

## Patterns of Deceptive Vote-Buying Tactics by Local Politicians: Implications for Moral Integrity and the Erosion of Democratic Foundations

Utis Tahom\*

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Buriram Rajabhat University, Thailand*

---

### ABSTRACT

**Background and Objectives:** Vote-buying is a pervasive political phenomenon that undermines democratic principles, particularly in local governance structures. This study examines the deceptive vote-buying tactics employed by local politicians in rural Thailand, focusing on their impacts on democratic values, governance, and public morality. The research aims to analyze the mechanisms through which politicians manipulate the electoral process, the role of economic vulnerability in perpetuating vote-buying, and the long-term consequences for democratic development. Understanding these patterns is essential for formulating policy recommendations to combat electoral corruption and enhance political integrity.

**Methodology:** The study employed a qualitative research approach, drawing from in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and non-participant observations in four northeastern Thai provinces: Buriram, Surin, Si Sa Ket, and Ubon Ratchathani. The target participants include general voters, local politicians, community leaders, election officials, and youth representatives. Data collection focused on the types of vote-buying tactics used, public attitudes towards elections, and the societal implications of these corrupt practices. Additionally, secondary data from political science literature and electoral reports were analyzed to contextualize findings within broader theoretical frameworks.

**Main Results:** The study revealed a multifaceted pattern of vote-buying strategies employed by local politicians in rural Thailand, reflecting a deeply entrenched culture of transactional politics. These tactics range from direct cash payments and the provision of consumer goods to false development promises, digital vote-buying via online transfers, and the mobilization of long-standing patronage networks. Economically vulnerable groups—particularly low-income households and the elderly—are systematically targeted due to their heightened dependency on state assistance and limited political agency. Beyond material inducements, coercive measures such as threats to withhold welfare benefits are deployed to manipulate voter behavior. Notably, the normalization of such practices within rural communities has blurred the moral boundaries between legitimate campaigning and corrupt exchange. Vote-buying is often perceived not as an act of electoral malfeasance but as a socially accepted reciprocity. This perception contributes to the erosion of democratic values, diminishes political accountability, and perpetuates a cycle of ineffective and self-interested governance.

---

### ARTICLE INFO

*Article history:*

Received March 6, 2025

Revised August 7, 2025

Accepted August 15, 2025

---

**Keywords:**

Patterns of Deceptive Vote-Buying Tactics, Local Politicians, Implications for Moral Integrity, The Erosion of Democratic Foundations

**Discussions:** The research underscores the ethical implications of vote-buying, demonstrating its role in eroding democratic values and public trust in governance. The practice reinforces systemic corruption, weakens political accountability, and prioritizes personal financial gain over genuine policy-driven governance. Moreover, vote-buying perpetuates a cycle of ineffective leadership, as politicians who attain power through financial incentives often seek to recoup their expenditures rather than fulfill campaign promises. Institutional weaknesses, including ineffective enforcement mechanisms by the Election Commission of Thailand, further enable these corrupt practices to persist.

**Conclusions:** Vote-buying poses a significant threat to democratic integrity, particularly in local political systems where patronage networks are deeply entrenched. Addressing this issue requires comprehensive legal reforms, stronger law enforcement, and increased political literacy among citizens. Strengthening civic engagement and fostering a political culture based on transparency and accountability are critical for reducing electoral corruption. By implementing systemic changes and raising awareness about the detrimental effects of vote-buying, Thailand can move towards a more equitable and democratic electoral process.

---

*\*Corresponding author*

*E-mail address: arm.utit.tahom@gmail.com, uits.th@bru.ac.th*

## **Introduction**

Representative democracy stands as one of the most significant political innovations in human history. It is a system of governance in which the populace elects representatives to make decisions on their behalf, thereby reflecting the will of the people. Fundamentally, representative democracy is built upon the principle that governance should be conducted by individuals chosen to act in the interest of the electorate. This system contrasts with direct democracy, where citizens participate directly in decision-making processes. The core principles of representative democracy include free and fair elections, the rule of law, the separation of powers, and accountability. These foundational elements ensure that elected representatives act within the framework of legality, maintain checks and balances across governmental institutions, and remain answerable to the people they serve. Through this structure, representative democracy seeks to uphold the ideals of equitable governance while balancing efficiency and inclusivity (Alonso et al., 2011). In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, increasing emphasis has been placed on decentralization as a means of strengthening governance, particularly in developing countries. International organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank have actively supported decentralization initiatives. Programs like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) collaborate with local agencies to build capacity, enhance service delivery, and reinforce democratic practices. Similarly, the World Bank has promoted decentralization through financial assistance and technical expertise, focusing on improving governance and developing local infrastructure. By enabling local governments to achieve financial autonomy, these efforts empower them to address regional challenges more effectively, fostering more responsive and efficient governance at the community level (Faguet, 2012).

Decentralization involves the transfer of governmental decision-making authority from the central government to local administrations. This shift transforms centralized control into oversight, empowering provincial governors and district chiefs to play key roles in supervising local governance. The principles of decentralization encourage citizen participation by granting local communities significant authority in making decisions about their own development. At the same time, decentralization alleviates the administrative burden on central agencies, enabling faster decision-making for local development. Moreover, it facilitates the equitable distribution of resources and services across regions, addressing disparities and promoting balanced development. This approach not only enhances the efficiency of governance but also fosters inclusivity and sustainability in regional growth initiatives (Dafflon & Madiès, 2009). While decentralization is founded on sound principles, its implementation in developing countries often exposes gaps in practice, particularly through the misuse of "money politics." This dynamic transforms political power into a tool for personal gain, influence, and privilege. Financial resources are exploited to build political clout or secure power, often involving practices such as bribery, corruption campaign, and direct vote-buying through monetary or material incentives to sway voters. Such practices are particularly pervasive in developing nations, especially in regions plagued by economic and social challenges, weak political institutions, and limited voter awareness. These conditions enable the manipulation of the democratic process, undermining the core objectives of decentralization and reinforcing inequalities within the political system.

Vote buying and selling is a pervasive issue across various levels of politics, particularly at the local level. It fundamentally undermines democratic principles and adversely impacts governance and social development. Local politicians often engage in vote-buying practices, offering incentives to citizens in exchange for electoral support to secure victory. On the other side, citizens who sell their votes are often economically disadvantaged or unaware of the deceptive tactics employed by politicians. Vote buying refers to the act of offering money, goods, or services to voters in exchange for their votes. Conversely, vote selling involves voters willingly accepting such offers and agreeing to cast their votes as directed. This cyclical dynamic erodes the integrity of democratic processes and perpetuates systemic inequalities, particularly in vulnerable communities (Nelson & Saka-Olokungboye, 2019).

The causes of vote buying and selling stem from several factors. First, economic inequality, poverty, and economic vulnerability compel voters to sell their votes in exchange for monetary compensation from politicians. Second, weak political institutions in regions where political institutions lack transparency and accountability, vote buying becomes an effective strategy for local political candidates to secure support. Third, because of cultural and historical factors in certain areas, vote buying is normalized due to the persistence of patronage systems. Voters perceive the exchange of money or goods not as electoral corruption but as an act of generosity. Fourth, distrust in local politicians has led to a widespread belief that elected officials fail to fulfill their campaign promises. This leads voters to prioritize immediate tangible benefits over the uncertain long-term advantages promised by candidates. These factors collectively perpetuate the cycle of vote buying and selling, eroding democratic integrity and hindering societal progress (Callahan, 2005).

Morality is a system of beliefs, values, or principles that humans use to determine whether actions are right or wrong within the context of society. It is often associated with guiding principles for living a life that promotes virtue, justice, and peaceful coexistence within a community or society. Morality can be derived from various sources, including religion, culture, law, and ethical philosophy, each contributing to the framework that shapes moral conduct and societal norms (Markovits, 2014). Morality and democracy are inherently interconnected components. Democracy is not merely a political system or an electoral mechanism, but a framework grounded in ethical values including justice, equality, and respect

for human dignity. Morality plays a crucial role as the foundation that enables democracy to function meaningfully and sustainably, ensuring that democratic practices align with principles that uphold the common good and societal harmony.

Based on the aforementioned reasons, the researcher recognizes the significance of vote buying and selling as a deeply rooted issue within the democratic system, particularly at the local level in Thailand, where citizens engage most directly with politics. This phenomenon not only undermines societal morality but also erodes the fundamental principles of democracy. This study aimed to analyse the deceptive tactics employed by local politicians and the resultant impacts on societal morality and governance. By examining these dynamics, this research sought to highlight how these practices contribute to the long-term degradation of democratic systems and jeopardize the integrity and sustainability of democratic governance.

## Method

For this study, the researcher collected data from four provinces in Northeastern Thailand: Buriram, Surin, Si Sa Ket, and Ubon Ratchathani. The focus was on examining the patterns of vote buying and selling, public attitudes toward elections, the impact of vote buying on societal morality, and citizens' perceptions of democracy. The study employed a qualitative research approach, utilizing several methods. In-depth individual interviews were used to gain detailed insights into the experiences and perspectives of participants. Individual interviews to capture a range of opinions and personal accounts. Focus group discussions were also used to explore collective attitudes and social dynamics. Additionally, participant observation was employed to understand the phenomenon within its natural context. These methods were chosen to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the issues under investigation. The findings aim to shed light on the interplay between vote-buying practices, moral values, and democratic principles in the local context.

**1. Secondary Sources.** The collection of secondary data for this research involved a thorough review of relevant documents. These included studies on the deceptive tactics employed by local politicians in vote-buying practices, analyses of the impacts of vote buying on societal morality, and the stability of democratic foundations. The examination of relevant concepts, theories, and previous research was conducted to contextualize and frame the findings within the broader academic discourse. This approach provided critical insights into the structural and systemic nature of vote-buying and its far-reaching implications on democratic governance and societal values.

**2. Primary Sources.** Primary data were collected to explore patterns of vote-buying practices, public attitudes toward elections, the impacts of vote buying on the morality of communities, and citizens' perspectives on democracy. The data collection methods employed for this purpose included detailed investigations into local practices and behaviours related to vote buying. Qualitative assessments took the form of interviews, focus groups, and participant observations. This approach aimed to capture the lived experiences and viewpoints of individuals directly engaged with or affected by these phenomena, providing a deeper understanding of their implications for democracy and social ethics.

The in-depth interview technique was employed using a structured interview guide to collect data on the following: (1) knowledge and experiences related to vote buying and selling, (2) causes of and motivations behind vote-buying practices, (3) patterns and methods of vote buying, (4) public attitudes toward elections, (5) the impact of vote buying on the moral fabric of communities, and (6) citizens' perspectives on democracy. This method allowed for detailed and nuanced insights into the personal and collective experiences of participants, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding vote-buying practices and their broader implications.

Focus group discussions explored public opinions and perspectives on the deceptive tactics used by local politicians in vote-buying practices. Each focus group consisted of six to eight participants. They provided insights into the perceived impacts of vote-buying on public morality and discussed potential solutions to address these challenges.

Non-participant observation was employed to collect data on public behavior related to vote-buying practices, including methods of cash distribution and the provision of goods. This approach allowed for a deeper understanding of the environmental and social contexts surrounding vote-buying activities. The collected observational data complements the findings from interviews and focus group discussions, enhancing the comprehensiveness of the study.

### **Data Collection Period**

The fieldwork for this study was conducted between October 2024 and April 2025: a politically significant period for local governance in Thailand. This timeframe coincided with the preparatory phase and pre-election activities leading up to local elections in various parts of the country, particularly in the four target provinces of Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani. The timing of the data collection thus provided a highly relevant context for examining the political behavior of both candidates and eligible voters. This period allowed for a nuanced investigation into patterns of vote-buying, the use of resources and influence for political advantage, and the complex interaction between local cultural norms and grassroots democratic processes. The convergence of electoral mobilization and socio-political dynamics during this phase offered valuable insights into how local political practices are shaped, negotiated, and embedded in everyday life.

### **Research Target Group**

In this study, the researcher focused on four provinces in Northeastern Thailand: Buriram, Surin, Si Sa Ket, and Ubon Ratchathani. A total of 95 key informants were selected through purposive sampling. The selection process emphasized individuals with knowledge and experiences related to vote buying and selling. This includes causes, motivations, patterns, public attitudes toward elections, the impact of vote buying on community morality, and citizens' perspectives on democracy. The target group was categorized into five distinct groups as follows:

**1. General Public Voters.** This study includes a total of 30 individuals from key demographic groups: rural residents, urban residents, and low-income individuals. These groups provide critical perspectives on the issue of vote-buying by local politicians. Rural residents are often the primary targets of vote-buying due to their limited access to information and political education, making them more vulnerable to deceptive tactics. In contrast, urban residents typically have broader access to information and may possess differing viewpoints on vote-buying, offering insights into the issue from a diverse contextual perspective. Additionally, low-income individuals constitute an economically vulnerable group that can be easily influenced by financial incentives offered by politicians. This dynamic highlights the relationship between poverty and political corruption, underscoring the socioeconomic dimensions of the issue.

**2. Local Politicians and Campaign Teams.** This group consists of 15 individuals, including local politicians and campaign team members responsible for voter outreach and coordination. They play a direct role in planning and implementing political strategies, providing valuable insights into the methods, strategies, and forms of electoral fraud employed in local elections. Their perspectives contribute to a deeper understanding of the patronage networks associated with vote-buying, the mechanisms used to maintain political power, and

the strategies employed to build public support. This group's insights are crucial for comprehending the intricate dynamics of local political corruption.

**3. Community Leaders and Influential Figures.** This group consists of 20 individuals, including subdistrict chiefs, village heads, religious leaders such as Buddhist monks or other spiritual figures, teachers, and other individuals who play significant roles in society. They possess a deep understanding of the social issues and context within their communities and play a crucial role in reflecting the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of the public, as well as the moral implications of vote-buying practices. Their insights facilitate an analysis of social trends and the potential long-term impacts of vote-buying, such as the erosion of trust in leadership and the democratic system. This group's perspectives are essential for comprehending the broader societal consequences of electoral corruption.

**4. Election Process Stakeholders.** This group consists of 10 individuals, including officials from the Election Commission (EC), government officials involved in election management, and election observers. They play a crucial role in overseeing and ensuring that the electoral process complies with legal regulations. These stakeholders possess in-depth knowledge of the procedures, processes, and legal frameworks related to vote-buying. Their insights are essential in identifying vulnerabilities and weaknesses within the electoral system that may create opportunities for corruption. This group's perspectives contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the systemic challenges and potential areas for electoral reform.

**5. Youth and the New Generation.** This group consists of 20 individuals, including students and young people from both rural and urban areas. As future voters and key drivers of the democratic system, their perspectives provide valuable insights into emerging political behaviors and attitudes that may have long-term implications for the electoral system.

## Findings

Vote buying remains a persistent issue in democratic systems across many countries, undermining the integrity of elections and the core values of democratic governance. The methods employed by local politicians to buy votes vary significantly and play a critical role in shaping the dynamics of democratic societies. These methods include direct cash payments, promises to provide goods, services, or other benefits to citizens, either directly or indirectly. The consequences are profound, eroding the foundations of democracy by diminishing public trust in elections, reducing civic engagement, and fostering perceptions of politics as a mechanism for the benefit of those in power. Vote buying erodes the moral structure of democracy, which is fundamentally built upon fairness, justice, and accountability. The decline of these moral foundations weakens the democratic process. Furthermore, such deceptive practices instill distorted values among citizens, contributing to the perpetuation of political corruption in the long term. This study specifically examines the deceptive tactics employed by local politicians in vote-buying practices and their impact on societal morality, which ultimately threatens the stability and future of democratic foundations. The findings are detailed as follows:

**1. Patterns of Deceptive Vote-buying Practices by Local Politicians.** The findings reveal that vote buying and selling is a widespread issue that undermines democratic principles in political systems worldwide. Vote buying refers to the exchange of material benefits—such as money, goods, or assistance—offered by politicians to eligible voters in return for electoral support. Conversely, vote selling involves voters willingly accepting these benefits in exchange

for their votes. This practice is particularly prevalent in rural areas and among low-income or economically disadvantaged groups, where voters often accept money or goods as compensation for their votes. Such transactions perpetuate systemic inequalities and distort the democratic process, compromising the integrity of elections and the fundamental values of representative democracy (Muhtadi & Muhtadi, 2019). Local politicians often view these groups—those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds—as more susceptible to exchanging their votes for money or goods, compared to individuals with higher education levels or stable incomes. The latter group tends to possess greater knowledge, experience, and a more critical perspective, recognizing that vote buying and selling undermines the moral foundations of justice within society. This behavior erodes ethical values essential to maintaining fairness and equity in democratic systems (Heath & Tillin, 2018). Based on data collected from the four provinces—Buriram, Surin, Si Sa Ket, and Ubon Ratchathani—eight distinct patterns of vote-buying practices were identified: (1) Direct cash payments, in which money is offered directly to voters; (2) Provision of goods or services, which supplies tangible items or services in exchange for votes; (3) False promises, which include making deceptive promises to gain voter support; (4) Use of networks or intermediaries, which employs middlemen or networks to facilitate vote buying; (5) Coercive strategies, which apply pressure or threats to secure votes; (6) Concealed vote-buying practices, which mask the transaction through indirect methods; (7) Digital vote-buying by utilizing digital platforms or technologies to influence voters; and (8) Exploitation of state mechanisms or organizations, which takes the form of leveraging government resources or institutional frameworks for electoral advantage. Each of these methods reflects the complexity and adaptability of vote-buying tactics, with further details elaborated below.

**1.1 Direct Cash Payments.** The study found that direct cash payments are a prevalent method of vote buying across various levels of politics, including village heads, members of sub district administrative organizations, municipal councils, provincial administrative organizations, and members of parliament. This form of vote buying typically occurs in three distinct phases: (1) Introduction Phase: During this phase, the politician introduces themselves to the community, signaling their intention to run for office. Community-level campaign coordinators collect the names of attendees at these introductory events to estimate expenses and allocate cash or goods for participants. This phase is primarily about establishing initial recognition among voters. (2) Campaigning Phase: This is the active campaigning period, during which local campaign coordinators select potential voters to attend rallies or meetings. Cash payments may also be offered to secure votes, particularly targeting low-income groups or elderly individuals with lower quality of life. These groups are seen as more approachable and easier to persuade compared to others. (3) Pre-Election Period (2-3 days before voting): This phase involves the most intense vote-buying activities. Politicians and their campaign teams focus on visiting households identified as likely supporters. Local coordinators engage directly with these households to solidify support, offering cash with the explicit expectation of securing votes. This phase is critical as it aims to ensure the desired election outcome. This systematic approach highlights the strategic deployment of cash payments at different stages of the electoral process, with particular emphasis on targeting vulnerable groups for maximum impact.

According to accounts from eligible voters with experience in vote-buying, they stated:

*“Vote buying occurs at all levels, from village heads to members of subdistrict administrative organizations, municipal councils, provincial administrative organizations, and members of parliament. The spending is particularly high at the local level. For instance, village heads, subdistrict administrative members, and municipal council members pay*

*between 500 and 3,000 baht per person. The smaller the jurisdiction, the higher the payment. For example, candidates running for the position of village head might pay 2,000–3,000 baht per person. If a household has many members, they often receive both lump sums and individual payments. Lump sums range from 30,000 to 50,000 baht, in addition to 3,000 baht per person. This strategy increases the likelihood of securing votes, as gaining the support of large families significantly enhances election prospects."*

The patronage system constitutes an asymmetrical structure of power relations, wherein politicians provide material benefits—such as money, goods, employment opportunities, or various forms of assistance—to constituents in exchange for electoral support. The data highlight that vote buying in elections, where votes are exchanged for monetary compensation, undermines the foundations of democracy by exploiting the economic and social vulnerabilities of rural voters. These individuals, often living in poverty with low incomes and difficult living conditions, become easy targets for politicians seeking to gain power through unethical means. For economically disadvantaged voters, receiving immediate monetary benefits offers an instant and tangible reward, eliminating the uncertainty of whether the promises made by politicians will ever be fulfilled. Direct cash payments, therefore, serve as an immediate gratification mechanism, appealing to those who cannot afford to wait for potential, uncertain benefits in the future. This dynamic reflects how vote-buying practices capitalize on systemic inequalities to erode democratic principles (Owen, 2013). At the same time, rural areas in Thailand, particularly among elderly voters and low-income groups, face limited access to information about candidates, policies, and the consequences of electoral corruption. This lack of political knowledge increases the vulnerability of these groups to interest-driven politics, further entrenching practices like vote buying and reducing their ability to make informed electoral decisions (Callahan, 2005). Vote buying in rural areas by local politicians has become normalized, with many citizens perceiving it not as corruption but as a legitimate practice through which politicians demonstrate goodwill or distribute wealth. Local politicians often maintain close relationships with the community, leveraging patronage networks and social hierarchies to influence voters and reduce resistance to vote-buying practices. This dynamic reinforces the acceptance of such activities and perpetuates the cycle of electoral manipulation in rural areas.

The impacts of vote buying represent a significant erosion of morality, which serves as the foundation of justice. This practice also degrades the quality of political leadership by prioritizing financial power over the knowledge and abilities of candidates. Politicians who spend substantial sums to secure votes often view their tenure as an opportunity to *"recover their investment,"* which becomes a primary driver of corruption and mismanagement. Furthermore, these actions weaken the democratic system by fostering public perceptions that elections are merely ceremonial acts rather than mechanisms for improving the quality of life and driving societal development. This diminishes the perceived value of democracy and undermines its potential to serve as a tool for meaningful progress.

**1.2 Provision of Goods or Services.** The study found that local politicians frequently distribute essential goods, such as rice, cooking oil, sugar, or cooking utensils, which hold significant value in resource-scarce rural areas. These items are typically handed out during election campaigns and are often accompanied by support for community activities, such as religious events, funerals, or other social gatherings. Politicians provide items like rice, oil, sugar, and cooking utensils, as well as drinking water, to support these events. Such distributions often occur during the initial phase of a campaign or within a period when electoral regulations from the Election Commission do not yet prohibit such activities. Additionally, local politicians may offer temporary assistance, such as repairing roads,

organizing community clean-ups, or providing healthcare services during the campaign period. Examples of these services include vision tests, free eyeglasses for the elderly, and the distribution of health-related supplies. Although these activities may appear to be charitable endeavours, they are inherently political in nature, with the underlying objective of securing votes from eligible voters. This blend of social outreach and political strategy exemplifies how material incentives are used to influence electoral outcomes in rural areas.

From focus group discussions with community leaders and socially influential individuals in Buriram Province, it was noted:

*"When local politicians provide rice, cooking oil, sugar, or cooking utensils to the public during religious or communal events, it is often seen as an act of social support. Moreover, such distributions typically occur outside the official campaign period or before the Election Commission (EC) enforces restrictions. Although these actions carry implicit political motives, in rural areas, they are viewed as necessary contributions. For events like religious ceremonies or funerals, most people perceive this support as part of a politician's duty to care for the well-being of the community. During election periods, such distributions continue but are conducted indirectly. Politicians rely on campaign coordinators to distribute goods, as direct distribution is illegal. The coordinators often inform the event organizers or recipients that the items come from a specific politician, ensuring that the association with the candidate is clear while technically adhering to legal boundaries."*

The persistence of patronage-based politics reflects not only economic poverty but also deeply rooted cultural norms and reciprocal expectations. Stakeholders in Buriram Province emphasized that the exchange of votes is often not perceived as corruption, but rather as a customary transaction—an obligation to reciprocate assistance received during times of personal or communal hardship.

**1.3 False Promises.** The study found that vote-buying through false promises is a common strategy employed by local politicians. In this approach, candidates make pledges to voters, promising to implement development projects or improve local resources. Such promises are typically made during campaign periods, exploiting voters' aspirations for the development of their communities. For instance, during the 2024 campaign for the position of Provincial Administrative Organization (PAO) Governor in Northeastern Thailand, a candidate stated in a speech:

*"If elected as the PAO Governor, I will establish a provincial transportation system connecting all districts. We will develop a convenient and accessible bus service that reaches every district in the province. Additionally, we will create stable income opportunities for citizens by establishing a centralized hub for purchasing agricultural products from local farmers."*

However, after being elected, these campaign promises were not implemented, revealing the discrepancy between the candidate's campaign rhetoric and their actual performance in office. This practice not only undermines public trust but also highlights the manipulation of voter expectations as a tool to secure electoral victory without accountability. From focus group discussions with eligible voters in Sangkha District, Surin Province, participants shared the following insights:

*"The promises made by politicians are merely campaign rhetoric designed to deceive the public. Voters who lack critical thinking skills or who have never evaluated the past performance of politicians are often misled. This is particularly true in rural areas, where the majority of the population consists of elderly individuals with limited education. As a result, they are unable to see through the deceptive tactics of these politicians, ultimately believing the promises and deciding to cast their votes for them."*

It is evident that "promises to provide," or commitments to deliver various benefits in exchange for electoral support, are a common political strategy, particularly in rural areas or regions plagued by economic and social inequality. These promises, such as building roads, distributing financial aid, or supporting development projects, are often presented during campaign periods to instill hope among the electorate. The phenomenon of "promises to provide" arises from two primary factors: (1) the needs of the populace, and (2) the politicians' intent to secure electoral victory. In areas where communities lack fundamental resources (Umbers, 2020), pledges to address essential needs—such as clean water systems, schools, or roads connecting villages—resonate strongly with voters. A significant number of citizens choose to support candidates who promise to fulfill their urgent needs. However, a critical issue arises when such promises turn out to be nothing more than "deceptive assurances," with no genuine intent of implementation. This practice not only deceives voters but also erodes public trust in democratic systems. This dynamic underscores the complex interplay between voter expectations and political motivations, revealing both the potential for short-term influence and the long-term consequences for democratic integrity.

*"According to information provided by an official from the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), the Office of the Election Commission has issued public guidelines for election campaigning. These guidelines prohibit candidates or any individuals from engaging in actions aimed at influencing voters to cast their votes for themselves or other candidates, to refrain from voting for particular candidates, or to encourage voters to cast "no votes" in elections for local council members or local administrators. While some complaints have been filed, many lack sufficient evidence. As a result, investigations often conclude with findings of no wrongdoing or insufficient evidence to prosecute those accused. The Election Commission performs its duties based on available evidence and adheres to its mandate to ensure fairness and integrity in the electoral process. For elections to be transparent, fair, and just, public participation is critical. Citizens are encouraged to monitor the election process and, if they witness any violations, to document the evidence and submit it to the Election Commission at any time. This collaborative effort between the commission and the public is essential to uphold the principles of democracy and electoral integrity. "*

Although the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) is primarily responsible for ensuring that elections are conducted with integrity and fairness, its efforts to investigate electoral fraud have often proven ineffective or inefficient in practice. The researcher identifies five key reasons for the ECT's inability to effectively address election fraud. First, is the complexity and sophistication of fraudulent practices. Those involved in election fraud employ methods that are difficult to detect, such as using local proxies, distributing money through vote canvassers (hua khan), or offering benefits in less traceable forms, such as organizing community events or promising development projects. Second, technology is used to conceal evidence. Modern election fraud increasingly involves digital financial transactions, making it more challenging to trace the flow of money. The third reason involves a lack of sufficient witnesses or evidence. Many citizens who witness electoral fraud are reluctant to report it or serve as witnesses due to fear of retaliation or threats from influential figures in their communities. The fourth reason entails the distortion of information within the complaint process. In some cases, complaints are delayed or inadequately addressed due to procedural complexity, or because involved officials may have political interests or conflicts of interest.

**1.4 The Use of Networks or Intermediaries.** In the four provinces of Buriram, Surin, Si Sa Ket, and Ubon Ratchathani, the practice of vote-buying has evolved into a system of increasing complexity. Local politicians have leveraged networks or intermediaries to secure electoral support by engaging influential individuals within communities, referred to as vote

canvassers or head agents. These intermediaries are carefully selected based on their credibility and influence within the community, often including respected elders, village chiefs, deputy village chiefs, subdistrict administrative organization members, village health volunteers, or other prominent community figures. The intermediaries act as conduits for distributing money and goods to eligible voters on behalf of the politicians. Despite the illegality of these activities, head agents are incentivized with compensation or rewards that exceed the value given to voters, both in monetary terms and material benefits. The responsibilities of these vote canvassers encompass various activities, such as mobilizing community members to attend political rallies, distributing cash to voters, and providing household items or goods to the public in the name of the politician. This system exemplifies the strategic use of community influence to achieve electoral gains while circumventing legal frameworks. Lastly, the normalization of vote-buying as a cultural value. In certain areas, vote-buying or offering benefits during elections has become a socially accepted practice. Some groups view these benefits as immediate personal gains rather than recognizing their long-term detrimental effects on the political system. These factors collectively hinder the effectiveness of the ECT in combating election fraud and undermine the integrity of the democratic process. Addressing these challenges requires systemic reforms, public awareness, and robust enforcement mechanisms to ensure free and fair elections.

A pivotal mechanism employed by local politicians to attain political office is the use of head agents, individuals, or groups who play a crucial role in building networks and bridging the connection between politicians and the electorate. These head agents are entrusted by local politicians to serve as intermediaries between politicians and eligible voters. Their responsibilities include supporting politicians by leveraging their personal credibility and influence within the community. Head agents are often individuals who are well-known and trusted by local residents, such as village chiefs, sub district chiefs, or community leaders. They maintain strong personal relationships with the people in their area and utilize these connections to distribute financial and material benefits. These benefits often take the form of gifts, cash, or promises of employment contracts. Such activities are carried out discreetly, making them difficult to detect or verify. In addition to material distribution, head agents rely on their social relationships to persuade the electorate to vote in alignment with the politicians' preferences. In certain cases, indirect intimidation may be employed to pressure voters into compliance. Furthermore, in some regions, head agents are tasked with monitoring whether voters have cast their ballots as agreed. They may employ methods such as collecting evidence of voting or observing activities on Election Day. This system exemplifies the intricate interplay of trust, influence, and informal coercion that underscores the strategic operations of local political campaigns, often challenging the boundaries of legal and ethical standards.

**1.5 The Use of Coercive Strategies.** The four Northeastern Thai provinces analyzed in this study are characterized as remote and underdeveloped areas, where local politicians employ coercive strategies to influence voters. These tactics often exploit voters' limited access to information and awareness. While physical violence is rarely used, the coercion typically takes the form of indirect threats. Politicians may warn that families who do not vote for them will be denied various financial subsidies or agricultural assistance. Such benefits are conditional upon the individual or family casting their vote in favor of the politician. This strategic use of implied threats highlights the vulnerability of rural populations and the reliance on essential resources as a leverage point in electoral manipulation.

Based on information provided by eligible voters in Krasang District, Buriram Province:

*"Coercion to influence the electorate in favors of local politicians has been observed during mayoral elections. Representatives of parliament have reportedly exerted*

*pressure on village chiefs and their deputies, stating that if their villages fail to elect the designated candidate as mayor, the community will be denied funding for various activities. This includes withholding support for community projects and infrastructure development. Village chiefs are subsequently tasked with ensuring that every household within their jurisdiction casts votes exclusively for the preferred candidate, reinforcing the coercive strategy to secure the election of the politician in question. This practice underscores the interplay between political pressure and the dependency of rural communities on state-funded resources."*

Information provided by general voters reveals that coercion often originates from national-level politicians who strategically position their affiliates as local politicians. These affiliates, in turn, compel community leaders to instruct every household to vote in a unified direction. Noncompliance results in individuals or families being stigmatized as outsiders, which subsequently impacts their access to community support and activities (Amaechi & Stockemer, 2022). The use of political power to intimidate voters fosters an environment of fear, leading people to believe they lack the power to resist such behavior. This perception emboldens some local politicians to act without regard for legal constraints, further perpetuating a culture of impunity within the political system.

**1.6 Concealing Vote-Buying Practices.** Local politicians often disguise vote-buying efforts by organizing or supporting events that appear to benefit the community, such as vocational skill-building programs, health campaigns, or agricultural training. While these activities may provide value, their primary objective is to enhance the politician's public image. Social events are strategically used as a façade to gain favor from voters (Naz & Fruto, 2024). The planning of sporting events at the sub district or district levels, such as football games, is a noteworthy example. These gatherings are a common method of gaining political backing. Under the presence of community development, politicians usually promote these initiatives by giving money, awards, gear, or uniforms. With this strategy, they may cultivate goodwill while secretly using public events to win over voters.

Consequently, local politicians frequently use training sessions or skill development initiatives, such as agricultural workshops, health awareness campaigns, or vocational training, to conceal vote-buying. These programs are intended to convey a sense of dedication to community development. Though these kinds of events usually take place in the run-up to national elections (Muhtadi, 2019) and are primarily aimed at fostering loyalty among voters.

**1.7 Digital Vote-Buying.** The advancement of digital technology has led local politicians to increasingly adopt modern tools for digital vote-buying. These methods include transferring money through mobile applications and offering rewards or incentives via social media platforms. Research indicates that digital vote-buying typically operates through financial transactions conducted via mobile apps. Politicians transfer funds to vote canvassers or intermediaries who are responsible for distributing the money to eligible voters. By entrusting intermediaries with this task, politicians aim to prevent authorities from obtaining evidence that could directly implicate them. This method is considered cautious and sophisticated, leaving only digital traces that are difficult to monitor comprehensively. Each financial transfer to a voter's account is carefully managed, and intermediaries must ensure that recipients do not disclose the transactions publicly or report them to relevant authorities. Beyond monetary transfers, other forms of incentives are also distributed, such as gift vouchers, prepaid top-up cards, or even physical goods, to motivate voters to support specific candidates. These practices are particularly common in rural areas, where poverty rates are high, and financial incentives have a stronger influence on voter behavior. Many voters in these

communities use the money or rewards they receive to cover living expenses and support their families. In such rural settings, vote-buying is often perceived as a normal practice rather than corruption. It is viewed as a transactional relationship—an exchange negotiated between voters and candidates.

Based on interviews with local politicians and their campaign teams in Khueang Nai District, Ubon Ratchathani Province:

*"Advancements in technology have significantly influenced contemporary practices. A commonly employed method involves transferring money through multiple accounts, such as using 'merchant accounts' that are not directly linked to the politicians. Alternatively, intermediaries first receive the funds and then distribute them to eligible voters. To avoid raising suspicion, the money is often transferred in small amounts over irregular intervals. Another observed strategy is the use of e-Wallets or bank transfer applications, where funds are provided in exchange for points redeemable for goods or discount cards, often under the name of another individual. When intermediaries communicate with voters about these transactions, efforts are made to obscure the purpose of the funds. Messages or verbal instructions avoid explicitly indicating that the transfers are for vote-buying. Instead, they are framed as "donations for religious events" or "repayment of personal loans."*

**1.8 Abuse of Governmental Mechanisms and Establishments.** Public assets including cars, buildings, and official lines of communication are sometimes used by local politicians for their campaigns. Ongoing state initiatives, such as welfare distribution, water system development, or road construction, are frequently cited by politicians as their personal accomplishments, even when they are part of established government policies or regular operations of public agencies. Promotional signs usually use the politician's name to support these assertions. Furthermore, policies that deal with the allocation of resources—like money, products, or services—are frequently carried out by state agencies in order to win political support, especially before elections. For instance, targeted financial assistance programs in areas prioritized by politicians, or special welfare initiatives in key constituencies, are commonly observed strategies. Simultaneously, politicians may interfere in the operations of state agencies, exerting influence to pressure or direct these agencies to act in ways that serve political objectives. This behavior is particularly prevalent among national-level politicians affiliated with major political parties. Examples include accelerating the approval of projects in key constituencies or delaying projects in areas likely to support opposing candidates. These actions reflect manipulative political tactics aimed at exerting pressure and intimidating both political opponents and constituents who do not support them.

Vote-buying in local elections constitutes not only a violation of the rule of law, but also a systematic subversion of democratic structures. This practice reflects the inequitable deployment of resources in exchange for political power, thereby distorting the principle of citizen participation and reducing elections to hollow rituals devoid of substantive meaning. An analysis of vote-buying patterns reveals at least eight distinct practices that contravene both legal and ethical standards in politics: (1) direct cash payments, (2) provision of goods or services, (3) false promises, (4) the use of patronage networks or intermediaries, (5) coercive strategies, (6) concealment of vote-buying operations by local politicians, (7) digital vote-buying, and (8) abuse of governmental mechanisms and public institutions, as shown in Figure 1.

These findings reveal that vote-buying is not merely the result of individual behavior, but rather a structural mechanism that exploits income disparities and economic deprivation to gain political power. Therefore, the distribution of money and goods is not simply a form of reward for votes, but a component of a long-standing patron-client relationship that continues to shape electoral dynamics in Thai society. According to a study by Krisanaphuti (2014). Vote-buying in local elections in Northeastern Thailand is not merely a transient phenomenon,

but rather a deeply embedded system within the social structure and political culture of local communities. Central to this system is the role of *hua khanaen* (canvassers or vote brokers), who serve as key intermediaries in building networks and negotiating with eligible voters. Canvassers for electoral candidates function as distributors of various resources, including cash, clothing, and consumer goods. Particularly in the days leading up to an election, additional cash payments are often made to remind or secure the loyalty of voters. The amount disbursed varies according to the level of the election. It was found that, in local elections, candidates tend to offer higher sums—typically ranging from 500 to 1,000 baht, and in some cases up to 2,000 baht per voter—which is significantly more than the amounts offered in national parliamentary or senatorial elections (Krisanaphuti, 2014).

Beyond the distribution of money and goods, candidates or their proxies also organize communal feasts, often involving the slaughter of cows or pigs to provide food for the community. These practices foster cultural and psychological bonds between candidates and voters. Additional services are also commonly offered, such as transportation to polling stations, assistance in attending community rituals (e.g., ordinations, weddings, funerals), and even sponsored excursions for canvassers to various locations. Moreover, populist policies implemented by political parties function as a structural form of vote-buying at the policy level. These strategies reflect a deliberate effort by parties to deploy state resources as political incentives, aiming to garner electoral support in exchange for short-term material benefits.

**2. Effects on Ethics and the Dismantling of Democratic Bases.** Vote-buying turns the election process into a controlled mechanism, distorting what should ideally be the true will of the people. Those in positions of authority frequently do so by using financial resources to influence voting decisions rather than by their skills or visions that inspire public trust. The core democratic values of equality and justice are compromised by this behavior. Vote-buying by local politicians usually puts gaining political positions ahead of enacting laws that benefit the general population. Such conduct is indicative of a lack of ethics and morals (Achel, 2023), which are qualities essential for leadership in a democratic system. The tactics of vote-buying take many forms, including offering cash, goods, consumables, or even making unrealistic promises. These actions not only destroy the integrity of fair elections but also foster a harmful societal norm that views voting rights as commodities to be bought and sold. As a result, some citizens perceive elections as opportunities for short-term personal gain rather than avenues to contribute to a better collective future. Vote-buying perpetuates a vicious cycle within local governance and Thailand's political system. Politicians who secure positions through financial manipulation often seek to recoup their expenditures or profit from their offices, leading to corruption, inefficient governance, and increased societal inequality. Furthermore, this practice erodes public confidence in the democratic system and the representatives they elect.

John Rawls proposed that a democratic society should be grounded in the principle of justice as fairness, which entails that all individuals must have an equal voice in shaping the future of their society. When individuals sell their political rights in exchange for personal gain, such actions distort the mechanisms of justice and generate political inequality. This is because the voices of the poor are effectively silenced, subsumed under a system driven by the private interests of the powerful (Audard, 2014).

The following effects on morals and the weakening of democratic underpinnings are described by the researcher distortion of the election process and how the popular will is reflected in it: (1) The devaluation of democratic values, such as justice and equality; (2) The creation of detrimental social norms that put immediate profit ahead of long-term growth; (3) The promotion of ineffective government and corruption; and (4) The decline in public confidence in elected officials and democratic institutions.

**2.1 Impacts on Morality.** When politicians resort to vote-buying to secure electoral support, such unethical behavior becomes normalized or even accepted by society in certain contexts. Many individuals perceive it as mere assistance or a benefit they are entitled to during elections. In reality, however, this practice undermines morality, lowers ethical standards, and fosters harmful values. For instance, it creates an acceptance of corruption as an inevitable or minor issue. Elections, which should serve as a mechanism for justice and social progress, are reduced to opportunities for financial gain or the exchange of goods, transforming democracy into a commodity rather than a system of governance aimed at societal development (Berry, 2016). When voters accept bribes or benefits from politicians engaged in vote-buying, they become complicit in the corrupt process. While they may not be the direct perpetrators, their participation validates and supports the immoral behavior of local politicians. Accepting bribes legitimizes corrupt politicians, enabling them to repeat such actions without societal resistance. This creates a vicious cycle in which corrupt politicians continue to win elections and misuse their power, while honest candidates struggle to compete due to a lack of resources to engage in vote-buying. Consequently, the system perpetuates unethical practices, further eroding public trust in democracy and preventing genuine reform.

From focus group discussions with young voters and members of the new generation of eligible voters in Sisaket Province, participants shared the following insights:

*"Vote-buying by politicians occurs at every level. I've often seen parents and guardians accept money from politicians, but I personally refuse to take it. A mere 300-500 baht cannot buy our rights. Politicians who attain power through such means inevitably seek to exploit their positions for personal gain. What we cannot accept is the hypocrisy of these politicians—once in office, they promote campaigns like 'Grow Up with Integrity,' despite having committed electoral fraud themselves. It is morally reprehensible for them to preach ethics while violating them so blatantly. Our politicians seem to lack self-awareness and shame for their actions. However, I believe that in the future, vote-buying will decrease because the public is becoming increasingly aware of and resistant to these corrupt practices."*

**2.2 Undermining the Foundations of Democracy.** Vote-buying and electoral fraud at the local level undermines the fundamental values of democracy, eroding both justice and social accountability. Democracy relies on free and fair elections—an essential process that allows citizens to select appropriate leaders without coercion, undue pressure, or corruption. Vote-buying distorts democratic principles, as political candidates do not secure victory based on policies or competence but rather through financial incentives designed to manipulate voter decisions. When elections are reduced to mere financial transactions, political fairness is compromised. Individuals who should be elected based on knowledge, capability, and integrity are displaced by those who exploit financial resources to secure votes. This practice fosters a political culture devoid of accountability to the public. Consequently, the emphasis on public policy diminishes, and individuals with a genuine commitment to societal development but lacking financial resources are systematically excluded from the political process. Furthermore, citizens who accept bribes contribute to the perpetuation of political corruption. By engaging in such exchanges, they inadvertently reinforce a system that rewards dishonesty and undermines democratic legitimacy (Hicken, 2009).

Ockey (1994) describes political parties in Thailand as inherently weak institutions, often dominated by factional leaders who consolidate power within personal networks. These networks rely more on patronage than on political ideology, fostering a system of clientelism and political corruption. This phenomenon is not merely a consequence of weak institutions; rather, it is a critical mechanism that enables factions to sustain themselves within Thai society. Vote-buying, bureaucratic appointments, and policy manipulation serve as the primary tools through which factional leaders maintain their dominance. Thai political parties tend to lack

stability, functioning more as temporary alliances rather than as permanent, structured organizations. Politicians frequently switch parties, seeking affiliations that offer them the best access to resources and benefits. The dominance of factions over political ideology has profound implications for democratic competition. Instead of being policy-driven, political rivalry revolves around power struggles within and between factions. Consequently, governments face chronic instability, as shifting alliances and internal conflicts undermine policy continuity. At the national level, this factionalism sets a precedent for local politics. Local politicians often mimic these structures, establishing patronage networks within their constituencies to secure electoral victories. As a result, vote-buying and patron-client relationships become entrenched at the local level, perpetuating a political culture centered on personal power rather than public policy (Ockey, 1994).

In four key provinces—Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani—politicians do not merely engage in vote-buying to secure local elections. Instead, they construct patronage networks that operate as power structures, leveraging local actors such as community leaders, influential figures, and politically connected businesspeople to mobilize votes. These networks play a crucial role in ensuring the success of factional allies in key positions within the local political system, ultimately channeling votes to support candidates in national elections. The reliance on patronage and financial resources in elections transforms national politics into an extension of entrenched local power bases. Rather than focusing on genuine social development or addressing public concerns, these political actors prioritize personal gains and the consolidation of power within their factions. As a result, vote-buying severely undermines democratic principles and inflicts long-term harm on the political system. This phenomenon not only distorts the will of the electorate but also perpetuates structural corruption, trapping the political system in a cycle of self-serving interests. Addressing this issue requires the implementation of strong institutional mechanisms capable of effectively regulating and mitigating political misconduct. Four key institutional measures are essential:

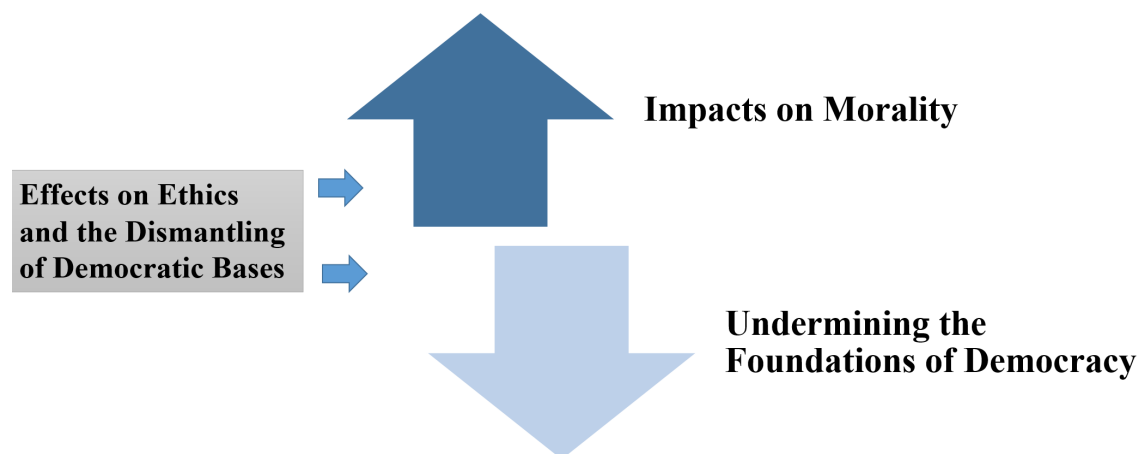
1. Legal and enforcement reforms and a more stringent legal framework governing elections and campaign finance is essential. This includes imposing severe and enforceable penalties for politicians and other actors involved in vote-buying. The Election Commission of Thailand (ECT) must be granted expanded authority to conduct rapid investigations and prosecute electoral fraud. Additionally, mechanisms for citizen participation in election oversight should be strengthened, enabling transparent reporting and public disclosure of electoral malpractice.

2. Financial transparency in political funding is needed. Controlling the sources and flow of political funds is critical in reducing the incentive for vote-buying. Clear and enforceable spending limits for electoral campaigns must be established, with stringent auditing mechanisms to ensure compliance. Politicians and political parties should be required to publicly disclose their financial statements, including assets, liabilities, and campaign expenditures. Furthermore, state funding for political parties should be expanded to reduce reliance on private sector contributions, which often lead to clientelistic politics and financial influence over electoral outcomes.

3. Electoral and institutional reforms are needed. The structure of political institutions and the electoral system directly influences vote-buying behavior. Electoral processes must be redesigned to reduce the incentive for financial manipulation, such as shifting toward proportional representation, which diminishes the reliance on local vote banks. Political party governance should also be reformed to ensure greater transparency and fairness in candidate selection processes, promoting merit-based leadership rather than factional loyalty. Moreover, stricter qualification and vetting measures should be implemented to prevent individuals with a history of corruption from entering the political system.

4. Strengthening political culture and civic engagement is needed. While institutional reforms play a critical role, long-term change requires a transformation in political behavior and public awareness. Civic education must be promoted, particularly at the local level, to raise awareness about the detrimental effects of vote-buying on democratic integrity. Civil society organizations should be empowered to actively monitor elections and advocate for transparency. Additionally, ethical political leadership must be cultivated through structured training and development programs for politicians, reinforcing the values of accountability and public service.

By integrating these institutional and cultural reforms, Thailand can move toward a more transparent and accountable democratic system, reducing the influence of money in politics and fostering genuine political representation.



**Figure 1** Effects on Ethics and the Dismantling of Democratic Bases

Elections are a central mechanism of democratic governance, offering citizens the opportunity to participate in the selection of political leadership and the direction of national policy. However, this mechanism has been distorted by the persistent practice of vote-buying, which reveals deeper structural deficiencies in democratic development—particularly in the four northeastern provinces of Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani. In these regions, widespread poverty, dependency on political authority, and limited political literacy among the population contribute to the entrenchment of electoral manipulation. Findings from this study indicate that local politicians frequently exchange material goods—such as cash, essential household items, or promises of future benefits—in return for electoral support. These exchanges occur both at the individual and group levels and are often embedded within targeted policies, including agricultural subsidies or activity-based community support programs. While vote-buying is legally prohibited, it remains socially accepted in certain areas - especially within communities where patron-client relationships are deeply rooted.

In this study, the researcher proposes a five-level scale to classify the types of vote-buying employed by local politicians, based on the degree of coercion, complexity, and institutional embeddedness:

**Level 1: Non-Coercive Behavior**

This refers to vote-buying practices that occur without the use of coercion or pressure, typically involving voluntary and open exchanges.

**Level 2: Targeted Non-Cash Vote-Buying**

This involves the provision of goods, services, or selective favors to specific groups in exchange for electoral support, without direct monetary payments.

**Level 3: Deceptive Promises and Misinformation**

At this level, politicians employ false promises or deliberately misleading information to influence voter behavior, despite no intention to deliver on such commitments.

Level 4: Technological or Sophisticated Vote Manipulation

This level reflects the use of modern tools—such as digital platforms, surveillance mechanisms, or algorithmic targeting—to manipulate voter perceptions or behaviors in covert ways.

Level 5: State-Embedded Vote Control

This represents the highest degree of manipulation, wherein vote-buying is institutionalized within state structures and reinforced by technological control, rendering political manipulation systemic and difficult to detect. The author presents observed patterns of vote-buying behavior across the four provinces—Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani—as follows:

**Table 1.** Evaluation of Vote-Buying Behaviors by Politicians in Four Provinces

Typologies of Vote-Buying Practices	Characteristic(s)	Target Group	A Rating Scale of 1 to 5					Empirical Data from the Field	
			1	2	3	4	5		
1. Direct cash payments	Distributing cash in exchange for votes	Eligible voters / vote canvassers						✓	The four provinces—Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani
2. Provision of goods or services	Distribution of in-kind goods—such as rice and clothing—and the provision of personalized services	Citizens eligible to vote						✓	The four provinces under study include Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani. In Ubon Ratchathani Province, the research specifically focused on three districts: Khemarat, Nam Yuen, and Na Tan.
3. False promises	False promises, such as pledges to build roads or implement social assistance programs	Audience of the political speech						✓	The four provinces—Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani
4. Use of networks or intermediaries	Utilizing vote canvassers or local power brokers as intermediaries	Vote canvassers / local politicians						✓	The four provinces—Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani
5. Use of coercive strategies	Intimidation or coercion, such as threatening to revoke welfare entitlements	Eligible voters in economically disadvantaged areas						✓	The study covers four provinces: Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani. In Buriram Province, vote-buying practices were observed across all districts,

**Table 1.** (Cont.)

Typologies of Vote-Buying Practices	Characteristic(s)	Target Group	A Rating Scale of 1 to 5					Empirical Data from the Field
			1	2	3	4	5	
6. Concealing vote-buying practices	Employing concealment tactics, such as intentionally delaying the distribution of goods until after the election	Election Commission / Vote canvassers		✓				The four provinces—Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani
7. Digital vote-buying	Transferring money via PromptPay or providing mobile phone credit	First-time voters/youth electorate					✓	The four provinces—Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani
8. Abuse of governmental mechanisms	Using state budget allocations for electoral campaigning, such as distributing cash to the elderly during the election period	Civil servants / welfare recipients		✓				The study focuses on four provinces: Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani. In Buriram Province, evidence indicates that state power was systematically utilized in conjunction with vote-buying across all districts, highlighting an embedded relationship between political authority and electoral manipulation at the local level.

From a phenomenological perspective, the lower levels (1–2) reflect traditional vote-buying practices, which—though illegal—are relatively transparent and traceable through the direct relationship between the giver and recipient. The intermediate levels (3–4) indicate an evolution toward more sophisticated and covert strategies. These involve technological tools and network-based influence to engineer a form of soft domination over the electorate. The highest level (5) represents an embedded form of vote-buying, wherein corrupt practices are institutionalized within the state machinery or entrenched in local power structures. This form poses the gravest threat to democratic governance, as it is profoundly resistant to scrutiny and difficult for civil society to confront or dismantle.

Rational choice theory (Eriksson, 2011) offers a compelling framework for understanding vote-buying as a form of rational transaction. Under this perspective, vote-buying is not merely a corrupt aberration but a calculated exchange of benefits between political actors and voters. Politicians, in pursuit of electoral support, offer material incentives such as cash, consumer goods, services, or even job guarantees. In return, voters weigh the immediate tangible gains against the uncertain and often intangible promises of future public

policy. This transactional dynamic reflects a classic principal-agent relationship. In democratic theory, politicians act as agents who are expected to seek legitimacy from principals—the citizens who delegate political authority. However, in the context of local politics—characterized by fragmentation, information asymmetry, and low trust in policy implementation—vote-buying emerges as a politically efficient mechanism for acquiring votes. It allows candidates to bypass unreliable policy channels and instead secure electoral support through direct, verifiable exchanges.

Moreover, rational choice theory (Eriksson, 2011) posits that voter turnout and candidate selection are influenced by a basic utility calculus:  $(\text{Expected Benefits}) - (\text{Cost of Voting}) + (\text{Sense of Civic Duty}) = \text{Political Participation}$ . In this framework, monetary inducements can effectively reduce the cost of voting or increase perceived utility—especially when voters receive immediate compensation. Consequently, the act of selling one's vote may be interpreted as a rational decision, particularly when shaped by local economic constraints, social norms, or context-specific ethical considerations (Eriksson, 2011).

The provinces of Buriram, Surin, Sisaket, and Ubon Ratchathani—located in the lower northeastern region of Thailand—share distinct socio-economic and cultural characteristics. The majority of the population in these areas are engaged in agriculture, including rice farming, field crops, and horticulture. However, persistent economic constraints—particularly among low-income groups with limited access to education—continue to hinder social mobility. These structural limitations leave segments of the population vulnerable to political manipulation, especially during electoral cycles. The social fabric in these provinces is characterized by a reciprocal society rooted in kinship networks, communal assistance, and interpersonal empathy. While such relational norms serve as valuable forms of social capital, they simultaneously present openings for exploitation by political actors. Local politicians with opaque political intentions often appropriate the discourse of generosity and benevolence to construct an image of themselves as patrons or benefactors. This narrative, deeply embedded in Thailand's patron-client political culture, serves as a strategic vehicle for securing electoral support. Beneath this façade, however, lies a form of embedded vote-buying, wherein the exchange of favors is camouflaged within personal relationships and social obligations. These practices subtly distort voter behavior, making it difficult to distinguish between voluntary support and politically engineered compliance.

Consequently, there is an urgent need to foster political literacy among local populations and to cultivate a sustainable democratic culture. Enhancing the quality of civic participation and reducing the political exploitation of communal generosity—an inherent form of cultural capital—is essential for strengthening democratic resilience in these rural constituencies.

## Discussion

Democracy is sacred because it is founded on the values of fairness, openness, and true representation of the people. Nevertheless, in Thailand, these ideals have been severely weakened by politicians' widespread vote-buying tactics, especially in rural regions where people are more susceptible to manipulation due to poverty, lack of knowledge, and low political consciousness. Both direct and indirect effects on morals and the weakening of democratic underpinnings result from local officials purchasing votes.

Vote-buying is the practice of exchanging promises or tangible advantages for election support. It has developed over time into a covert and intricate benefit bargain that is masterminded by local politicians. The purpose of this study was to investigate local politicians' underlying attitudes, difficulties, and strategies related to vote-buying schemes. It highlights how these actions affect people's political beliefs, which may eventually threaten the basis of Thai democracy. Stakeholder interviews, thorough case study analyses, and examinations of pertinent political and electoral corruption records served as the foundation for the conclusions.

By focusing on the specific dynamics of vote-buying in local contexts, the study provides valuable insights into the intersection of ethics, governance, and democracy.

This section seeks to present and discuss key findings related to the vote-buying strategies employed by politicians and their implications. The discussion will delve into the multifaceted consequences of these practices on morality, governance, and the democratic process.

Purpose to present a discussion of the findings and key insights that have emerged regarding vote-buying practices among politicians. The researcher will analyze and elaborate on the significant implications of these practices in the context of morality and democracy.

**1. Mechanisms of Concealed Vote-Buying.** According to the report, local officials are now using more advanced and covert techniques to purchase votes instead of openly doing so. Stricter election regulations and the availability of several avenues for reporting electoral infractions have been the driving forces behind this shift. As a result, in order to win votes, politicians increasingly provide incentives in the form of products like home appliances, farm equipment, or services like fixing local infrastructure. A range of strategies are used by politicians before the election, throughout the canvassing phase, and as the election day draws near. These strategies frequently involve making use of customary and community-building events, such religious services, funerals, neighborhood gatherings, and sporting tournaments at the sub district level. In addition to providing local communities with necessary products and services, these initiatives help them become more well-known and visible to voters.

**2. Targeting Vulnerable Populations.** Vote-buying tactics mostly target vulnerable populations, including low-income families, the elderly, and neglected neighborhoods. Politicians take advantage of these groups' financial struggles by providing them with temporary advantages, such as money or necessities, in return for votes. Nevertheless, these tactics put short-term benefits ahead of long-term fixes to raise the general standard of living for the public. According to the study by Muhtadi and Muhtadi (2019) on *The Prevalence of Vote Buying in Indonesia: Building an Index*, economic conditions, particularly poverty and economic insecurity, play a significant role in perpetuating vote-buying practices. Many low-income voters perceive elections as opportunities to obtain short-term material benefits, which makes them highly susceptible to electoral incentives. Political candidates exploit these economic hardships by offering cash, food, or household goods in exchange for votes. Additionally, the study highlights that long-standing patron-client relationships between politicians and voters are a crucial factor in sustaining vote-buying practices. Voters often anticipate tangible rewards in return for their political support, thereby reinforcing a cycle of dependency that perpetuates the practice across electoral cycles.

**3. Social and Cultural Management.** This study emphasizes how politicians make use of social norms and beliefs to win elections. Giving money for funerals, ordination celebrations, or religious rituals are just some examples. Another is giving dry goods and rice to people who are in need. Although such measures are helpful in delivering assistance (Fund, 2009), they frequently have covert political agendas. These include strategies that gradually increase the politician's visibility and influence among voters, such having their name prominently displayed on donation signs or giving community leaders instructions to remind beneficiaries of the politician's role in delivering help. According to Guerra and Justesen (2022), vote buying is a form of political clientelism in which candidates offer money or material benefits to voters prior to elections. Despite the implementation of secret ballots, vote buying remains prevalent in many developing countries. While existing research has primarily focused on how political parties and candidates implement vote-buying strategies and which voter demographics are targeted, there is still limited understanding of the broader impacts on

citizens' political attitudes and behaviours. The study's findings indicate that vote buying presents a paradox for candidates relying on clientele strategies. While it helps secure votes from individuals who accept the money, it simultaneously provokes negative reactions from those who reject the offer or were not targeted. Furthermore, vote buying has a detrimental effect on public perceptions of candidates who engage in such practices, undermining their credibility and trustworthiness in the eyes of the electorate.

**4. Erosion of Public Trust in Democracy.** The detrimental effect of vote-buying on public trust in democratic institutions is among the most important conclusions. People are becoming more and more disenchanted with the election process because they believe it to be dishonest and ineffectual. People's civic engagement and involvement in democratic processes have decreased as a result of this disillusionment because they think that "without money, there is no path to power" (Achel, 2023). A detrimental value system called "political business," which represents the blending of political and commercial interests, has been generated by this perspective. The following are some of its defining characteristics: (1) the idea of political business: Gaining political power is seen by politicians and political parties as an investment that will pay off in the form of access to state resources or unique privileges. During election campaigns, substantial sums of money are frequently spent with the hope of gaining advantages through profitable projects or positions of power after the election. (2) Company-politics relationships: In return for future advantages, such as lucrative government projects, procurement contracts, or legislation that supports their company interests, business owners or corporate groupings give politicians money or resources. (3) Networks of interest: To further their own or their linked companies' interests, politicians take use of their positions to assign friends to important posts in government ministries or state-owned corporations (Gomez, 2002). By putting political and economic gain ahead of the general welfare, this cycle erodes democracy's integrity and erodes public trust in democratic procedures and structures.

**5. Legal and Institutional Weaknesses.** The report identifies serious deficiencies in the way anti-corruption legislation and election rules are implemented. Vote-buying continues undetected due to inadequate supervision procedures and weak legal frameworks, especially in rural regions. In addition to creating a faulty political value system where rights are viewed as commodities that may be bought, sold, or traded, this feeds an unending cycle of corruption (Berry, 2016). Such actions degrade the ethical underpinnings of democratic societies by undermining the moral principles upon which they are based.

The findings show that the public's impression of elections is altered by vote-buying. A lot of people perceive elections as chances for immediate personal gain rather than as a way to promote policies that would enhance their quality of life over time. The capacity to elect capable, informed, and moral officials who can really represent the interests of the people and promote sustainable development in their communities is thereby compromised.

## Conclusion

Elections are a fundamental mechanism of democracy, intended to provide citizens with the opportunity to express their political will freely and fairly. However, in many rural areas, the reality often paints a different picture. Vote-buying has become a strategic tool employed by local politicians to secure power, utilizing various methods to entangle citizens in a cycle of short-term benefits. Ultimately, this practice has profound implications for public morality and the democratic structure. One of the most prevalent forms of vote-buying is the direct distribution of cash. Politicians frequently employ this tactic throughout the campaign period, from the early stages to the final days before the election. Low-income individuals and the elderly in rural areas are often the primary targets, as their immediate financial needs make

them highly susceptible to such inducements. Politicians exploit this economic vulnerability, converting political will into a tradable commodity.

Beyond cash handouts, the provision of goods and services is another widely used strategy. Distributing essential commodities such as rice, cooking oil, or other necessities fosters a sense of loyalty toward the politician. In some cases, politicians actively participate in community events, such as religious ceremonies, funerals, or infrastructure repairs, with the implicit promise that such support will continue if they are elected. False promises also serve as a crucial tool in vote-buying strategies. Politicians frequently pledge development projects such as road construction, water supply systems, or economic opportunities for the community. However, once elected, these promises often prove to be empty rhetoric, leading to widespread disillusionment and further eroding trust in the political system. A more sophisticated form of vote-buying involves leveraging local influencers and coercive tactics. Vote canvassers—often influential community figures such as village heads or religious leaders—act as intermediaries to distribute money and goods while persuading or even pressuring voters to support a specific candidate. In some cases, coercion takes the form of implicit threats, such as the withdrawal of government aid programs or restricted access to community resources. The digital era has introduced new avenues for vote-buying through electronic money transfers and social media platforms. Politicians exploit technology to circumvent traditional oversight mechanisms by transferring funds directly to voters' bank accounts or offering digital incentives such as vouchers and mobile credits. These methods enable politicians to buy votes more discreetly and make it increasingly difficult for regulatory bodies to detect and prevent such activities.

The consequences of vote-buying extend far beyond a single election cycle. It fosters a flawed value system in society, where citizens come to perceive their voting rights as commodities to be traded. As a result, local democracy is undermined, as elected leaders often ascend to power not based on their competence or vision but through financial influence. This creates a vicious cycle in which politicians who invest in vote-buying seek to recoup their expenses through corruption and inefficient governance. Consequently, public trust in the political system erodes, leading to weakened civic engagement and participation. Ultimately, vote-buying is not merely a localized electoral issue; it represents a deeply entrenched problem within the fabric of Thailand's democratic structure. The erosion of social ethics through this practice compromises governance transparency and paves the way for unethical politicians to maintain power without genuine public scrutiny. Addressing this issue requires a collective effort to enhance political literacy, enforce stringent legal measures, and foster a culture of accountability to ensure the integrity of the democratic process.

## References

- Achel, M. (2023). *Vote buying: Perception of ghanaians on the legality and ethics of the practice*. University of Wyoming.
- Alonso, S., Keane, J., & Merkel, W. (Eds.). (2011). *The future of representative democracy*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511770883>
- Amaechi, O. C., & Stockemer, D. (2022). The working of electoral corruption: The Ekiti model of vote buying. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 78(2), 105-123. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10611-021-10015-w>
- Audard, C. (2014). *John Rawls*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315712109>
- Berry, M. F. (2016). *Five dollars and a pork chop sandwich: Vote buying and the corruption of democracy*. Beacon Press.

- Callahan, W. A. (2005). Social capital and corruption: Vote buying and the politics of reform in Thailand. *Perspectives on Politics*, 3(3), 495-508.  
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592705050310>
- Dafflon, B., & Madiès, T. (2009). *Decentralization: A few principles from the theory of fiscal federalism*. Paris: Agence française de développement.
- Eriksson, L. (2011). Rational choice theory: Potential and limits. Macmillan International Higher Education. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-230-34379-5>
- Faguet, J. P. (2012). *Decentralization and popular democracy: Governance from below in Bolivia*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.175269>
- Fund, J. (2009). *Stealing elections: How voter fraud threatens our democracy*. Encounter Books.
- Gomez, E. (2002). Political business in east asia (1st ed.). Routledge.  
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203166338>
- Guerra, A., & Justesen, M. K. (2022). Vote buying and redistribution. *Public Choice*, 193(3), 315-344. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-022-00999-x>
- Heath, O., & Tillin, L. (2018). Institutional performance and vote buying in India. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 53, 90-110. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-017-9254-x>
- Hicken, A. (2009). *Building party systems in developing democracies*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511575563>
- Krisanaphuti, W. (2014). Approaches to preventing vote-buying in elections based on public opinion in Northeastern Thailand. *Phrae Wa Kalasin Academic Journal*, 1(2), 67–75.
- Markovits, J. (2014). *Moral reason*. OUP Oxford.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199567171.001.0001>
- Muhtadi, B. (2019). *Vote buying in Indonesia: The mechanics of electoral bribery (p. 318)*. Springer Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6779-3>
- Muhtadi, B. (2019). The prevalence of vote buying in Indonesia: Building an index. In Muhtadi, B. (Ed.), *Vote Buying in Indonesia* (1st ed., pp. 45-79). Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6779-3\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6779-3_2)
- Naz, G., & Fruto, B. (2024). Exploring the sobre vote-buying in rural villages: the lived experiences of poor voters in the Philippines. *Recoletos Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, 12(2), 61-75. <https://doi.org/10.32871/rmrj2412.02.05>
- Nelson, A., & Saka-Olokungboye, N. (2019). Money politics, vote buying, and selling in Nigeria: An emerging threat to good governance. *International Journal of Advanced Academic Studies*, 1(2), 146-152. <https://doi.org/10.33545/27068919.2019.v1.i2c.38>
- Ockey, J. (1994). Political parties, factions, and corruption in Thailand. *Modern Asian Studies*, 28(2), 251-277. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X00012403>
- Owen, D. A. (2013). Conceptualizing vote buying as a process: An empirical study in Thai provinces. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 5(2), 249-273. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12028>
- Umbers, L. M. (2020). What's wrong with vote buying? *Philosophical Studies*, 177(2), 551-571. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-018-1194-4>