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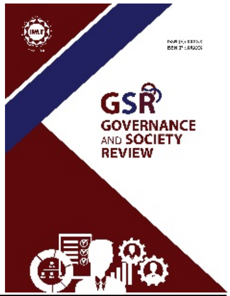

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Title:	**Transnational Illicit Finance: How Dirty Money Undermines Electoral Legitimacy in Nigeria and India**
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Transational Illicit Finance: How Dirty Money Undermines Electoral Legitimacy in Nigeria and India

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Abstract

Elections form the bedrock of any form of democratic governance, as they offer citizens the opportunity to select or elect viable leaders, bring about accountable governments, and shape public policy. This study highlights the need for stiffer governance structures to protect democratic processes. It aims to assess the role played by illegal monetary flows in determining election outcomes in Nigeria and India. It also aims to examine how illegal electoral funding undermines democratic legitimacy and public trust in electoral institutions. The study adopts the use of the political economy theory of elections for the purpose of analysis. The comparative case study method is used to analyze how illegal financial flows across borders affect electoral legitimacy in both Nigeria and India. The findings of this study tend to improve the political economy theory by demonstrating how economic discrepancies modify the role of illicit finance in election manipulation, which goes beyond the analyses of a single nation. Moreover, illicit financing deemphasizes the need for a holistic and all-encompassing political campaign, monetary regulations, improved anti-corruption efforts, and comprehensive voter sensitization to protect democratic ethos. The study contributes unequivocally to the wealth of literature on corrupt electoral processes by linking illicit monetary flows with the comparative political economy analysis of Nigeria and India, giving a cross-regional perception on both countries that shows how institutional weaknesses and transnational dimensions are often ignored in isolated studies.

***Keywords*:** campaign finance transparency, electoral legitimacy, political patronage, transnational illicit finance, vote buying

Introduction

Electoral processes are central to the functioning of democratic systems, allowing citizens to determine their representatives, strengthen governmental accountability, and contribute to the direction of public policy. The trustworthiness of electoral outcomes likely relies deeply on the

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integrity and transparency of the electoral process. In principle, the electoral process should show the candid inclinations of voters and enable peaceful political competition. Nevertheless, in most emerging democracies around the world, electoral processes are increasingly influenced by illicit funding and financial networks that distort participation in the democratic process. Political economy scholars have long debated that as soon as money takes over electoral competition, political power shifts from the citizens to the wealthy few and to networks capable of bankrolling political campaigns (Norris & Grömping, 2019). As a result, the growing role of illicit finance in electoral politics has become the topmost concern for democratic alliances across the Global South; this may spell doom sooner or later for emerging democracies.

The complex nature of the relationship between politics and money further shows how these two are intertwined. The case of illegal financial flows with relative ease across borders is enabled by political actors to gain access to money from both international and local sources, all these but together include tax evasion, corruption proceeds, and money laundering. These monies are often put together for the purpose of financing electoral campaigns, electoral body manipulation, and influencing voter actions. Developing nations across the world suffer from weak institutions, unaccountability, and gross corruption, resulting in illicit financial flows that serve as a potent threat to governance systems. If deliberate steps are not taken to curb this menace, it could further plunge developing nations into more institutional crises. The intersection between illicit finance and electoral politics, therefore, represents an emerging area of concern within the broader field of political economy and democratic governance (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2019).

Politicians in both Nigeria and India take advantage of the existing weak institutions and are negligent about the laws on money laundering. This is because both countries are still in the process of building their democracy. Most politicians in both nations take advantage of weak systems to perpetuate dastardly electoral acts, such as making use of crypto currency channels and conniving with corporate financial institutions. For instance, dirty money can also be used directly to sway voters by buying their votes or handing out favors. Evidence on the ground shows that this happens during elections all across Africa and Asia. Some researchers have pointed out that politics has become more of a business venture, hence political candidates in most cases feel overly pressured to make huge expenditures during campaigns, with the hope to recover what they have spent during their ascendance to power. This opens up the political system to endemic corruption, many policies designed to serve special interests of a few, and a few powerful elites controlling the show.

The situation in Nigeria is a good example to examine how illicit money goes a long way to affect whether people think elections are free and fair. Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999 and ever since elections in Nigeria have been more competitive in nature. Consequently, some politicians make electoral campaigns about who spends the most money and this rivalry has intensified day by day. Even though there is an inclination towards inclusiveness in politics because of the electoral process in Nigeria, some conspicuous problems still linger, including the problem of financial unaccountability, campaign process inducement, and vote buying. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime asserts that many of the voters in Nigeria are offered money to vote in favor of certain politicians during electoral campaigns. In some areas in Nigeria, such as the recent gubernatorial elections held in Kogi State, vote buying has become a planned process to win elections, with candidates openly handing out food, cash, and other material things to voters in return for their unalloyed support. The aforementioned goes against the ethos of democracy, where free and fair elections should determine electoral results, that is to say the votes of the electorates count and not who spends the most.

India, on the other hand, is faced with similar issues as Nigeria. Despite India's vibrant electoral system and a long history of robust competitive elections, the country still battles with transparency issues in campaign spending and political finances. The total cost of vying for a political office in India has become exorbitantly high. This has forced many political parties and candidates to rely on contributions from donors with questionable sources of income and opaque funding sources to remain competitive. A few scholars rightly suggest that because of the heavy financial demand during elections in India, candidates tend to seek campaign funds through opaque or even questionable means (Vaishnav, 2017). Furthermore, corruption in electoral processes has manifested itself in diverse forms over time and this includes direct cash handouts to voters.

Despite the fact that India and Nigeria significantly differ in democratic stability and institutional frameworks, they share obvious similarities in their electoral processes. Both are large in terms of land size and population, the competition in their respective democracies are intense and ferociously contested elections are hostile, wherein some cases may even result in the destruction of lives and property. In both countries, due to the large population size, conducting elections and campaign mobilization are very expensive and typically require considerable financial funding. Consequently, politicians may resort to questionable financial practices to gain advantage in elections. Research examining the interplay between politics and economics indicates that such practices can undermine democratic accountability, granting wealthy candidates or their benefactors undue influence over electoral outcomes and political decision-making.

There have been a bunch of ideas floating around on how to tackle the increasing problem of shady money getting into elections. Global groups and governments across the world have been pushing for the regulation of campaign funding, best ways to make campaign funding clearer, and stringent measures on corruption related cases. Electoral officials have also introduced spending limits on electoral campaigns and to determine the donor. For electoral accountability to stand, the Indian government has set rules like spending limit to ensure that politicians act in a responsible way and manner. Similarly, constitutional laws governing electoral activities in Nigeria compel the numerous political parties to reveal publicly the campaign funds accrued to various political parties and spending limits. However, in reality, these efforts have been counterproductive because of the lack of enforcement of these rules and regulations and due to the fact that politicians still find ways to beat the system.

Despite the fact that many scholars have discussed electoral corruption and the role money plays, it is yet to comprehend how illicit money flows mess with electoral legitimacy in various democracies. Many researches have examined electoral corruption in a country at a particular point in time, mainly focusing on either Asian or African democracies. It is rare to find studies which assert the comparison of how illicit funds affect election process in different parts of the world. In addition, most of the researches tend to highlight political campaign financial rules without paying attention to the larger political force that allows illicit money to have a sway on who wins the elections.

This study seeks to address the existing gaps by interrogating the role of illicit funding flows in politics (election) via a comparative case study of

Nigeria and India, respectively. By analyzing how illicit finances impact voter behaviour, electoral institutions, and political campaigns, this study tends to contribute to a much deeper understanding of how money politics interfaces with democratic processes in emerging democracies like Nigeria and India. The comparative approach of this study allows for the identification of both contextual disparities and usual patterns in the relationship between illicit money and electoral legitimacy.

This study fills the gap in the effort to create a connection between the literature on illicit money flow, acute corruption in the election process, and a relative comparison in the political economy of both Nigeria and India, respectively. Instead of focusing exclusively on vote buying or mainly on campaign financing regulation, this study tends to examine the broadly economic and institutional structures that play a vital role in facilitating illicit finances that impact electoral outcomes. In doing so, this study also highlights the need for stiffer governance structures to protect democratic processes.

Objectives of the Study

The study objectives are as follows:

- To assess the role played by illegal monetary flows in determining election outcomes in Nigeria and India.
- To examine how illegal electoral funding undermines democratic legitimacy and public trust in electoral institutions.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

- How do illegal monetary flows impact election processes in India and Nigeria?
- What are the ways illicit campaign funding practices impact the legitimacy of elections and democratic accountability in India and Nigeria?

Literature Review

Vote Buying and Electoral Integrity in Nigeria

There are many studies that have strived to explore the impact of financial gains on voting patterns in Nigeria. Ezeabasili (2025) examined vote buying during the well talked about 2019 and 2023 (presidential and governorship) general elections. It was found that vote buying has become the part and parcel of election gimmicks used by politicians to lure and retain the loyalty of voters. According to the study findings, politicians contesting political positions are seen often times giving out food items, cash gifts, and other inducements to voters during elections to win their support. The findings of the study also revealed that this tradition of vote buying perpetuated by political actors damages electoral integrity and public trust in democratic institutions (Ezeabasili, 2025).

In the same way, Tagowa et al. (2022) carried out a study on the relationship between corruption and campaign funding in the Nigerian electoral process. The study found that political campaigns in Nigeria are very expensive to venture into and this encourages political actors to rely heavily on illicit money and illegal networks to fund electoral processes. In most cases, electoral candidates divert funds meant for the public or receive secret financial donations from banks, big multinational corporations, and even private sponsors within and outside the country in order to withstand the expensive nature of campaign operations in Nigeria. The study concluded that political actors take advantage by exploiting the failure of the government to strengthen campaign regulations against illicit funding (Tagowa et al., 2022).

Onapajo et al. (2015) assessed the buying of votes in Nigeria. The aforementioned authors went further to debate that Nigeria's resource-dependent political economy adds in no small way to the "political trade or buying and selling" of elections in Nigeria. This is because politicians in office have unlimited access to tax payers' money or state resources, hence they can do anything within their power and are willing to dole out huge amounts of cash during election campaigns with the mindset of getting it back once elected to office. The aforementioned tends to promote widespread buying of vote and strengthen patronage politics within the Nigerian electoral system (Onapajo et al., 2015).

The 2023 Nigerian General Elections again demonstrated that finance-based inducements have an effect over how people vote. Tukura et al. (2023) explained that even though electoral groups and the government have tried to deal with it, vote buying is still much of a problem in the system. By assessing how the policy of the Central Bank of Nigeria to redesign the currency has affected voting, the study showed that a temporary problem of cash scarcity in election time interrupted vote-buying methods in different locations. Many politicians who usually deliver cash handouts to push voters found it tougher to organize a ton of physical money for buying votes. The investigation saw that in some polling units, open vote purchasing activity was reduced for some time. Indeed, monetary inducement has a considerable influence on the outcome of elections and political behavior. Although frantic efforts have been made to improve on transparency, cash scarcity introduced a gap that for a short while checked the buying of vote, which remains a major concern. The research goes further to proffer stringent measures required to combat the buying of votes and also improve on electoral integrity. It is of great importance for the government and the civil society alike to stay alert for the sake of future electoral activities.

Recently, studies have investigated the 'impact that government social help programmes have on how people vote.' Some scholars have postulated that programmes like TraderMoni, including many other empowerment schemes, are sometimes introduced during election periods in order to garner voter backing and also for political patronage purposes (Amadu & Ibrahim, 2025). Some of these programmes are designed to serve as succor to the masses and reduce poverty to some extent, but the intentions behind them are worthy of concern, especially when they happen close to elections.

Political Finance and Electoral Transparency in India

A lot of studies from India focus on how 'money affects election politics'. Although India is known for competitive voting and a solid electoral system, the amount of finances required for political campaigns has, over the last twenty years, spiked to unimaginable heights. Candidates, as well as political parties, rely on huge donations that come from multinational or national companies and affluent people in most cases, so that campaign momentum can continue. The rise in the cost of campaign advertisements, organization of large political gatherings, and mobilizing electorates at the grass root level has actually made electoral process require more money. Due to this fact, having unlimited access to financial assistance has become a serious concern that determines who wins elections in India (Norris & van Es, 2016).

The rising expenses of running political parties and candidacies has created a lot of worry and this goes a long way to determine political decisions. There are empirical studies which postulate that candidates who are wealthy possess better chances of controlling political communication spaces (like new and old media spaces) and are able to pay for huge campaign events and garner supporters via their networks. Money gives politicians an edge and also gives rise to unfair competition; indeed, political groups or candidates who possess money are at an advantage to convince voters and shape the election outcomes (Vaishnav, 2017).

The electoral bond system in India was started in 2018 and is seen by many in Indian political finance as controversial. The nature of electoral bonds makes it possible for companies and people to give funds to various political parties and remain anonymous, yet the funds go through legal, bank, and government approvals. The government of India has made it explicitly clear that this scheme is a part of larger electoral reforms. The aim is to stop the use of illicit cash that cannot be tracked in politics. In this setup, select banks make it possible for the buyers of bonds to purchase them and pass them to various political parties without having their identities revealed.

The primary reason for the introduction of this significant policy was basically to show transparency or to formalize how funding reaches political parties. However, this has been criticized a lot and it has been said that this is yet another way for funds to be clandestine and for some high and powerful people to implement their personal interests in elections. As long as the names of the organizations or people that made donations remain unknown, there is a significant chance that a microscopic few affluent political actors can have a clandestine sway over decisions on public matters and political parties. A study has identified certain issues surrounding transparency and this can render democracy less accountable, whereby rigging and other electoral vices can prevail because voters remain unaware which political and economic groups respectively inject money behind which political parties (Chhibber & Verma, 2018; Vaishnav, 2017).

Consequently, research has shown that, as expected, the electoral bond system tends to favor certain political parties, especially those that are organizationally stronger and have national spread. Political parties that have a smaller coverage often lack the capacity to receive major donations through the bond system, which goes further to project gross inequality in the political system. Some experts have opined that reforms that are formulated at making political financing regular in most cases turnout in favor of bigger and influential political parties (Chhibber & Verma, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the use of political economy theory of elections for the purpose of analysis. The notion behind political economy emphasizes how financial resources and political power contribute in shaping politics and institutional occurrences. The theory sees elections as events where political actors who struggle for power tend to spend money so they can acquire political power.

Political economy proposes how those people or parties who have greater access to money could change election results. Candidates with a lot of money can pay for big campaign things, try to gather more followers, and take over how news is told about politics. As a result, money differences between political actors can create unequal competition in politics (Aidt & Jensen, 2017).

The theory also pays attention to how economic patterns relate with political action. For countries like Nigeria where economy depends on resources, not being able to get state resources makes people fight harder for public office. Political actors are then encouraged to use much money for elections, since holding office allows them to exploit economic resources. For this reason, illegal money is sometimes used by candidates because they wish to ensure they win (Onapajo et al., 2015).

In addition, the theory of political economy would explain why voters occasionally engage in vote selling. In settings marked by persistent poverty and significant socioeconomic disparities, people understand elections as a chance to gain quick cash. Consequently, electoral competition can devolve into a transactional exchange between politicians and voters that support patronage politics, while undermining democratic accountability (Norris & van Es, 2016).

From the political economy perspective, this research aims to develop an understanding regarding how illicit money flows encourages electoral misbehaviour and diminishes democratic legitimacy in both Nigeria and India, respectively. The study is significant for future studies of corruption in electoral cases as it may unveil the structural possibilities available to political actors indulging in corruption, while also reflecting upon solutions and recommendations based on the suggested framework, such as strong institutions regulating political financing.

Methodology

This research uses the comparative case study method to analyze how illegal financial flows across borders affect electoral legitimacy in Nigeria and India. A comparative case study gives way for an organized evaluation of things that are alike and unlike among two democratic nations which both have big voting groups, party competition, and repeated worries about money interfering in their politics. By doing a comparison, researchers that are looking for patterns and context-based differences can find them in how unlawful money influences elections, depending on what kind of institutions are in place.

The selection and comparison of Nigeria and India matter theoretically. The two nations represent the largest democracies in the Global South and they both have ongoing arguments about different types of electoral problems, such as corruption in elections, how campaigns are financed, as well as rich people having a strong power in politics. In Nigeria, voting issues are usually linked with buying votes, networks of patrons, as well as illegal money flowing around campaigns. In contrast, there are many criticisms of the electoral system in India including the fact that its political finances are not properly managed, campaign expenditure is rising at a geometric proportion, and some companies are given a bigger role to finance the campaign (Vaishnav, 2017). Doing a comparative study of both nations makes it possible for scholars to observe how illicit money networks used in politics lead to the degradation of the democratic legitimacy of the political system.

This study relies basically on secondary qualitative data. Data obtained from secondary sources were carefully selected for the main purpose of providing extensive analysis and documentation of election financing flows that would be hard to obtain via primary fieldwork alone. The various sources been made use of include policy papers, publications from anti-corruption agencies, election observation reports published in academic journal articles, books, and comprehensive reports from international organizations, such as Transparency International and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA).

In other to ensure that the collected data was credible, a systematic selection method for the data was used. Furthermore, the primary reason for choosing these sources was their strong connection to illicit money flow, corruption issues, and election funding within democratic systems. Qualitative materials that did not explore the linkage between electoral money and the voting process were carefully excluded from the manuscript. Going forward, this research focuses more on scholarly materials presenting empirical findings or case study records that relate mostly to India and Nigeria. This is to further strengthen discussion on reliable data. Similarly, a careful assessment was done to ascertain the trustworthiness and reliability of each of the numerous sources of data. Attention was given to the articles from peer-reviewed journals, academic texts, and reports from internationally recognized groups because they meet high research standards (Wager & Kleinert, 2010).

For the analytical part of this study, qualitative content analysis was used. Researchers can make use of content analysis to analyze diverse texts in a systematic way to find themes, patterns, and relationships in qualitative data (Kleinheksel et al., 2020). The documents were thoroughly scrutinized to identify key points about significant topics, such as vote buying, campaign funding systems, political donations by companies, illicit financial flows, and institutional reactions to corrupt practices during elections. Through these methods, the study singled out repeated patterns that show how illicit money impacts election activities, makes political competition unpalatable, and reduces public trust in democratic systems. The comparative strategy was applied further to show obvious structural problems and peculiar factors of both countries regarding funding and election legitimacy.

Results

Table 1

Prevalence of Vote Buying in Nigeria

Election Year	Estimated Prevalence of Vote Buying (%)
2015	15%
2019	17%
2023	22%

Note. Adapted from election monitoring reports by civil society organizations, electoral observation missions, and academic studies on Nigerian elections.

Table 1 reveals that there has been a continuous increase in vote buying in Nigeria over three separate elections. The estimation of vote buying rate was 15% in 2015, it increased to 17% in 2019, and went up to 22% by 2023. This trend demonstrates that electoral politics have become more about money. In 2015, while election seemed competitive according to many, it was still documented that financial incentives were offered to voters. In 2019, vote buying got more structured and was more present especially in regions where elections were tightly contested. Even though currency redesign policies were created to limit illegal cash transactions in 2023, politicians brought in new ways to sway voters which made financial incentives even deeper rooted in Nigeria's electoral system (Tukura et al., 2023).

Table 2

Forms of Illicit Electoral Financing in Nigeria

Form of Illicit Financing	Description
Vote Buying	Direct cash payments or material inducements offered to voters to influence their voting decisions.
Use of Public Funds	Diversion or misuse of government resources and state funds to support political campaigns.
Money Laundering	Use of illicitly acquired funds that are channeled through informal or disguised financial networks to finance political activities.

Note. Adapted fromTukura et al. (2023); Ezeabasili (2025); and election monitoring reports by civil society organizations on Nigerian elections.

Table 2 emphasizes the main types of illegal electoral funding in Nigeria. The act of buying votes is still in use in which political individuals provide voters either cash or items to determine how they vote. A method normally used is redirecting government finances; those holding office can make use of public money, state contracts, and government programs that they use to fund campaigns. On the top of that, money laundering is involved in covering up criminally earned money and this money eventually enters political campaign funding. Such actions make the electoral competition unfair, which decreases trust in the system and hurts the democracy of Nigeria.

Table 3

Effects of Illicit Electoral Financing on Nigerian Elections

Effect	Description
Electoral Manipulation	Illicit financial practices enable politicians to influence election outcomes, undermining the fairness of the electoral process.
Reduced Voter Trust	Widespread use of vote buying and diversion of public funds erodes citizens' confidence in the credibility and integrity of elections.
Entrenchment of Political Patronage	Financial inducements and resource diversion strengthen patronage networks, rewarding loyalty over competence and policy-based governance.

Note. Author's compilation based on thematic and qualitative content analysis of secondary data, including election monitoring reports, academic studies, and institutional publications (Ezeabasili, 2025).

Table 3 shows the main outcomes from illegal money activities in the electoral system of Nigeria. Electoral manipulation takes place if candidates influence results with money offers or stolen government funds, which ruins free and fair elections. This behavior creates less trust among voters who come to view elections as more about money deals than true decision-making. Furthermore, illegal money creates a strong patronage system where the reward for loyalty is rated above real skill. This causes dependency and also leads to more corruption. These issues then lower institutional trust, lessens democratic responsibility, and deepens structural imbalance, causing elections to be less valid for real representation.

Table 4

Evidence of Electoral Financial Irregularities in India

Election Year	Observed Irregularities
2004–2012	Spikes in consumption during election periods. This includes the distribution of material incentives, gifts, and cash to voters.
2014	Sharp increase in electoral campaign disbursements. This reflects an increased costs of media, constituency-level mobilization, and rallies.

Election Year	Observed Irregularities
2019	Significant increase in political donations through electoral bonds, allowing anonymous contributions by corporate actors and wealthy individuals.

Note. Author's compilation based on thematic and qualitative content analysis of secondary data, including Yoganandham (2025)

Table 4 shows how money is gaining more and more importance in Indian elections. From 2004 to 2012, both local as well as national polls saw more people buying things during elections and more gifts or cash given, pointing to unofficial financial benefits to affect the way people voted (Björkman, 2013) .In 2014, election expenses jumped because of so many public events, web-based political activities, and more local campaign works, making elections costlier (Semiatin, 2020) .In 2019, there was a much bigger use of electoral bonds allowing hidden business funding, which created doubts about openness, too much power for the rich donors, and weaker democratic control (Schnurr, 2022)

Table 5

Forms of Electoral Corruption in India (with Statistical Evidence)

Form of Corruption	Description	Estimated Prevalence (%)
Cash-for-Votes	Direct monetary or material inducements given to voters in exchange for their electoral support.	12–18% of voters reported receiving cash/gifts during elections (2004–2019).
Opaque Political Donations	Contributions to political parties through mechanisms such as electoral bonds, where donor identities remain undisclosed.	₹22,000 crore (~$3 billion) donated via electoral bonds in 2019–2020 elections.
Booth Capturing	Illegal occupation or manipulation of polling stations by party agents to influence voting.	0.5–2% of polling stations reported incidents during state elections (2014–2019).

Note. Chopra and Saha (2020); Yoganandham (2025)

Table 5 clearly shows the various ways in which the electoral process is corrupted in India. Around 12-18% of people were bought with money in different elections - this shows how regularly people are directly paid to vote a certain way. In 2019 and 2020, a massive ₹22,000 crore (roughly 3 billion US dollars) were given to political parties as "electoral bonds". These bonds aren't transparent, so the sources of funding remain unknown. Booth capturing, while not occurring as much, happened in between 0.5 and 2% of polling places, generally during elections for state or local government. The people in power often have an influence over the outcomes of election results in India and rarely accept responsibilities for their ill actions. All the above discourages the electorates to show trust in the democratic process. The above figures comprise evidence that financial crimes during electoral processes are part and parcel of elections in India.

Table 6

Consequences of Illicit Electoral Financing on Electoral Legitimacy in India

Consequence	Description	Supporting Data / Evidence
Policy Capture	Political decisions and public policies are disproportionately influenced by wealthy donors and corporate actors who fund parties.	Approximately ~60% of major policy decisions perceived to favor large corporate donors in 2019–2020 elections.
Weak Accountability	Elected officials prioritize financial backers over public interest, reducing transparency and institutional oversight.	About 45% of voters in a national survey reported feeling unable to hold politicians accountable due to opaque campaign funding (ADR, 2020).
Declining Public Trust	Citizens lose confidence in electoral integrity and democratic institutions due to the financial manipulation of elections.	Only 38% of surveyed citizens believed elections reflected genuine voter choice in 2019 (Lokniti-CSDS, 2019).

Note. Author's compilation based on Chopra and Saha (2020); Yoganandham (2025)

Table 6 shows the ways through which illegal money in elections damages democracy in India. When rich individuals and companies give money, they get to affect what laws and policies are made, usually at the expense of what the public actually needs. Since donations to politicians remain anonymous, they are less likely to be held to account; in fact, 45% of people say that they don't feel like they can really make politicians answer for their actions. Due to this fact, people have less faith in the system and in 2019, only 38% of citizens felt that election results really showed what voters wanted. These developments prove that money's power isn't just about the election period itself, it's about what happens when the government is running and it's wearing away at people's belief in India's democratic ways.

Discussion

Theme 1: Direct Voter Influence through Financial Inducements (Linked to RQ1: How do illicit financial flows influence electoral processes?)

Vote buying is seen as a dominant force in contemporary mainstream politics in Nigeria, with its occurrences rapidly rising from 15% in 2015 to 22% in 2023 (as shown in Table 1). This illicit trend shows how plans are well thought-out where candidates distribute cash, food, or goods to sway voters, particularly in competitive regions. Ezeabasili (2024) noted that the subject of discussion has become normal and has weakened the electoral fabric of the country. In the same vein, Tukura et al. (2023) documented that the Federal Government of Nigeria through the Central Bank of Nigeria's currency redesign temporarily slowed down cash inducements to some extent and also reduced open vote buying to a reasonable extent in some polling units within the country by limiting physical cash flow and availability. Notwithstanding, many criminally minded politicians have adapted the use of mobile transfers as one of the alternatives to maintain ill practices.

A study carried out in India between the years 2004–2019 showed that cash incentives were responsible for swaying 12–18% of voters in India, with a sharp surge during elections (Ganguly & Mistree, 2025). Greater availability of such incentives shifts the preferences towards the right and the incumbent (Bayer & Urpelainen, 2016). More recently, opaque instruments like electoral bonds have eased legal limits on corporate donations, allowing the flow of over INR 22,000 crore (~$3 billion) of undisclosed corporate money in 2019-2020. Campaign costs started escalating in 2014 due to an increase in the cost of rallies and communications, including mobilization and the media (Semiatin, 2020).

In comparison, inducements in Nigeria directly target voters' circumstances (e.g., poverty). Whereas, in India, they are more indirect and occur at elite level, as they are hidden through corporate channels. Both cases exemplify how illicit financial flows facilitate election manipulation. This answers the first research question by underscoring that the transnational aspects of such flows (e.g., money laundering) exacerbate existing domestic vulnerabilities.

Theme 2: Erosion of Electoral Legitimacy and Public Trust (Linked to RQ2: In what ways do illicit campaign financing practices affect electoral legitimacy and democratic accountability?)

In India, an estimated US$ 52 billion leaves the country annually in illegal flows, permanently undermining countless possibilities (Thakurta & Jain, 2017). This compromises the responsiveness of political parties with dependency on rent-seeking donors (Kar, 2011). The levels of illicit financial outflows make a significant portion of India's estimated revenue loss associated with tax evasion, bribery, and corruption-linked schemes (Vittal, 2003).

Theme 3: Structural Enablers and Institutional Weaknesses

Democratic processes are scuttled by illicit money practices because an anonymous source hides wealth which remains unaccounted by government regulators and restricts political parties from accessing alternative sources of financial support. Furthermore, external finance supports clientelism regardless of other regulations. Such financial support, be it from citizens, foreigners, or big or small corporations as electoral campaign donors, tends to increase the dependence of government officials on extra-budgetary sources, discouraging proper representation. All the aforementioned examples show that most of the business donations can be easily camouflaged and re-routed into rent-seeking.

Given dependence on illicit money, political will remains insufficient; civil society, media, and citizens need to monitor the politicians, parties, and brokers who turn dirty money into votes via clientelism. Countries should monitor, report, and explore transnational funding, with global recognition as a valuable electoral integrity indicator.

Conclusion

This study shows that dirty financial flows greatly structure election outcomes in both Nigeria and India. In Nigeria, for instance, the prevalence of vote buying spiked to 22% in the year 2023, thus strengthening gross manipulation via public fund diversion and cash inducements. Whereas, in

India, clandestine mechanisms such as electoral bonds tend to facilitate nameless donations that exceeded ₹22,000 crores or US$ 3 billion between the years 2019–2020, stopping healthy competition through mutual cooperation. These practices tend to wear away the tenets of democratic legitimacy by promoting election fraud, diminishing voter trust (for example, 38% in India see the electoral process as genuine), and reducing the acceptability of elections. Thus, in the long-run, reducing accountability process and institutional confidence by the public.

Theoretically speaking, the findings of this study tend to improve the political economy theory by illustrating and demonstrating how economic discrepancies modify the role of illicit finance in election manipulation, which goes beyond the analyses of a single nation. Practically speaking, illicit financing deemphasizes the need for a holistic and all-encompassing political campaign, monetary regulations, improved anti-corruption implementation, and comprehensive voter sensitization to protect democratic ethos. The study contributes unequivocally to the wealth of literature on corruption in electoral process by linking illicit monetary flows with the comparative political economy of both Nigeria and India, giving a cross-regional perception that shows how institutional weaknesses and transnational dimensions are often ignored in isolated studies. Future research may well engage quantitative econometric academic models to serve as a measurement of the causative impacts of illicit financial flows, make an in-depth comparison to other Global South democratic nations such as Indonesia or Brazil, and conduct a comprehensive investigation on the role of digital financing emerging from the post-pandemic electoral process.

Author Contribution

Meshach Rizama Zhizhi: conceptualization, investigation, methodology, supervision, writing-original draft. **Able Shibinya Zhizhi:** project administration, validation, writing- review & editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon request.

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