of vote buying).
3. Address methodological gaps in prior research that rarely connected macro-level governance indicators (CPI, WGI) with micro-level electoral practices.

### **Data Collection Strategy**

The study draws upon two main categories of data:

Primary secondary sources (document-based):

- Peer-reviewed journal articles (2018–2025) on Indonesia (Regif & Pribadi, 2024; Muhtadi, 2019), Nigeria (Nwakpu et al., 2024; Ajayi, 2025), Ghana (Gyasi & Torsu, 2024), and the US (Martin, 2025; Saiegh, 2024).
- Official documents and global statistics: *Corruption Perceptions Index* (Transparency International, 1995–2024), *Worldwide Governance Indicators* (World Bank, 1996–2023), and Indonesian reports from Bawaslu, KPU, and the *Cost of Politics Indonesia 2024*.

Supporting methodological sources:

- Guidelines for *scoping review* (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010).
- Standards for mixed-method reporting (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013).
- Best practices in comparative governance studies (Hantrais, 2009; Lijphart, 2012).

Unit of Analysis and Periodization

The unit of analysis is the Indonesian electoral system across eras:

1. Old Order (1945–1966) → indirect elections via deliberation.
2. New Order (1966–1998) → indirect, centralized elections dominated by Golkar.
3. Reform Era (1998–present) → direct democracy, *one man, one vote*.

For comparative purposes, Nigeria, Ghana, and the United States are examined as representative cases of developing, hybrid, and advanced democracies, while the Philippines and Thailand serve as regional Southeast Asian comparators.

Analytical Techniques

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. Literature Mapping → identifying determinants, modalities, and impacts of vote buying.
2. Comparative Analysis → situating Indonesia among advanced, developing, and hybrid democracies.
3. Theoretical–Empirical Synthesis → testing the paradox: direct democracy increases costs and vote buying, yet CPI shows macro-level improvements.

Validity and Reliability

- Triangulation combines quantitative CPI/WGI data with qualitative case studies.
- Inclusion criteria: journal articles with DOI, published 2018–2025, plus official global/national documents.
- Exclusion criteria: non-scholarly sources such as news reports and opinion pieces without academic referencing.

Limitations

- CPI data are unavailable for the Old Order (1945–1966); historical reconstruction relies on qualitative sources.
- Comparative cases (Nigeria, Ghana, US, Philippines, Thailand) differ in institutional and socio-economic contexts, limiting generalizability. The analysis is oriented toward pattern recognition rather than universal generalization.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Global Practices and Comparative Analysis

United States: Money in Politics

In advanced democracies such as the United States, literal vote buying is rarely found due to strong law enforcement and a political culture that stigmatizes direct bribery. Nevertheless, money remains the dominant source of democratic distortion. The 2024 federal elections were projected to cost over USD 16 billion, much of it spent on political advertising. This demonstrates that even in consolidated democracies, electoral competition is profoundly shaped by

financial power. Legally, these distortions are institutionalized. *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) ruled that restrictions on candidates' personal expenditures violated free speech, while *Citizens United v. FEC* (2010) expanded the rights of corporations and unions to fund political campaigns without limits. Consequently, *super PACs* have become dominant actors. According to *OpenSecrets*, more than USD 3 billion was funneled through super PACs during the 2020 elections, with even higher levels anticipated in 2024. Martin (2025) identified the emergence of "cash-for-donations," where small vouchers or gift cards were offered to encourage small-scale donations. Though legal, the practice resembles vote buying in substance: money incentivizes participation. Saama (2025) highlighted biases in prediction markets, which theoretically should neutralize partisanship but in practice reinforced political polarization. Saiegh (2024) further demonstrated how financial markets responded to Donald Trump's electoral prospects, underscoring the tight coupling between economics and politics. Thus, vote buying in the US takes the form of campaign finance and legalized financial dominance, rather than direct exchanges at polling stations. The distortion of democracy persists—through legal channels.

### **Nigeria: Vote Trading and Fragile Democracy**

Nigeria presents perhaps the clearest example of systemic vote buying in a developing democracy. Since its democratic transition in 1999, virtually every election has been marred by financial transactions. Musa et al. (2024) describe a vote trading chain: voters as sellers, local brokers as retailers, party elites as wholesalers, and candidates as ultimate buyers. Incentives include cash, food, and promises of community projects. Nwakpu et al. (2024) argue that vote buying undermines democratic consolidation, as impoverished voters act pragmatically while weak sanctions render the practice cost-free. Ajayi (2025) labeled the phenomenon institutionalized corruption. The 2023 elections introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), designed to reduce fraud. However, observers reported widespread vote buying at polling units, with payments of 2,000–5,000 naira per vote. Enforcement remained negligible, so offenders rarely faced penalties. The failure of BVAS to address entrenched patronage illustrates the resilience of informal practices. Omu-Ngebo et al. (2024) found that radio-based voter education modestly reduced vote selling, though impacts were limited. Structural challenges—poverty, inequality, weak institutions—continue to render Nigerian democracy procedurally active but substantively hollow.

### **Ghana: Vote Selling as a Social Contract**

Ghana, often praised for electoral stability in West Africa, is nonetheless plagued by widespread vote selling. Gyasi and Torsu (2024) describe it as a short-term social contract between candidates and voters, where money or goods are exchanged for electoral support. This practice emerges from two sources: broken campaign promises that foster public cynicism, and a view of elections as opportunities to secure a "national share." Survey data from Ghana show that most voters accept money or goods due to economic necessity, while others cite distrust in campaign pledges. Only a minority reject such offers on normative grounds. Thus, vote selling is embedded in the interaction between poverty and public distrust of elites. The consequence is the erosion of accountability. Elections remain peaceful and regular, but substantive democracy declines as voters prioritize immediate gains over long-term evaluation of governance. Ghana illustrates how procedural stability does not guarantee substantive quality.

### **Indonesia: The Paradox of Electoral Democracy**

Indonesia presents a unique case combining elements of both advanced and developing democracies. As in Nigeria and Ghana, vote buying is pervasive. Muhtadi (2019) estimated that 25–33% of voters were exposed to vote buying during the 2014 elections, with electoral impacts of up to ten percentage points. The *Cost of Politics Indonesia 2024* report showed that 79% of campaign expenditures were covered personally by candidates, making vote buying the most practical instrument. Yet, unlike Nigeria and Ghana, Indonesia's CPI scores improved, rising from 19/100 (1995) to 37/100 (2024). This reflects macro-level institutional reforms, such as strengthening the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and bureaucratic governance, even as electoral corruption persists at the grassroots. The situation is compounded by decentralization. Since the introduction of direct local elections in 2005, vote buying has spread from legislative and presidential contests to regional elections. Local candidates, facing huge costs, rely on patronage networks and community brokers to distribute cash or goods. Decentralization multiplied patronage nodes, institutionalizing vote buying at nearly all levels. Rasyad and Harsono (2025) further highlight symbolic dimensions: candidates "sell" identities (religious, nationalist, developmental) within the market for loyalties, binding voters through narratives as well as material incentives. Thus, Indonesia embodies a paradox: procedural democracy advances—direct elections, high turnout, improved CPI—while substantive democracy remains corrupted by high costs, weak parties, and entrenched clientelism.

### **Theoretical Framework Integration**

## Rational Choice Theory: Incentives, Risks, and Strategic Calculations

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) conceptualizes candidates, parties, brokers, and voters as actors seeking to maximize net benefits while minimizing risks. In post-Reform Indonesia—where electoral thresholds require broad mobilization but party financing is limited—vote buying emerges as an instrumentally "rational" strategy. Regif and Pribadi (2024) found that voters often regard money or material goods as more certain benefits than campaign promises that are uncertain and delayed. For candidates, weak party support and underdeveloped programmatic campaign infrastructures lead them to adopt strategies that can yield measurable and immediate electoral outcomes. Indonesian studies also show that candidates personally cover more than 79% of campaign expenditures, creating strong incentives to reduce electoral uncertainty by increasing turnout among core supporters and shifting marginal voters.

## Clientelism & Patron–Client Networks: The Social Infrastructure of Money Politics

Beyond individual calculations, vote buying is sustained by recurring social relations—*clientelism*. Patron–client networks link candidates/parties (patrons) with voters (clients) through intermediaries (brokers, local leaders, village heads, organizational networks). Muhtadi (2019) shows how these intermediaries function as "distribution machines," identifying target voters, managing beneficiary lists, and ensuring "commitment" prior to polling day. In Indonesia, clientelism flourishes in the decentralized context of the Reform Era, which multiplies local power centers and opens new nodes for patronage. Hadiz (2010) demonstrates how post-authoritarian oligarchs repurposed local institutions to reproduce power through politico-business networks.

## Market for Loyalties: Identities as Electoral Commodities

The Market for Loyalties perspective conceptualizes the public sphere as a marketplace where political actors "sell" identities, narratives, and symbols to "buy" voter loyalty. In the 2024 Indonesian presidential race, Rasyad and Harsono (2025) observed how candidates packaged identities (religiosity, continuity of development, nationalism) and disseminated them through media and debates. This framework helps explain qualitative variations in money politics. On one hand, direct material transfers (cash, rice, groceries) target short-term preferences and turnout. On the other, symbolic transactions cultivate longer-term loyalties by strengthening identity ties, often reinforced through intensive political communication.

## Integrative Model and Policy Implications

From the comparative analysis, an integrative model can be constructed to explain how vote buying operates across contexts. This model encompasses four interrelated stages:

1. Socio-Economic Determinants - Poverty and high campaign costs are primary triggers.
2. Political Infrastructure and Networks - Vote buying requires organizational conduits.
3. Operational Modalities - Material transactions, symbolic transactions, and hybrid forms.
4. Democratic Consequences - Distorted representation, fragile democracy, weak accountability, and procedural–substantive paradox.

## Policy Implications

### Reforming Political Finance

Indonesia needs to redesign its political finance system:

- Expand public financing for parties and candidates meeting electoral thresholds.
- Enforce stricter transparency rules and external auditing of campaign funds.
- Develop regulated crowdfunding mechanisms that avoid becoming channels for covert donations.

### Strengthening Oversight Institutions

The Election Supervisory Board (Bawaslu) primarily acts against visible vote buying, while transactions mediated by brokers often remain hidden. Stronger institutions are needed:

- Technology-based monitoring, including community digital reporting systems.
- Inter-agency coordination, linking Bawaslu with the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK).

- Expanded authority for the KPK to address electoral corruption.

#### Voter Education and Media Role

Indonesia needs to strengthen:

- Community-based voter education, beyond national advertising.
- Partnerships with civil society organizations to foster long-term voter awareness.
- Collaboration with local media to disseminate anti-money politics narratives.

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the paradox of Indonesian democracy: the coexistence of widespread vote buying in direct elections with gradual improvements in macro-level governance indicators such as the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). While procedural democracy has deepened since the Reform Era—through direct presidential and local elections, higher participation, and institutional reforms—substantive democracy has remained compromised by entrenched clientelism, escalating political costs, and weak party financing. Comparative analysis reinforces this paradox. In the **United States**, legalized campaign finance distorts representation through super PACs and cash-for-donations. **Nigeria** exemplifies systemic vote trading, where poverty and weak enforcement institutionalize corruption. **Ghana** reveals vote selling as a pragmatic social contract, eroding accountability despite stable procedures. By contrast, **Indonesia** demonstrates the anomaly of rising CPI scores amid persistent vote buying—an electoral paradox of progress and decay. Policy implications are clear. Without reforming political finance, strengthening electoral oversight, investing in voter education, and regulating participation, Indonesia risks remaining a **procedurally democratic but substantively corrupt polity**. The paradox warns that democracy does not automatically improve through direct elections. Rather, democratization without institutional safeguards may institutionalize new forms of corruption. Ultimately, Indonesia offers more than a case study; it represents a **laboratory of paradoxes** for democratization studies. The lesson is sobering but vital: **democracy can cost too much**—financially, institutionally, and normatively—unless reforms are undertaken to align procedures with substance.

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