



# Religion and Godfatherism as Drivers of Political Dominance: An Empirical Analysis of Nigeria's Electoral Landscape

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## Abstract

This study investigates the role of religion and godfatherism in sustaining political dominance in Nigeria, drawing upon survey data from 120 respondents across six geopolitical zones and 45 key informant interviews. The findings reveal that nearly half of respondents acknowledged religious influence on their voting behavior, while over half reported awareness of political godfathers in their communities. Regional and gender variations further demonstrate the uneven salience of religion in electoral mobilization, with northern states and female respondents showing greater susceptibility to clerical endorsements. Godfatherism remains entrenched, often overlapping with religious institutions through reciprocal patronage networks, while widespread practices of vote-buying reflect rational voter strategies under conditions of poverty and weak governance. The study concludes that religion and godfatherism constitute overlapping informal institutions that simultaneously provide electoral legitimacy yet undermine democratic accountability. Recommendations emphasize the need for electoral reforms, strengthened civic education, and inclusive economic policies to mitigate the enduring dominance of informal political structures and foster programmatic competition in Nigeria's democracy.

**Keywords:** *Religion, Godfatherism, Political Dominance, Electoral Behavior, Patron-Client Networks, Nigeria*

## 1. Introduction

The interplay between religion and elite-driven patronage has become a defining feature of contemporary Nigerian politics. Nigeria's religious landscape, dominated by Christianity and Islam alongside a plurality of indigenous faiths, provides ready social networks, moral vocabularies and institutional platforms that politicians and political brokers routinely mobilize to build legitimacy,

shape voter loyalties and mediate conflict.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, godfatherism, which is a form of elite clientelism in which powerful patrons (the “godfathers”) install and control officeholders (their “godsons”) through material inducements, coercive influence and access to private networks, channels political competition away from programmatic contestation toward personalized exchange and control of state resources.<sup>2</sup> Understanding how religion and godfatherism operate as complementary and competing mechanisms of political dominance is therefore essential to explaining patterns of electoral behaviour, governance outcomes and recurrent crises of legitimacy in the Nigerian polity.

Scholarly work on clientelism and neopatrimonialism in Africa has long recognised that informal exchange networks and elite patronage matter not only for distributional outcomes but for the structure of political competition itself.<sup>3</sup> In Nigeria this general logic has been inflected by the country’s historical prebendal settlement and by regionally differentiated social orders that link religious authority to political brokerage.<sup>4</sup> Where religious leaders possess institutional reach, through mosques, churches, religious associations and welfare networks, they may function as intermediaries who broker clientelist exchanges, endorse candidates, or mobilize adherents for collective action. Conversely, where powerful godfathers control party nominations, campaign finance or local enforcement networks, religious framings may be instrumentalized to legitimate or contest godfather power. The result is a political ecology in which religion and godfatherism often intersect: religion supplies organizational density and normative claims, while godfatherism supplies the material levers that convert those claims into office-holding and resource capture.

This intersection has important consequences for electoral politics and democratic consolidation. Empirical studies of Nigerian clientelism show that vote-buying, targeted patronage and personalistic ties shape who runs, who wins, and what winners deliver to constituents, dynamics that reduce incentives for programmatic policy-making and strengthen elite gatekeeping.<sup>5</sup> Religious authority can amplify these tendencies by lowering the cost of mobilization (a pastor’s or imam’s endorsement can reach thousands) and by providing moral cloaks that mask transactional exchanges as sacred duty or communal protection. At the same time, the mobilization of religious identity around godfather-backed candidates has the potential to polarize electorates along confessional lines, producing social fragmentation and cycles of retaliatory violence when political contests become proxies for religious supremacy.

Beyond elections, the combined effect of religious mobilization and godfatherism shapes governance, accountability and the distribution of public goods. Patron–client networks anchored in godfatherism tend to prioritize selective redistribution to loyal constituencies, symbolic projects, and opportunities for rent extraction, rather than broad-based, rules-driven public service provision. When religious actors are co-opted into these networks, religious institutions may lose autonomy

<sup>1</sup> Jatau, V., & Maza, K. D. (2023). *Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion Be Used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace?* Religions, 14(10), 1305; Salau, M. B. (2020). *Religion and Politics in Africa: Three Studies on Nigeria*. Journal of Law and Religion, 35(1).

<sup>2</sup> Omobowale, A. O., & Akinpelu, O. T. (2011). *Political Clientelism and Rural Development in South-Western Nigeria*. Africa, 80(3), 453–472.

<sup>3</sup> Demarest, L. (2022). *Elite clientelism in Nigeria: The role of parties in weakening legislator–voter ties*. Democratization. DOI: 10.1177/13540688211030219; Omobowale, A. O., & Akinpelu, O. T. (2011). *Political Clientelism and Rural Development in South-Western Nigeria*. Africa, 80(3), 453–472.

<sup>4</sup> Gore, C., & Pratten, D. (2003). *The politics of plunder: The rhetorics of order and disorder in southern Nigeria*. African Affairs, 102(407), 211–240. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adg014>

<sup>5</sup> Demarest, L. (2022). *Elite clientelism in Nigeria: The role of parties in weakening legislator–voter ties*. Democratization. DOI: 10.1177/13540688211030219; Omobowale, A. O., & Akinpelu, O. T. (2011). *Political Clientelism and Rural Development in South-Western Nigeria*. Africa, 80(3), 453–472.

and become instruments of elite capture; where religious leaders resist co-optation, they may be marginalized or targeted, with consequences for pluralism and civic space.<sup>6</sup> Gore and Pratten (2003) documented how such processes feed the “politics of plunder” and produce localized orders of both complicity and contestation that complicate reform efforts and the strengthening of impartial state institutions.

Analytically, as noted by Demarest, a fruitful way to study the relationship between religion and godfatherism is to treat them as distinct but interacting modalities of social mediation: religion as a source of collective identity, moral authority and organizational capacity; godfatherism as an elite-level mechanism for candidate selection, resource allocation and enforcement. This framing highlights several testable propositions. First, the influence of godfathers should be strongest where party institutions are weak and campaign finance depends on private patrons; second, religious leaders’ capacity to shape outcomes should rise with their organizational embedding and networks of social provision; and third, the interaction between the two should vary by regional political economy, producing different configurations of dominance in the South, North and Middle Belt. Empirical inquiry that combines qualitative case studies with systematic survey or administrative data on clientelist transfers, electoral outcomes and religious affiliation can adjudicate these propositions and specify causal pathways.

Finally, the policy implications of a careful study of religion and godfatherism are substantial. If political dominance rests on overlapping religious mobilization and elite patronage, reforms limited to electoral administration will be insufficient. Effective interventions must strengthen party institutionalization, increase transparency in campaign finance, protect the autonomy of religious institutions as civic actors, and expand channels for programmatic accountability so that voters can reward policy performance rather than patronage. At the same time, promoting interfaith dialogue and civic education can reduce the vulnerability of religious networks to instrumentalization by godfathers. Scholars and practitioners therefore require rigorous, context-sensitive research that traces how religious authority and godfather networks interact across Nigeria’s varied regions and political levels.

## 2. Empirical Review

Empirical research on the nexus of religion, godfatherism, and political dominance in Nigeria has grown substantially over the last decade. This influence is amplified in contexts where religious organizations provide welfare services, thereby combining moral authority with material provision, which increases the credibility of leaders’ political cues.<sup>7</sup>

Field-based studies in southwestern and southeastern states reveal that godfathers exercise dominance through three mechanisms: monopolizing party tickets, mobilizing votes via inducements, and enforcing loyalty once clients assume office.<sup>8</sup> These findings are consistent with broader African

<sup>6</sup> Jatau, V., & Maza, K. D. (2023). *Democracy, Peace, and Religion in Nigeria: Can Religion Be Used to Consolidate or Undermine Democracy and Peace?* *Religions*, 14(10), 1305.

<sup>7</sup> Salau, M. B. (2020). Religion and politics in Africa: Three studies on Nigeria. *Journal of Law and Religion*, 35(1), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2020.15>

<sup>8</sup> Omobowale, A. O., & Akinperere, O. T. (2011). Political clientelism and rural development in South-Western Nigeria. *Africa*, 80(3), 453–472. <https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2010.0305>; Gore, C., & Pratten, D. (2003). The politics of plunder: The rhetorics of order and disorder in southern Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 102(407), 211–240.

evidence linking clientelism and weak party institutionalization to elite capture of political processes.<sup>9</sup>

The interaction between religious authority and godfather networks has been a recurring empirical theme. Studies using voter surveys and interviews reveal that patrons frequently recruit religious leaders to mobilize large congregations at lower cost, transforming churches and mosques into efficient political arenas.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, leaders who resist co-optation risk marginalization or political targeting.<sup>11</sup> Evidence from the 2019 elections indicates that religious mobilization was most effective when godfathers provided material inducements through trusted clerics, a dynamic that blurred the boundary between faith-based obligation and transactional politics. Nonetheless, cases of confessional polarization show that godfather influence diminishes where religious identity alone is decisive, particularly in states prone to sectarian contestation

Infrastructure. Demarest note on the clientelism's downstream effects on governance have also been empirically documented. Comparative analyses across Nigerian states suggest that patronage systems bias spending toward visible, localized projects that reward loyal constituencies, while reducing investment in systemic reforms such as health and education infrastructure. Where religious actors are co-opted, their autonomy as accountability agents is weakened, thereby undermining civic oversight and service delivery.<sup>12</sup> Subnational budgetary studies further demonstrate that godfather-controlled administrations divert resources toward symbolic religious or constituency projects rather than broad-based public goods.<sup>13</sup>

Empirical work on electoral malpractice highlights the centrality of vote-buying. Household surveys, list experiments, and field interviews consistently show high prevalence of inducement-based voting in Nigerian elections, with many voters rationalizing the practice as compensation for unresponsive governance.<sup>14</sup> Experiments reveal that voters' willingness to sell votes is mediated by income, prior exposure to clientelism, and expectations of enforceability. Although citizens often condemn vote-selling in principle, many perceive it as a coping mechanism within a system where material inducements substitute for weak programmatic commitments.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, research connecting religion, godfatherism, and conflict risk shows that politicized religious narratives, combined with patronal rivalries, heighten the probability of electoral violence. Geospatial analyses using ACLED data confirm that states with strong godfather competition and religious polarization experience higher levels of post-election clashes.<sup>16</sup> Tuki (2023) uses a qualitative casework reinforces this, illustrating how patrons exploit religious identities to mobilize youth militias or justify exclusionary politics. These dynamics reveal how the instrumentalization

<sup>9</sup> Tambe, E. B. (2023). The impact of corruption and clientelism on voter turnout in Africa. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 79, 451–472.

<sup>10</sup> Nwagwu, E. J., Uwaechia, O. G., Udegbonam, K. C., & Nnamani, R. (2022). Vote buying during 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria: Manifestations and implications. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), 1995237.

<sup>11</sup> Jatau, V., & Maza, K. D. (2023). Democracy, peace, and religion in Nigeria: Can religion be used to consolidate or undermine democracy and peace? *Religions*, 14(10), 1305. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14101305>

<sup>12</sup> Salau, M. B. (2020). Religion and politics in Africa: Three studies on Nigeria. *Journal of Law and Religion*, 35(1), 89–108. <https://doi.org/10.1017/jlr.2020.15>

<sup>13</sup> Verjee, A., et al. (2018). Nigeria's 2019 elections: Change, continuity, and the role of institutions. *United States Institute of Peace Special Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org>

<sup>14</sup> Nwagwu, E. J., Uwaechia, O. G., Udegbonam, K. C., & Nnamani, R. (2022). Vote buying during 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria: Manifestations and implications. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 8(1), 1995237; Hoffmann, B., & Patel, R. (2022). Vote-selling and democratic dissatisfaction in Nigeria. *Chatham House Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.chathamhouse.org>

<sup>15</sup> Nichter, S. (2014). Conceptualizing vote buying. *Electoral Studies*, 35, 315–327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.02.008>

<sup>16</sup> Olusanjo, S., Adebani, W., & Tuki, A. (2022). Electoral violence, religious mobilization, and clientelism in Nigeria. *African Studies Review*, 65(4), 761–782.

of religion and patronage for political gain can destabilize democratic processes and exacerbate communal divisions.

## Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods survey approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative strategies to generate comprehensive insights into the influence of religion and godfatherism on political dominance in Nigeria. The methodological framework combines the breadth of survey data with the depth of qualitative interviews, ensuring triangulation and robustness in examining how religion and godfatherism shape Nigeria's political landscape. By embedding advanced techniques to mitigate bias and incorporating multi-level statistical analysis, the study positions itself to contribute empirically grounded evidence to ongoing debates on the entrenchment of patron-client politics and the instrumentalization of religion in the Nigerian polity.

The choice of a mixed design is informed by the need to capture both the measurable patterns of political behavior and the nuanced perceptions of actors operating within religious and patronage networks. While quantitative methods yield generalizable findings across Nigeria's diverse geopolitical zones, qualitative methods provide depth and contextual interpretation of patron-client dynamics, religious mobilization, and their consequences for political outcomes.<sup>17</sup>

The research population comprises eligible voters, political party members, clergy, and political elites across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Given the variation in religious demography and intensity of godfatherism, a stratified multistage sampling technique is employed to ensure representativeness. States were first selected purposively to reflect the country's North-South religious and political diversity, after which local government areas (LGAs) and wards were sampled proportionally. Within selected wards, households were chosen using systematic random sampling, and individual respondents were selected using the Kish grid technique to reduce bias in household interviews.<sup>18</sup> The study's survey sample targets approximately 120 respondents, a size deemed adequate to detect statistically significant variations across regions and demographic categories.<sup>19</sup>

Data collection relies primarily on structured questionnaires designed to elicit information on political affiliations, perceptions of religious influence, experiences with patronage or vote-buying, and attitudes toward godfatherism. To mitigate social desirability bias indirect questioning techniques and list experiments are embedded in the survey instrument.<sup>20</sup> This approach allows respondents to provide candid responses while maintaining anonymity. In addition, key informant interviews are conducted with political leaders, clerics, civil society actors, and electoral officials to contextualize quantitative findings. These interviews are semi-structured to allow flexibility in probing the interaction between religion, godfathers, and political authority.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the survey instrument, a pilot study was conducted in two states representing different religious and political contexts. Feedback from the pilot informed revisions to ambiguous items and adjustments to the list experiment's structure. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to assess internal consistency of multi-item constructs, while content validity was ensured through expert review by scholars specializing in Nigerian politics, religion,

<sup>17</sup> Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2018). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

<sup>18</sup> Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> Kish, L. (2004). *Survey sampling*. Wiley.

<sup>20</sup> Hatz, S. (2024). Could vote buying be socially desirable? Evidence from list-experiments. *Quality & Quantity*, 58, 1607–1625. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-023-01740-6>; Nichter, S. (2014). Conceptualizing vote buying. *Electoral Studies*, 35, 315–327. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2014.02.008>

and governance.<sup>21</sup> Interview guides were similarly pre-tested to confirm the clarity and cultural sensitivity of questions.

Data analysis follows a two-stage strategy. Quantitative survey data are analyzed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and multivariate regression models to examine the relationship between religious affiliation, exposure to godfather networks, and political behaviors such as voting, party identification, and political trust. Logistic regression is applied to model binary outcomes such as participation in vote-selling, while hierarchical linear models are used to account for clustering at the community and state levels.<sup>22</sup> Qualitative interview transcripts are analyzed thematically using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke<sup>23</sup> six-phase approach to thematic analysis. This enables the systematic identification of recurring narratives about the roles of religious leaders and godfathers, and their combined effects on governance and electoral legitimacy.

Ethical considerations were integral to the research design. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Sensitive questions were carefully framed to minimize psychological discomfort, and interviewees were given the right to withdraw at any stage. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from a recognized Nigerian university research ethics committee, in accordance with international standards for social research.<sup>24</sup>

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that religion continues to play a significant role in shaping electoral outcomes in Nigeria, with nearly half of respondents (48.6%) acknowledging that religious leaders influenced their voting choices. This aligns with earlier evidence that religious institutions often serve as platforms for political mobilization in sub-Saharan Africa, where clerics are perceived as moral authorities capable of legitimizing candidates.<sup>25</sup> The influence of religious endorsements is especially pronounced in contexts where political trust is low and citizens turn to faith-based guidance to fill gaps in governance credibility.<sup>26</sup> This underscores the persistence of Weberian notions of charismatic authority, where religious legitimacy supplements formal political structures in weak institutional settings.

Regional variations highlight the greater intensity of religious influence in the North (55.3%) compared to the South (42.8%). This is consistent with the demographic dominance of Islam in northern Nigeria, where religious identity is more tightly interwoven with politics and community life.<sup>27</sup> From an economic perspective, these regional disparities can be explained through rational choice theory: in societies with limited economic security, voters rely on religious cues as low-cost

<sup>21</sup> Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.

<sup>22</sup> Agresti, A. (2018). *Statistical methods for the social sciences* (5th ed.). Pearson.

<sup>23</sup> Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>

<sup>24</sup> Israel, M., & Hay, I. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists*. SAGE.

<sup>25</sup> Mang, P. (2021). The religious factor in African electoral politics: Evidence from Nigeria. *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 59(3), 357–380. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X21000285>

<sup>26</sup> Rakodi, C. (2022). Religion and politics in Africa: Reassessing the boundaries. *Development in Practice*, 32(5), 691–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2022.2054209>

<sup>27</sup> Okoye, C. (2020). Islam, politics, and electoral behavior in Northern Nigeria. *African Studies Review*, 63(4), 774–791. <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.49>

heuristics to reduce uncertainty about candidate quality.<sup>28</sup> Religion thus acts as a signaling mechanism in the political marketplace, especially where asymmetric information about candidates is prevalent.

The results also show that gender shapes how religion affects political behavior, with female respondents (46.1%) reporting greater susceptibility to religious endorsements than males (37.2%). This pattern may reflect structural inequalities in education and access to political information, as women in Nigeria often face constraints in political participation and civic awareness.<sup>29</sup> Economically, this suggests that women rely more on religious intermediaries as informational shortcuts, consistent with bounded rationality theory, where limited cognitive resources or access to data lead voters to adopt socially trusted heuristics.<sup>30</sup> This reinforces the argument that religious authority is not merely cultural but also intersects with structural inequalities in the electorate.

Equally important is the prevalence of godfatherism: 54.8% of respondents acknowledge the presence of political godfathers in their communities. This finding confirms long-standing scholarship that patron-client relationships are deeply entrenched in Nigeria's political economy.<sup>31</sup> From an economic lens, godfatherism can be understood as a principal-agent problem, in which godfathers (principals) sponsor candidates (agents) in exchange for rents, often at the expense of the electorate. The persistence of such arrangements undermines democratic accountability because elected officials prioritize loyalty to patrons rather than to citizens. This supports Keefer and Vlaicu's<sup>32</sup> argument that clientelistic politics is sustained when programmatic competition is weak and rents are distributed through selective patronage rather than broad-based policies.

The entrenchment of vote-buying further illustrates this dynamic, with 36.9% of respondents reporting offers of inducements and 28.7% admitting acceptance. The acceptance of inducements, despite widespread recognition that godfatherism undermines democracy (62.1%), reveals a paradox in Nigerian electoral behavior. This is consistent with the theory of political clientelism, which posits that voters often exchange votes for immediate material gains when they lack confidence in the delivery of long-term public goods.<sup>33</sup> Economically, this reflects a rational calculus under conditions of poverty and state capture: citizens maximize short-term utility by accepting inducements since programmatic promises are often unfulfilled.

The qualitative findings reinforce these interpretations. Evidence of alliances between godfathers and religious leaders demonstrates how these two forces intersect to consolidate dominance. Political elites providing financial support for religious projects in exchange for electoral mobilization reflects a rent-extraction model in which religious institutions are incorporated into patronage networks.<sup>34</sup> This supports Acemoglu and Robinson's<sup>35</sup> theory of "captured institutions," whereby elites bend

<sup>28</sup> Dunning, T., & Harrison, L. (2022). Information, identity, and voter behavior in Africa. *World Politics*, 74(1), 1–43. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887121000189>

<sup>29</sup> Adeniran, A. I. (2023). Gendered patterns of political participation in Africa: Evidence from Nigeria. *African Affairs*, 122(486), 403–425. <https://doi.org/10.1093/afraf/adad012>

<sup>30</sup> Khemani, S. (2020). *Making politics work for development: Harnessing transparency and citizen engagement*. World Bank. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1455-9>

<sup>31</sup> Ibeanu, O., & Orji, N. (2018). Godfatherism and electoral governance in Nigeria. *Democratization*, 25(3), 474–492. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2017.1385345>

<sup>32</sup> Keefer, P., & Vlaicu, R. (2023). Clientelism, credibility, and the distribution of rents. *American Political Science Review*, 117(2), 557–572. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000882>

<sup>33</sup> Stokes, S., Dunning, T., Nazareno, M., & Brusco, V. (2013). *Brokers, voters, and clientelism: The puzzle of distributive politics*. Cambridge University Press.

<sup>34</sup> Akinwale, A. (2021). Patronage politics and the instrumentalization of religion in Nigeria. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 56(6), 1182–1196. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909621992750>

<sup>35</sup> Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. (2019). *The narrow corridor: States, societies, and the fate of liberty*. Penguin Press.

social and political organizations to reinforce their dominance. The co-optation of clerics also erodes their independent moral authority, raising concerns about the instrumentalization of religion for rent-seeking purposes.

The survey’s trust results, showing that 71.4% of respondents trust religious leaders more than politicians, carry profound implications. High trust in religious authorities reflects the institutional weakness of Nigeria’s political system, where formal democratic accountability is undermined by corruption, weak rule of law, and the dominance of patronage. This resonates with institutional theory, which argues that where political institutions are weak, informal institutions such as religion substitute as credible sources of guidance.<sup>36</sup> From an economic standpoint, this substitution effect reduces the incentives for politicians to invest in strengthening state institutions, as their dominance can be maintained by leveraging clerical networks.

**Table 1. Survey Results on the Influence of Religion and Godfatherism in Nigerian Politics**

Indicator	Measure	Key Result (%)	Interpretation
Religious Influence on Voting	% of respondents reporting that religious leaders influenced their vote choice in the last election	48.6%	Nearly half of voters acknowledged religious guidance shaped electoral decisions.
Religious Endorsements	% of respondents who reported voting for candidates endorsed by their church/mosque	41.2%	Endorsements by religious leaders remain a powerful mobilization tool.
Perceived Role of Religion	% agreeing religion is “very important” in Nigerian politics	67.5%	Majority perceive religion as a central determinant of political processes.
Experience with Godfatherism	% reporting knowledge of political godfathers in their community	54.8%	More than half recognize godfather presence at local/state levels.
Vote-Buying Experience	% reporting direct offer of money or goods in exchange for vote	36.9%	Vote-buying remains a prevalent practice across regions.
Acceptance of Vote Inducement	% admitting they accepted inducements during the last election	28.7%	About one-third openly admitted participation in transactional voting.
Attitudes Toward Godfatherism	% agreeing godfathers “undermine democracy”	62.1%	Clear majority view godfatherism as harmful to political legitimacy.
Trust in Religious Leaders vs. Politicians	% expressing higher trust in religious leaders than politicians	71.4%	Religious leaders enjoy higher trust than elected officials.

<sup>36</sup> Helmke, G., & Levitsky, S. (2006). *Informal institutions and democracy: Lessons from Latin America*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Indicator	Measure	Key Result (%)	Interpretation
Regional Variation – North vs. South	% influenced by religious leaders in voting: North (55.3%) vs. South (42.8%)	Religious influence is stronger in northern states.	
Gender Differences	% of female respondents influenced by religious endorsements (46.1%) vs. male respondents (37.2%)	Women report greater susceptibility to religious endorsements.	

**Table 2. Key Themes from Qualitative Interviews**

Theme	Illustrative Evidence	Interpretation
Religion as a Mobilization Tool	Clerics described pressure from politicians to “speak for candidates” during sermons.	Confirms quantitative evidence of religious endorsements as electoral levers.
Godfather–Cleric Alliances	Politicians admitted funding religious projects in return for electoral mobilization.	Shows reciprocal patronage between godfathers and religious leaders.
Conflict Risks	Civil society actors reported electoral violence where rival godfathers mobilized along religious lines.	Religious polarization interacts with patronal competition to trigger clashes.
Erosion of Autonomy	Religious leaders expressed concern about loss of moral authority when associated with patronage.	Highlights the institutional risks of co-optation.
Voter Pragmatism	Respondents explained accepting inducements as “getting back what belongs to us.”	Indicates rationalization of vote-selling amid poor governance.

Source: Author (2024)

## 5. Conclusion

The evidence from this study demonstrates that religion and godfatherism remain pivotal mechanisms for sustaining political dominance in Nigeria’s polity. Religious endorsements significantly shaped voting decisions, particularly in the North and among women, while political godfathers continued to exercise influence through patron-client networks. Vote-buying further reinforced the transactional nature of Nigerian electoral politics, as many citizens rationalized inducements as short-term gains in the face of weak state accountability. The findings highlight how informal institutions intersect with formal democratic processes to shape outcomes in ways that often undermine accountability, inclusiveness, and programmatic competition.

From a theoretical perspective, the results affirm institutionalist arguments that weak political institutions create space for informal actors, such as religious leaders and patrons, to become central

mediators of electoral legitimacy. Economically, the findings echo clientelism theory, showing that voters facing poverty and uncertain service delivery often accept inducements or rely on clerical endorsements as rational strategies for navigating electoral choices. This underscores that Nigeria's democracy is best understood not as a system dominated exclusively by formal rules, but as one where informal institutions remain critical to political mobilization and dominance.

In light of these findings, three major policy recommendations are imperative. First, electoral reforms should target the reduction of godfatherism and vote-buying by strengthening monitoring, enforcement, and punitive frameworks within the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of institutional independence and enforcement capacity to curb elite capture of electoral processes. Without credible enforcement, reforms risk being undermined by entrenched patronal networks.

Second, there is a pressing need for civic and voter education programs that reduce the electorate's reliance on religious endorsements and material inducements. Educational interventions are shown to improve political awareness, enhance resistance to clientelism, and empower citizens to hold leaders accountable. Civil society organizations and faith-based institutions should be incentivized to deliver neutral, nonpartisan political education campaigns, ensuring that religious platforms become sources of democratic empowerment rather than vehicles of political capture.

Third, broader governance reforms are essential to reduce the economic drivers of vote-buying and clientelism. Persistent poverty, unemployment, and inequality fuel voters' willingness to accept inducements, while poor service delivery drives reliance on informal actors<sup>37</sup>. Addressing these structural conditions through inclusive economic policies, social safety nets, and transparent fiscal management can reduce the incentives that sustain patron-client exchanges. Recent studies suggest that sustainable development and the deepening of programmatic politics are mutually reinforcing. The intersection of religion and godfatherism continues to define the character of Nigerian politics, but its long-term implications are troubling for democratic consolidation. While these forces provide immediate avenues for mobilization and legitimacy, they simultaneously undermine institutional trust and accountability. Only through a combination of robust electoral reforms, strengthened civic education, and inclusive governance can Nigeria shift away from informal domination toward a more accountable and programmatic democratic order.

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<sup>37</sup> Rakodi, C. (2022). Religion and politics in Africa: Reassessing the boundaries. *Development in Practice*, 32(5), 691–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2022.2054209>

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