Why Do Many Nigerians Vote Against Their Own Interests?

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It is no longer news that the Nigerian political class does not care about Nigerians. For one, it became one of the world's poverty capitals while its politicians remain among the richest in the world. In Nigeria, rigging is routinized and normalized as part of the political process. With the 2027 Nigerian elections approaching, it is important—now more than ever, especially in a democracy—to ask: Why do Nigerians vote against their own interests? While there has been a span of backlash against many Nigerians (mostly poor people) selling their vote on election day for as low as 5,000 naira, and sometimes accepting a bag of rice or Semovita from politicians who clearly do not have their best interests at heart during campaigns, it is important to investigate why this is the case, since voting for this set of politicians has proven to be interest-undermining for a lot of Nigerians.

In 2022, while campaigning, President Tinubu stated that he would reduce Nigerians' purchasing power and expand the tax net. In other words, he would make Nigerians poorer and tax them more. And he won the 2023 election, with approximately 37% of the total vote going to him. Tinubu has fulfilled this promise: Nigeria is one of the poorest countries in the world; Nigerians pay more taxes than pre-2023 while enjoying no social benefits from the state; Nigeria is experiencing one of the worst periods of insecurity in its history; and social institutions are as weak as ever.

Two leading answers explain why many Nigerians vote against their own interests. First, some argue that Nigerians who vote against their interests are poor, and that this is what drives them to vote for a politician who is not in their interest. But such an argument fails. If poverty is a driver for why people vote for one politician rather than the other, then poor people would vote for whoever would

make their lives better, since poverty is antithetical to leading a better life.

Second, the pull of the argument from illiteracy is strong: people vote against their own interests because they are illiterate and lack the educational tools to make informed decisions. This, too, does not effectively answer the question. Well-educated people vote, protest, and campaign against their own interests all the time. Consider Dr. Kayode Fayemi, a former state governor and former Minister of Solid Minerals Development. Fayemi earned his doctoral degree in war studies from King's College London, a well-ranked University by Times Higher Education. While giving a keynote speech in 2023 at the Abuja School of Social and Political Thought, Fayemi, with a gleeful smile that reminds one of an evil character in a Disney movie, stated that the 2012 protest that he and members of his party (APC) organized against the fuel subsidy removal by former President Goodluck Jonathan was mere *politrick*. They knew, he confessed, that the removal was inevitable and vital to Nigeria's economic development. Surely, Fayemi is well-educated, but he also campaigned, protested, and voted against his interest and that of other members of the country.

So, why do Nigerians vote against their own interest? I have stated that the two common or popular ways—that many Nigerians are poor andlack adequate education—of responding to the question we're grappling with here fail. I want to suggest now that the accurate response to that question is that a lot of Nigerians are in the grip of ideological beliefs that distort rationality about what's in their best interests. According to Harvard Philosopher Tommie Shelby, ideological beliefs are defined as those set of "loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations." Thus, while under the grip of ideology, people support beliefs, policies, or systems that ultimately do not benefit them.

In 2023, a man in his mid-60s who started trending on Twitter (now X) for a video of him posted on the platform. In the video, the man was in a community meeting, and he can be seen defending regionalism, a specific sort of extreme right-wing nationalism that upholds preference for one's ethnicity rather than the whole nation-state. The man argued that because of ethnic bonds, it is ungracious for a Yoruba person to vote for a non-Yoruba person when there is a Yoruba person on the ballot paper. By extension, he defended the view that the constitutive reason to vote for Tinubu—who would later win the election—is because he is a Yoruba man.

As I have stated elsewhere, Tinubu has a somewhat squeamish background: his various links with drug cartels in the United States in the late 90s and early 2000s have been reported by both Nigeria and international Media; his educational history is foggy; and his date of birth remains a debate, especially in Nigerian Twitter political wars. His campaign slogan is "Emi lo kan"—a slogan that bullies in Nigeria use that roughly translates to *I am the next person even though it's not a right I am entitled to.* He has maintained a nepotistic attitude toward governing Lagos since his time as state governor in 1999. He failed to debate any of the other presidential candidates, thereby leaving Nigerians in the dark about what his plans for the country are. Yet, he got 37% of the total vote and won the national election.

This is not an isolated case. Ideological beliefs run rampant in Nigeria. On June 18, 2026, in Ekiti State, Biodun Oyebanji was re-elected as the state's governor. During and shortly after the election, various news reports described instances of vote buying—i.e., politicians pay voters to vote for them, not based on their merit, but on the less-than-$20 fee they offer on election day. This tactic has proven effective for winning elections, and many voters do take the money in exchange for their vote. Definitely, the person who took less than $20 to vote for a politician who has proven to be uninterested in making the state better voted against their interests. A quick search of Ekiti State on Instagram fills you with images and videos that break your heart: bad roads, school buildings without a roof, communities without electricity, among many others.

This ideological grip is perhaps made more lucid by the fact that the Alumni President of Ekiti State University, Seyi Idowu, used the money of the University's Alumni Association to purchase the 50 million naira All Progressives Congress (APC) Governorship Expression of Interest and Nomination forms for Governor Biodun Oyebanji as "part of their support for the Governor's re-election in the June 2026 governorship election in the state." The form was bought using the slogan "One of us is better than none of us"—a slogan that is used to indicate that the Governor is a graduate of the institution. Clearly, you don't have to study constitutional law to know that what the Alumni President did is illegal and a slippery slope. Yet, no one protested this corrupt practice, no one sued Seyi Idowu, and the Governor was re-elected.

Again, this is a rampant phenomenon in Nigeria. In Oyo State, residents supported a politician after receiving 1kg of Semovita. In Jigawa State, a Local Government Chairman "empowered" his constituent members by distributing a single Roofing Sheet to each participating individual. So, the grip of ideology is real. But what explains it, and why can't people just break away from it?

Princeton philosopher Lidal Dror offers* explanations for why it is not easy to break away from the grip of ideology, i.e., why ideological beliefs are forceful and hard to break away from. But I will only focus on two here: interest-motivated psychology and ideological dominance.

Interest-motivated psychology describes how people can endure suffering and form ideological beliefs that gratify it because such beliefs console them. Consider the university Alumni president above who supported, canvassed, and voted for a politician on the basis of the belief that "one of us is better than none of us." This belief might have been falsely generated by the fact that good governance in Nigeria is the same thing as the existence of a unicorn. Ekiti State University student area (where the majority of students live) has not had electricity for the past eighteen years. So, it is easy to form the ideological belief that this governor, an alumnus of the university, will be motivated to solve this problem that many other governors have failed to solve, even when the state governor has proven lacking in all other sectors of basic human flourishing.

You might think that ideological beliefs formed solely from interest-motivated psychology shouldn't be interest-undermining for the suffering masses. However, consider that interest-driven beliefs are frequently motivated by the need for short-term emotional relief from frustration, resentment, distress, and other negative affective states. If this is true, then the ideological beliefs formed through interest-motivated psychology are still in the interest of the suffering masses, albeit only momentarily.

One of the reasons that the suffering masses are prone to adapt their preferences to what they think is possible is that, over time, their government has ensured that basic human flourishing is outside of their reach. For example, women who accept 1 kg of Semovita in exchange for voting for a particular candidate likely do so because their economic conditions have remained unmet regardless of whom they have voted for in the past. As a result, they may come to believe that their circumstances cannot be improved, leading them to doubt alternative solutions and adopt ideological beliefs that do not challenge the status quo but instead regard working within it—for example, by accepting Semovita in exchange for their votes—as the only viable means of benefiting from the system.

Note that it is extremely difficult to escape the grip of ideological beliefs formed by interest-motivated psychology because, as Lidal Dror says, they are "resistant to rational revision, since people will be disposed to hold onto them even when presented with countervailing evidence, because of the psychological interest they satisfy."

Another mechanism through which we can understand the grip of ideology on Nigerians and why

many Nigerians vote against their own interest is *ideological dominance.* This is best explained by Marx and Engels' statement that "the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby… the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it," and what this means for our social architecture is that the ruling class "rule also as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age."

In an ideologically dominated society, the political ruling class's "corresponding ideology," as Lidal Dror stated, "dominates most institutions and social thinking, such that the ideas of that ideology have an especially high salience which promotes their adoption." The dominant ideology of the political ruling class in Nigeria has high salience, as Dror presupposes, and it offers a mechanism with which we can explain the Nigerian situation. In Nigeria, as with many countries in this world, dissent is usually crushed by the political class. Combine this with the fact of rampant poverty in Nigeria. This makes it very difficult for people who are mostly poor to have resources to do their own research, and thus undermines their ability to develop a cognitive interest in dissent and other possibilities beyond the status quo.

It is at its worst bellicose in Nigeria. Politicians not only destroy dissent but also actively ensure that the only resources available for citizens to consume are ideological content that aligns with their ideology. For instance, ruling politicians actively use state resources to campaign. An example of this is that during campaigns, ruling politicians typically make state-owned radio stations and TV stations promote their campaigns, and vehemently so. It is difficult to escape the grip of this ideological dominance because it forces people with fewer resources into an epistemic bubble, in which all they know or hear about is the dominant ideology. Thus, it becomes easy to vote against their own interests since the option reinforced to them as the only "good" available option is the one that the political ruling class made available to their social thinking.

To see the force of ideological dominance, consider that I moved to Boston in April of this year, and the city awakened something in me: The country I call home, Nigeria, is not merely in an economic crisis; it is also in a cultural, social, and ideological crisis.

My awakening was driven by *R*, a librarian-in-training, who was eager to show me all the public libraries in Boston, and when I asked her how many public libraries there are in the city, I was told it is more than twenty. A single city has more than twenty libraries. This would reveal something rather obnoxious: Does my home state in Nigeria even have a public library? A quick search would reveal that Ekiti State, with more than sixty towns, has a single public library, the barely funded Ekiti State Public Library.

This, further research would show, is not endemic to Ekiti State. Nigeria itself is in a massive socio-cultural crisis. On the 1st of September 2025, Nigeria's First Lady, Oluremi Tinubu, called for the crowdfunding of the completion of the country's National Library as a birthday gift to herself. Some weeks later, Mrs. Tinubu said she raised more than 20.4 billion naira through her Oluremi Tinubu Foundation for the National Library building.

This altruistic posturing of the wife of the highest public servant in the country is consequentially harmful. First, there is something absurd about public servants thinking that building institutions that help citizens with basic flourishing is supererogatory rather than obligatory. Second, using your political position to solicit public crowdfunding for a project that should be paramount to good governance is blatant corruption, since the National Assembly cannot have oversight of such a project. This is in a country that earmarked over 8 billion naira in its national budget for the building and renovation of churches and mosques.

The lack of libraries in Nigeria is merely an instantiation of the problems Nigeria and Nigerians are facing. There is a cultural crisis. Instead of demanding electricity as a right they are entitled to in virtue of being a citizen who deserves to be treated with respect and dignity, people still need to call radio stations to plead with their governor to remember to give them electricity transformers. Governors still campaign on the basis that they pay state workers salary in time rather than delaying and owing them.

However, in a capitalist and poverty-crippled country, should we be surprised that some people sell their votes? The question posed here is rather otiose. We should reframe it as the more interesting question: In a capitalist world and poverty-crippled state, should people be allowed to sell their vote? Here is why: surprise is a first-person attitude, and as such, it has no bearing on the question of what we *ought* to do, or what norms we *ought* to adopt in our society. If I tell you that people should send their kids to school, and you say that school is a surprising experience. That doesn't say anything about whether we ought to normalize going to school and ask kids to do it.

Now that we have reframed the question to the more interesting question, let's probe it further. A positive response to the question of whether people should be allowed to sell their votes in a poverty-stricken society is antithetical to the goals of liberal democracy and susceptible to treating the relevant voters as a means to an end rather than as ends in themselves.

On the former, in a liberal democracy, the basis of voting is that the people select a representative to represent their will. Now, if people select or converge on selecting a specific candidate based on selling their vote, then they will be represented by a candidate who has the most money rather than the candidate whose goals and aims track the ideals that voters actually accept. This is undemocratic. But you might ask about selling your votes to candidates that you would ordinarily vote for in an ideal world where you don't have to sell your vote and wonder if that too would be antithetical to the principles of a liberal democracy. Even if you would ordinarily vote for a candidate when money is not involved but voted for the same candidate when you're offered money, you would still be violating a core principle of democracy, namely accountability. If bribery does anything, it is its ability to remove from a bribed person the charisma to demand accountability from the person who offered the bribe.

On the latter, one core principle of liberal democracy is that individuals are seen and treated with respect. Surely, putting up votes for sale because of poverty violates this core principle, as it makes people a means to politicians' ends, rather than ends in themselves.

To treat a person as a means to an end is to use them merely as a tool for achieving someone else's goals without respecting their inherent dignity or worth as an individual. To treat them as an end in themselves is to respect that inherent dignity or worth. If votes are for sale just because one is poor, then that's a call for violating the respect inherent in being a person. Note that even if the politician is benign and treats the individuals who sold their votes with respect, it would still be wrong to do so. This is because doing so poses a risk of harm and exposes the people who sell their votes to the risk of harm, since they are now at the mercy of the politician being benign. Exposing oneself or others to the risk of harm is still wrong even if there is no harm. If you're traveling with me and I hit 120 mph on a tiny road, I wrong you by exposing you to harm even if we get to where we're going safely.

So, who should be allowed to vote? If people are under the grip of ideology, should they be allowed to vote since their preferences have been shaped by malign members of the ruling class? And, if some "poor people" have been known to sell their votes, should they still be allowed to vote since their vote is antithetical to the ideals of a liberal democracy?

My response to these questions is affirmative. A true democracy recognizes the conditions that give rise to these issues and shape the choices people make and the preferences they form, and seeks to address those underlying conditions. Rather than denying such people participation in the democratic process, we should focus on building a more just society in which individuals are no longer held, however subtly, in the grip of ideology. We should also strive to build a society in which people are not crippled by poverty and therefore do not see vote selling as the only means through which they can at least "gain" something from the political system.

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