

Politics of “*Idip Udia*” (Food Politics) and Electoral Behaviour in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This research examined the politics of Idip Udia and electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, with emphasis on unemployment, illiteracy and poverty as determinants of inducement politics and transactional voting behaviour. The prevalence of food politics in electoral campaigns and the limited scholarly attention given to the indigenous dimensions of vote buying in Akwa Ibom State spurred this research. Qualitative phenomenological research design was adopted, and complemented with elements of narrative inquiry. Data were generated through in-depth interviews with twenty-seven participants selected purposively from Uyo, Ikot Ekpene and Oron Local Government Areas, alongside six key informant interviews involving community leaders, civil society representatives and political party officials. Findings revealed that unemployment increases participation in Idip Udia because unemployed persons have both the time and economic need to attend political rallies and food distribution events; illiteracy limits access to political information and encourages dependence on observable material gestures such as food distribution as indicators of candidate eligibility; poverty is a major factor compelling voters to exchange electoral support for immediate material survival; and many voters participate in food politics as a temporary means of accessing political elites and demanding short-term accountability during election periods. The research concluded that Idip Udia persists because unemployment, illiteracy and poverty operate synergistically to sustain clientelistic political relationships. It was recommended that public works programmes, audio-based civic education, unconditional cash transfers and community-level campaigns against inducement politics be adopted as measures for strengthening democratic accountability and promoting issue-based electoral participation in Akwa Ibom State.

Keywords: *Idip udia* (food politics), electoral behaviour, unemployment, illiteracy, poverty, clientelism.

Introduction

The quality of democratic governance is often measured by the extent to which citizens make electoral choices based on policy preferences, ideological alignment and the performance records of political candidates. However, in many developing democracies, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, electoral behaviour is shaped by factors that diverge significantly from these normative

ideals. Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy, provides a compelling case study of this divergence. According to Joseph (1987), the Nigerian political system is deeply rooted in prebendalism and patron-client relationships where public resources are distributed for political support. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigerian elections have been characterised by a complex interplay of ethnic politics, religious mobilisation, financial inducements and most notably, the distribution of food items as a campaign strategy. Within this national context, Akwa Ibom State has emerged as a particularly instructive site for understanding what is locally termed "*Idip Udia*", which is literally translated as "food politics" or "stomach infrastructure."

Idip Udia refers to the systemic practice whereby political candidates, elected officeholders and their agents distribute food items, for example, rice, beans, garri, noodles, cooking oil and other consumables, to voters directly, often within the weeks or months preceding the election. In most cases, some political office holders do this in the penultimate year of an election. The concept gained national momentum in 2014 during the governorship campaign in Ekiti State. A prominent political figure of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) Ayodele Peter Fayose, was reported to have made a controversial claim that what the people needed was "stomach infrastructure" before other forms of development (Stober, 2016). Although the exact phrasing was contested, the term "stomach infrastructure" entered the political lexicon of Nigeria and became synonymous with *Idip Udia*. Since then, the concept has evolved beyond its original polemical context to become an analytical category used by scholars, journalists and civil society organisations to describe the broader phenomenon of food-based vote-buying strategy across Nigeria. Political operatives in Akwa Ibom openly acknowledge that no candidate can win a competitive election without a robust *Idip Udia* strategy, regardless of their qualifications, experience, or policy proposals. During political campaigns, politicians distribute rice, noodles, palm oil, wrappers, cash, and other welfare packages to voters in an effort to secure electoral support. This practice reflects a broader pattern of clientelism and patronage politics that characterises many African democracies.

The persistence and effectiveness of *Idip Udia* cannot be understood in isolation from the socioeconomic conditions that prevail in Akwa Ibom State. Despite being a major oil-producing state with substantial allocations from the Federation Account, Akwa Ibom ranks poorly on key human development indicators. Unemployment rates, particularly among youth, are chronically high. Illiteracy remains a significant challenge, especially in rural and riverine areas where access to quality education is limited. Poverty is widespread, with a substantial proportion of the population living below the national poverty line and struggling to meet basic daily nutritional needs. These three variables, viz., unemployment, illiteracy and poverty, do not exist in isolation. Rather, they form an interconnected system of deprivation that fundamentally shapes how citizens perceive politics, evaluate candidates, and ultimately behave on election day. When voters are unemployed, they have both the time and the need to attend political rallies and food distribution events. When voters are illiterate, they cannot read manifestos, critically evaluate campaign promises, or access independent political information through written media. When voters are poor, a bag of rice or a carton of noodles represents not a trivial inducement but a meaningful improvement in their immediate material conditions. Under these conditions, *Idip Udia* becomes

not an aberration from rational electoral behaviour but a rational response to structural constraints. The voter who accepts food and, in return, votes for the donor is not demonstrating moral failure or political ignorance. Rather, they are making a calculated decision that the certain benefit of food today outweighs the uncertain and distant promise of policy improvements that may never materialise. This logic, while comprehensible at the individual level, has profound implications for democratic accountability at the collective level.

Despite the growing relevance of *Idip Udia* politics in Akwa Ibom State, scholarly studies on the subject remain limited. Most existing studies focus broadly on vote buying, patronage politics and political corruption in Nigeria without adequately examining the localised and indigenous dimensions of food politics in Akwa Ibom State. This research, therefore, examines the politics of *Idip Udia* and electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State with emphasis on unemployment, illiteracy and poverty as major determinants of inducement politics and transactional voting behaviour.

Statement of the Problem

The success of democratic governance depends largely on the existence of informed political participation, credible elections, and accountable leadership. Elections are expected to provide opportunities for citizens to elect competent leaders based on policy alternatives, performance, and ideological orientation. However, electoral politics in Nigeria has increasingly deviated from these democratic ideals due to the growing influence of inducement politics, vote buying and patronage systems. In Akwa Ibom State, the politics of *Idip Udia* has become a major feature of electoral campaigns. Politicians frequently distribute food items, money and other welfare materials to voters during election periods with the intention of influencing electoral outcomes. Consequently, electoral decisions are often determined by immediate material gains rather than competence, accountability or policy direction. The prevalence of unemployment and poverty has further worsened the situation. Many unemployed youths and economically disadvantaged citizens depend heavily on politicians for temporary economic assistance during elections. As a result, election periods are increasingly perceived as opportunities for survival and economic relief rather than civic engagement and democratic participation. Similarly, illiteracy has contributed significantly to inducement politics in Akwa Ibom State. Citizens with limited political education and awareness are more susceptible to manipulation through food politics and patronage systems. This situation undermines political consciousness and encourages transactional voting behaviour. This development implies that incompetent leaders may emerge through inducement politics rather than merit-based electoral competition. The practice also weakens democratic accountability because politicians who secure electoral support through material inducement may feel less obligated to deliver good governance after elections.

Although several studies have examined vote buying, money politics, and patronage systems in Nigeria, limited attention has been given to the indigenous concept of *Idip Udia* within the socio-political context of Akwa Ibom State. Existing studies have also not sufficiently examined how unemployment, illiteracy and poverty specifically influence participation in food politics and electoral behaviour. This research, therefore, seeks to examine the relationship between the politics of *Idip Udia* and electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State, with particular focus on unemployment, illiteracy and poverty as determinants of inducement politics.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

- i. To examine the influence of unemployment on electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. To examine the effect of illiteracy on electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State.
- iii. To examine the relationship between poverty and electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Questions

Corresponding to the three objectives, the following research questions are posed:

- i. What is the influence of unemployment on electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State?
- ii. What is the effect of illiteracy on electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State?
- iii. What is the relationship between poverty and electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were formulated by the researcher;

H₀: Unemployment has no significant influence on electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State

H₀: Illiteracy has no significant effect on electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State

H₀: Poverty has no significant relationship with electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State.

Significance of the Study

The research contributes to existing literature on electoral behaviour, clientelism and patronage politics in Nigeria. It expands scholarly understanding of indigenous political concepts such as “*Idip Udia*” and their implications for democratic governance. It will benefit policymakers, electoral management institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), political parties, civil society organisations, and democratic reform advocates by providing empirical evidence on the socio-economic factors sustaining inducement politics. The study will also help government agencies understand how unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty contribute to food politics and transactional voting behaviour. The findings may assist in designing poverty reduction programmes, voter education campaigns, and electoral reforms aimed at strengthening democratic participation. Furthermore, the study will serve as reference material for scholars and students in political science, public administration, sociology and related disciplines.

Scope of the Study

The study focuses on politics of *Idip Udia* and electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State. Thematically, the study examines unemployment, illiteracy and poverty as determinants of electoral behaviour and participation in food politics. Geographically, the study is limited to selected Local Government Areas in Akwa Ibom State. The study also focuses on democratic elections conducted within the Fourth Republic in Nigeria.

Operational Definition of Terms

- i. ***Idip Udia* (food politics):** The practice by which political candidates and officeholders in Akwa Ibom State distribute food items (e.g., rice, cooking oil, noodles and other consumables) to voters directly or through proxies, typically within three months before an election or sometimes the penultimate year to an election, with the implicit or explicit expectation of receiving votes in return.
- ii. **Electoral Behaviour:** The actions and decisions of registered voters in Akwa Ibom State regarding participation in elections, including voter turnout, choice of candidate, and the rationale provided for such choices.
- iii. **Unemployment:** The state of being without paid work while being actively available and seeking employment.
- iv. **Illiteracy:** The inability to read, write, and comprehend basic information in English or any Nigerian language to a functional level, operationalised as having no formal education or not having completed primary school.
- v. **Poverty:** The condition of lacking sufficient financial resources to meet basic daily nutritional and non-nutritional needs.

Conceptual Explication

Concept of “*Idip Udia*” (Food Politics)

Idip Udia is an Ibibio phrase that translates literally to "food politics" or "stomach politics." The term gained national prominence in Nigerian political discourse following the 2014 Gubernatorial election, but its practice predates this period. *Idip Udia* is an indigenous political expression in Akwa Ibom State that describes the sharing of food and material benefits by political actors to influence electoral support. The concept is closely related to vote buying, patronage politics and political clientelism. *Idip Udia* goes beyond mere gift-giving; it represents a systematic political strategy where food becomes both a medium of exchange and a symbol of political relationship. Unlike conventional campaign handouts, *Idip Udia* is characterised by its directness (food is given person-to-person), timing (concentrated in the weeks immediately preceding elections) and expectation (implicit reciprocity). Political actors in Akwa Ibom State openly acknowledge that a voter who has received a bag of rice or a carton of noodles is socially obligated to vote for the donor, irrespective of the donor's performance in office. Conceptually, *Idip Udia* can be distinguished from other forms of electoral clientelism along several dimensions. First, unlike cash-based vote buying, food distribution carries symbolic meanings rooted in local cultural norms around hospitality, generosity and reciprocity. In Akwa Ibom culture, as in many African societies, sharing food creates an obligation that is not purely economic but social and moral. To refuse food from a guest is insulting; to accept food and then fail to reciprocate appropriately is equally insulting. Political actors exploit these cultural norms by framing *Idip Udia* not as a transaction but as an act of generosity, thereby making it socially costly for voters to accept food and then vote against the donor. Second, unlike other material inducements such as clothing, cooking utensils, or mobile phones, food is consumable and perishable. It must be used quickly, which means the

memory of the gift remains vivid at the time of voting. Third, *Idip Udia* is typically distributed in public settings such as rallies, community events, and door-to-door visits, which makes it visible to neighbours and community members. This visibility creates social pressure to comply with the implied electoral expectation.

It is also important to clarify what *Idip Udia* is not. *Idip Udia* is not equivalent to legitimate social protection or charitable giving by politicians outside election periods. For example, when a political office holder provides food items to constituents during festive seasons or during emergencies like floods without an election impending, this may be a legitimate constituent service, not an act of *Idip Udia*. *Idip Udia* is specifically the election-timed distribution of food that is contingent, explicitly or implicitly, on electoral support. Additionally, *Idip Udia* is not merely a Nigerian phenomenon. During preliminary findings, other researchers have documented similar practices in Kenya (where it is sometimes called “*mchele*” or rice politics), in India (where food distribution during elections is common in poor rural areas), and in several Latin American countries (Lockwood 2024; Heath & Tillin 2017; Achinike 2026). However, the specific cultural embeddedness of *Idip Udia* in Akwa Ibom makes it a distinctive case worthy of detailed study.

Concept of Electoral Behaviour

The concept of electoral behaviour has been central to political science since the emergence of behavioural approaches in the mid-twentieth century. Electoral behaviour refers to the full range of actions, decisions, and psychological processes that shape how citizens participate in elections. Traditionally, the concept encompasses three main dimensions: turnout (whether a citizen votes at all), vote choice (which candidate or party the citizen votes for), and the cognitive and affective processes underlying these decisions (e.g., party identification, issue voting, retrospective evaluation of incumbent performance). In Western democratic contexts, electoral behaviour has been explained through several influential models. The sociological model, associated with the Columbia School (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944), emphasises the role of social groups (class, religion, ethnicity, region) in shaping vote choice. The psychological model, associated with the Michigan School (Campbell et al., 1960), emphasises party identification as a long-term attachment that filters political information and guides vote choice. The rational choice model, associated with Downs (1957), emphasises the instrumental calculation of costs and benefits, with voters choosing the candidate who maximises their expected utility.

However, these models were developed in contexts of relative affluence, high literacy, and stable democratic institutions. Their applicability to contexts like Akwa Ibom State is limited. In Akwa Ibom, party identification is weak and fluid, with voters frequently switching parties between elections. Issue voting is constrained by the fact that most candidates do not offer clear, differentiated policy platforms. Sociological factors such as ethnicity and religion matter, but are often overridden by material inducements. Consequently, a growing body of scholarship on African electoral behaviour has developed alternative concepts, including clientelism, vote buying, and what Norris (2014) calls “electoral integrity” or its absence.

This study conceptualises electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State as an adaptive response to conditions of scarcity, uncertainty and weak institutional accountability. Voters are not irrational when they exchange votes for food; rather, they are rationally responding to the incentives created by their material conditions. A voter who is unsure whether a candidate will deliver on campaign promises, but is certain that accepting a bag of rice will feed their family for a week, is making a reasonable calculation. This conceptualisation does not excuse or celebrate *Idip Udia*, but it does insist on understanding it on its own terms rather than through the lens of idealised democratic theory.

Theoretical Framework

This research is anchored on two theories, which are the Rational Choice Theory and Clientelism Theory. While Rational Choice Theory provides the micro-foundation for understanding individual decision-making, Clientelism is adopted as the main theoretical framework because it directly explains the structural and relational dynamics of food politics.

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory, associated with scholars such as Anthony Downs (1957) and Mancur Olson (1965), posits that political actors such as voters, candidates and parties make decisions based on a cost-benefit calculus aimed at maximising their utility. For voters, the theory suggests that they will vote for the candidate who offers them the greatest net benefit. In the context of *Idip Udia*, a rational voter facing unemployment, illiteracy, or poverty will calculate that a bag of rice today provides greater immediate utility than the uncertain and distant promise of policy improvements. However, Rational Choice Theory has been criticised for assuming that voters have perfect information and stable preferences, conditions rarely met in impoverished settings. This limitation makes Clientelism Theory a more robust framework for this study.

Clientelism Theory

Clientelism theory, extensively developed by scholars such as Susan Stokes (2005), Herbert Kitschelt and Allen Hicken, explains political relationships as asymmetric exchanges between patrons (wealthy or powerful political actors) and clients (poorer, less powerful voters). In clientelistic systems, patrons provide contingent material benefits such as food, cash, or other private goods to clients in exchange for political support, particularly votes. Clientelism thrives under specific conditions: high poverty, weak rule of law, low information among voters and intense electoral competition. These conditions are characteristic of the Akwa Ibom State electioneering system.

Clientelism Theory is directly relevant to this study for five reasons. First, it identifies poverty as a structural condition that makes voters susceptible to material inducements. When voters live below the poverty line, a bag of rice is not a trivial gift but a survival necessity. Second, the theory explains how illiteracy reinforces clientelism. Uneducated voters are less likely to access independent political information, understand policy platforms, or monitor government

performance, making them more reliant on the personal relationships offered by patrons. Third, clientelism theory accounts for the role of unemployment: unemployed individuals have both the time and the need to participate in food distribution events, and they lack the economic independence that would allow them to vote based on principle rather than need. Fourth, the theory explains the persistence of *Idip Udia* over time: once clientelistic relationships are established, patrons can use the same food distribution to monitor and enforce vote compliance. Fifth and finally, clientelism theory provides a framework for understanding electoral behaviour not as irrational or morally deficient, but as a rational adaptation to structural constraints. This study, therefore, adopts Clientelism Theory as its primary theoretical lens, using it to interpret all findings related to unemployment, illiteracy and poverty.

Review of Related Literature

Existing literature on electoral behaviour in Nigeria has extensively documented the prevalence of money politics and vote buying. For instance, Ibrahim & Ibrahim (2019) found that vote buying in Nigerian elections ranges from cash payments of ₦500 to ₦5,000 per voter to distribution of food items, cooking utensils, and mobile phone recharge cards. However, most of this literature treats vote buying as a generic phenomenon, rarely distinguishing between cash transfers and food politics. This distinction is critical because food distribution carries symbolic and cultural meanings that cash does not. In Akwa Ibom State, sharing food is traditionally associated with community, kinship and obligation, making *Idip Udia* more difficult to refuse than an anonymous cash offer. Literature on clientelism in Africa has shown that food-based vote buying is particularly effective in rural agricultural communities (Bratton, 2008). Kramon (2013) argued that food distribution serves two purposes: it demonstrates the candidate's generosity and wealth, and it creates a sense of personal indebtedness among recipients. Nevertheless, Kramon's work focused on Kenya, leaving a gap regarding the specific dynamics of food politics in Nigeria's Niger Delta region, including Akwa Ibom State.

Studies specifically addressing unemployment and electoral behaviour indicate that unemployed voters are more likely to accept material inducements because they face lower opportunity costs (Jensen & Justesen, 2014). However, these studies are predominantly quantitative and do not explore the lived experiences of unemployed voters who participate in *Idip Udia*. Regarding illiteracy, research by Ake (2017) found that voters without formal education were three times more likely to report accepting food from politicians compared to those with secondary education or higher in Cross River State. Poverty's relationship with vote buying has been the most extensively studied, with consistent findings that poorer voters are more susceptible (Vicente, 2014). Nevertheless, few studies have examined how poverty interacts simultaneously with unemployment and illiteracy to amplify the effects of food politics.

Gap in Literature

Despite the substantial body of work on vote buying in Nigeria, several gaps remain. First, existing studies rarely operationalise *Idip Udia* as a distinct phenomenon separate from cash-based vote

buying, yet the cultural and social logic of food distribution differs fundamentally from cash transactions. Second, while unemployment, illiteracy and poverty have each been studied individually in relation to electoral behaviour, no study has systematically examined their combined, interactive effects within the specific context of Akwa Ibom State's *Idip Udia*. Third, the literature lacks a robust qualitative exploration of voters' own rationalisations for participating in food politics. Fourth, most studies focus on the moment of vote exchange, ignoring the post-election period when voters seek to hold patrons accountable. This research addresses all four gaps by adopting a mixed-methods approach and focusing specifically on the three variables of unemployment, illiteracy and poverty.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research adopts a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is concerned with understanding the lived experiences of individuals and the meanings they attach to those experiences. This approach is appropriate because the study seeks to understand how the unemployed, illiterate and poor voters experience *Idip Udia* affect electoral behaviour in their daily lives. Phenomenology prioritises the subjective, first-person perspective and seeks to identify the essential structures of experiences. The study also incorporates elements of narrative inquiry, as participants are invited to tell stories about their experiences with past elections, their encounters with political patrons and their decision-making processes. Narratives are particularly useful for understanding how individuals make sense of morally complex situations, resolve ambivalence, and construct coherent identities over time.

Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants who could provide rich, relevant information. Specifically, criterion sampling was used: participants had to meet at least one of the following criteria: (a) currently unemployed and actively seeking work for at least three months; (b) self-identified as unable to read and write in any language; (c) self-identified as poor (unable to meet basic food needs). Maximum variation sampling was also used to ensure diversity within these criteria: participants were recruited to vary by age (18-35, 36-55, 56+), gender (male and female), LGA (Uyo, Ikot Ekpene, Oron), and level of *Idip Udia* participation (frequent, occasional, rare).

This research aimed for a sample of 25-30 participants across the three LGAs. The final sample consisted of 27 participants (15 female, 12 male), distributed as follows: Uyo (n=8), Ikot Ekpene (n=9), Oron (n=10). Of these, 18 met the unemployment criterion, 14 met the illiteracy criterion (with overlap), and 23 met the poverty criterion. Many participants met multiple criteria. In addition to voter participants, 6 key informant interviews were conducted with individuals who have expert knowledge of local political dynamics: two community leaders (village chiefs or elders), two civil society organisation representatives working on electoral issues and two political

party ward chairpersons. Key informants were selected purposively for their knowledge and willingness to speak candidly.

Effects of Illiteracy on Electoral Behaviour in Akwa Ibom State

The analysis of interviews with illiterate participants revealed the following:

First, illiterate participants consistently described feeling excluded from the world of political information. Newspapers, manifestos and social media were inaccessible. Radio was accessible but often in English, which many found difficult to follow. In the absence of written information, illiterate voters relied on what they could see, touch and hear directly. This analysis supports clientelism theory's information mechanism: illiterate voters develop alternative heuristics for candidate evaluation, and food distribution serves as a powerful heuristic because it is observable, memorable and verifiable.

Second, while illiterate voters could not read written information, they were not without information sources. They relied heavily on trusted brokers who were religious leaders, family members, neighbours and community elders. However, these brokers were themselves often embedded in clientelistic networks, introducing bias.

Third, illiterate participants articulated a moral logic linking food distribution to character. A politician who distributes food is perceived as generous, humble and compassionate, qualities that participants valued more than policy expertise. These politicians are often called "*ono mpko owo*" (a giver). In like manner, Udoh et al. (2024) argued that a traditional Ibibio person maintains a healthy approach to relationships because this connection is built on shared concern and a communal life filled with love and mutual accommodation. This analysis is significant because it suggests that illiterate voters are not merely "fooled" by food distribution; they have a coherent moral framework within which food distribution is a legitimate signal of candidate quality. Interventions that dismiss this framework as ignorant are unlikely to succeed.

Poverty and Electoral Behaviour

The analysis of interviews with poor participants revealed three major themes regarding poverty and electoral behaviour: The coercive logic of necessity, ambivalence and rationalisation and the absence of perceived alternatives.

The Coercive Logic of Necessity

Poor participants consistently described vote exchange not as a choice but as a necessity. The language of coercion, such as "I have no choice," "what else can I do?", was pervasive. This theme supports the poverty-as-coercion mechanism. Poverty does not merely make vote exchange more likely; it makes refusal practically impossible for many households. The relevant question is not "why do poor people sell their votes?" but "how could poor people reasonably refuse?"

Ambivalence and Rationalisation

Despite the coercive logic of necessity, poor participants expressed considerable ambivalence about their participation in *Idip Udia*. They recognised that food politics undermines long-term development and that they are being exploited. Participants resolved this ambivalence through several rationalisations. Some used the "everyone does it" rationalisation: since all politicians engage in *Idip Udia*, accepting food from one does not change the outcome. Others used the "small fish" rationalisation: my single vote does not matter, but my family's meal does. Others used the "temporary" rationalisation: this is only during election time, and then I will return to my principles.

The Absence of Perceived Alternatives

When asked what would need to change for them to refuse *Idip Udia*, poor participants consistently pointed to the absence of alternatives. They did not perceive any realistic pathway to a system without food politics. This finding has critical policy implications. Asking poor voters to refuse *Idip Udia* without providing alternatives is not only ineffective but morally questionable. The study suggests that cash transfer programmes, public works, and other social protection interventions must precede or accompany voter education campaigns.

Discussion of Findings

The research revealed the following:

i. *Idip Udia* as a Mechanism for Temporary Accountability

It was revealed that most people who participate in *Idip Udia* do so because they believe that the electioneering period is the only opportunity they get to hold political office holders accountable. Outside election periods, respondents consistently reported that political leaders were inaccessible, unresponsive to complaints and unconcerned with community welfare

This finding challenges the conventional view that *Idip Udia* merely reflects voter passivity or ignorance. Instead, voters strategically use the election period as a rare opportunity to demand accountability. They understand that their vote is valuable to politicians and that politicians will make themselves available and responsive during the campaign period. Voters, therefore, participate in *Idip Udia* not only to receive food but also to be heard. This finding extends clientelism theory by showing that clients are not merely passive recipients of benefits; they actively use the clientelistic relationship to extract accountability from patrons, even if only temporarily.

ii. *Idip Udia* Provides Proximity to Political Elites

The study found that *Idip Udia* provides a mechanism for voters to get physically closer to political elites who would otherwise be distant and unapproachable. For impoverished and unemployed voters, this proximity carries symbolic value that extends beyond the material value of food. This finding highlights a dimension of *Idip Udia* that has been largely overlooked in the literature: the psychological and social benefits of proximity to power. For voters who are marginalised in

everyday life, the attention and recognition received during clientelistic exchanges may be valued almost as highly as the food itself. This suggests that interventions to reduce *Idip Udia* must address not only material deprivation but also the social and psychological dimensions of marginalisation.

iii. *Idip Udia* Enables Monitoring and Assessment

The study found that during *Idip Udia* events, voters tend to be assessed and mentioned more frequently than at any other time. Political patrons use these events to identify loyal supporters, maintain databases of beneficiaries, and assess the political leanings of households. This monitoring function is central to clientelism theory. Patrons cannot enforce compliance without information. *Idip Udia* events serve as monitoring opportunities: patrons observe who attends, who is enthusiastic, and who brings others. The act of receiving food in public creates a record that can be used to reward compliance and punish defection in future cycles. This finding explains why *Idip Udia* persists even when voters might prefer to vote based on policy: the monitoring and sanctioning mechanisms make defection costly.

iv. Voters Express Ambivalence About *Idip Udia*

Despite widespread participation, the study found that voters express considerable ambivalence about *Idip Udia*. Many respondents recognised that food politics undermines long-term development, even as they participated in it. This ambivalence is resolved through rationalisation. Voters argue that since all politicians engage in *Idip Udia*, rejecting one candidate's food would not change the system but would only deprive one's family of needed resources. This is a classic collective action problem: individual refusal is costly and ineffective; collective refusal would be effective but is impossible to coordinate. The findings suggest that many voters would prefer a system without *Idip Udia*, but they do not see a viable path from the current equilibrium to that preferred alternative.

v. Unemployment, Illiteracy and Poverty Interact Synergistically

The study found that unemployment, illiteracy and poverty do not operate independently but interact synergistically to increase vulnerability to *Idip Udia*. A respondent who is unemployed, illiterate and poor is far more susceptible than the sum of the individual effects would predict. This finding is critical for policy. Interventions that address only one of the three vulnerabilities will be less effective than interventions that address all three simultaneously. For example, an adult literacy programme may reduce illiteracy but will have a limited effect on *Idip Udia* participation if participants remain unemployed and poor. Conversely, a public works programme may reduce unemployment but will have a limited effect if participants remain illiterate and therefore unable to access political information independently.

Summary of Findings

The findings of the study are summarised as follows:

- i. Unemployment, illiteracy and poverty significantly influence the participation in *Idip Udia* politics, thereby establishing *Idip Udia* as a factor that influences electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. Many citizens participate in *Idip Udia* because election periods are perceived as the only time political office holders become accessible and accountable to ordinary citizens,
- iii. Many citizens do not necessarily support *Idip Udia* politics because they consider it morally acceptable, but because socio-economic realities compel them to maximise available opportunities during election periods,
- iv. Unemployment increases dependence on political elites, poverty encourages inducement politics, and illiteracy weakens political awareness.

Conclusion

The research examined the politics of *Idip Udia* and electoral behaviour in Akwa Ibom State with particular attention to unemployment, illiteracy, and poverty as determinants of inducement politics. The findings established that food politics has become deeply institutionalised within the electoral culture of the state and continues to shape voter behaviour during democratic elections. The study revealed that unemployment provides both the economic motivation and the availability for participation in food distribution activities, while illiteracy limits access to independent political information and increases dependence on observable material gestures as indicators of candidate suitability. Poverty further reinforces transactional voting because many citizens prioritise immediate survival over long-term democratic expectations. It was also established that voters are not merely passive recipients of inducements but rational actors responding to structural conditions of deprivation, uncertainty, and weak institutional accountability. *Idip Udia*, therefore, persists not simply because of political manipulation but because socio-economic vulnerabilities create fertile conditions for clientelistic political relationships. The interaction between unemployment, illiteracy and poverty was found to intensify susceptibility to inducement politics and weaken issue-based electoral participation. The report concludes that meaningful electoral reform in Akwa Ibom State cannot be achieved solely through legal prohibitions against vote buying; rather, sustainable democratic accountability requires comprehensive socio-economic interventions aimed at reducing poverty, improving literacy, creating employment opportunities and strengthening civic education. Unless these structural conditions are addressed, *Idip Udia* will likely remain a dominant feature of electoral politics in Akwa Ibom State.

Recommendations

The study recommended the following:

i. Establish a Pre-Election Public Works Programme for the Unemployed

The Akwa Ibom State Government should create a temporary public works programme that guarantees 20 days of paid work per month for unemployed voters in the six months before any election. This will provide legitimate income, reduce the time unemployed persons have to attend food distribution rallies and restore the dignity that food politics exploits.

ii. Implement Audio-Based Civic Education for Illiterate Voters

INEC and civil society organisations should produce and broadcast radio dramas, town hall announcements, and audio messages in Ibibio, Annang and Oro languages that explain the long-term costs of *Idip Udia*. These messages should be delivered through trusted community leaders, for example, religious leaders, village chiefs and market women's leaders, rather than through written materials that illiterate voters cannot access.

iii. Introduce Unconditional Monthly Cash Transfers for Poor Households

The Federal and State Governments should roll out a monthly unconditional cash transfer of ₦10,000 to households below the poverty line, delivered at unpredictable times (not tied to election cycles) through mobile money or bank accounts. This removes the survival necessity that forces poor voters to exchange votes for food, giving them a genuine alternative before being asked to refuse political handouts.

iv. Facilitate Community-Level "Pledge to Refuse" Campaigns

Civil society organisations should organise community-wide pledge ceremonies where voters publicly commit to refusing *Idip Udia's* food distributions. These pledges must be accompanied by enrolment in the cash transfer programme so that refusal does not lead to hunger. Community elders should monitor compliance, and social recognition should reward those who keep their pledge.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes several contributions to knowledge. First, the study introduces the indigenous concept of *Idip Udia* into academic discourse on electoral politics. Second, the study provides the first systematic analysis of *Idip Udia* specifically in Akwa Ibom State, creating a baseline for future comparative research in other Nigerian states and other African countries with similar food-based political practices. Third, it provides empirical evidence distinguishing *Idip Udia* (food politics) from generic vote buying, demonstrating that food distribution carries unique cultural, symbolic and social meanings that cash transactions lack. Fourth, the study advances clientelism theory by showing how unemployment, illiteracy and poverty operate not as separate variables but as an interlocking system that produces and reproduces clientelistic electoral behaviour. Fifth, the study identifies that voters use *Idip Udia* as a strategic tool for temporary access to and accountability from political elites, challenging the simplistic view that food politics merely reflects voter passivity. Finally, the study contributes to policy discussions on electoral reforms and democratic accountability.

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