

**An Assessment of the Impact of Godfatherism on Democratic Governance in Nigeria: A Case Study of the 2019 and 2023 General Elections.**

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**Abstract**

This study assesses the impact of political godfatherism on democratic governance in Nigeria, specifically examining the 2019 and 2023 general elections through the complementary lens of Elite Theory and Clientelism Theory. By utilizing a qualitative research design, relying on secondary data sources to probe into this topic. The findings of this study reveal that godfatherism remains entrenched in Nigeria's political landscape, shaping candidate selection, influencing electoral outcomes, and undermining internal party democracy. The findings on the 2019 and 2023 elections revealed a heavily monetized election, characterized by vote buying, elite manipulation, and institutional capture. Although technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) improved some procedural aspects of elections, elite considerably remain in control, through adaptation a more sophisticated forms of clientelism, including digital vote trading and strategic alliances leading to the weakening democratic governance, fostering corruption, distorting public policy, undermining accountability, and eroding public trust in political institutions with far reaching implication on voter apathy, political violence, and the subversion of democratic institutions such as the judiciary and electoral bodies. The study concludes that godfatherism constitutes a structural challenge to democratic governance in Nigeria, transforming elections into transactional processes and governance into an extension of elite interests. It therefore recommends comprehensive reforms in party politics, campaign financing, and institutional strengthening to curtail the influence of godfatherism and promote a more inclusive and accountable democratic system.

**Key words:** Clientelism, Democracy, Democratic Governance, Elections, Godfatherism, Political Patronage.

## **1. Introduction**

Nigeria's transition to democratic rule in 1999 represents a watershed and a significant milestone in Nigeria's political development. However, the country's democratic experience has faced a myriad of systemic challenges entrenched in political practices such as godfatherism that has continued to distort democratic processes.

Godfatherism refers to a system where powerful individuals use their wealth, influence, and connections to control political processes and determine who gets elected to public offices (Olarinmoye, 2018). Godfatherism is not merely a political anomaly but a structural feature of Nigeria's political economy. It thrives due to weak institutions, poverty, and the high cost of political participation. In this system, political power is negotiated and controlled by elites rather than determined by the electorate. Scholars have argued that godfatherism represents a deviation from democratic ideals, as it prioritizes elite interests over popular will (Albert, 2005; Omotola, 2007).

A cursory look at the Nigeria electoral transition since the return of democratic governance in order wise referred to the Fourth Republic since 1999, revealed that While reforms such as the Electoral Act (2022) and technological innovations (e.g., BVAS) were introduced, these did not fundamentally dismantle elite dominance. Instead, godfatherism has metamorphosed into a dominant political force, influencing electoral outcomes and governance structures with every passing election from 1999 to 2023. However, the 2019 and 2023 general elections provide critical case studies for examining this phenomenon, as both elections were marked by intense political competition, high financial stakes, and significant elite interference. Consequently, this study seeks to assess the influence and implications of godfatherism on democratic governance in Nigeria by analyzing its role in the 2019 and 2023 elections.

### **1.1 Research Questions**

#### **1. Mechanisms of Clientelist Exchange:**

How did patron-client relationships shape candidate selection and electoral outcomes in the 2019 and 2023 elections?

## **2. Institutional Capture:**

To what extent has clientelism undermined the independence of key democratic institutions, such as the judiciary and electoral commissions?

## **3. Governance and Accountability:**

How does patron-driven accountability influence public administration and the delivery of democratic dividends in affected states?

## **1.2 Research Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to examine the influence of godfatherism on democratic governance in Nigeria, with a focus on the 2019 and 2023 general elections.

The specific objectives are to:

1. **Examine how patron-client relationships shape candidate selection processes and electoral outcomes** in the 2019 and 2023 general elections.
2. **Assess the extent to which clientelism undermines the independence of key democratic institutions**, particularly the judiciary and electoral commissions.
3. **Evaluate the impact of patron-driven accountability on governance**, especially in relation to public administration and the delivery of democratic dividends in affected states.

## **1.3 Research Gap**

A research gap exists in understanding how clientelist networks have adapted to modern institutional safeguards. Previous studies have largely focused on the physical coercion and electoral violence of earlier electoral cycles, leaving the more sophisticated forms of “digital and economic clientelism,” as well as the emergence of “cross-party operators” during the 2019 and 2023 general elections, under-explored. This study addresses this gap by investigating the resilience of the patron-client bond in the face of institutional reform.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Concept of Godfatherism in Nigerian Politics

Godfatherism has been widely studied as a central feature of Nigeria's political system. Godfatherism is defined as a hierarchical patron-client relationship in which a powerful individual uses resources and influence to determine political outcomes (Ameh, 2025). According to Albert (2005), godfatherism involves a mutually beneficial relationship between a political sponsor (godfather) and a beneficiary (godson), where the latter is expected to deliver political and economic returns.

Omotola (2007) on his part defines godfatherism as a form of political brokerage characterized by the exchange of political support for material benefits. Similarly, Joseph (1987) links godfatherism to prebendal politics, where public offices are appropriated for personal gain. This system often results in the subversion of democratic processes, as political outcomes are determined by elite negotiations rather than voter preferences. This is because these godfathers typically possess substantial financial resources, extensive social connections, and political influence which they deploy to determine who gets nominated as candidates and eventually wins elections (Olarinmoye, 2018). This aligned with Abdulkadir (2022) and Adeoye (2009)'s findings that political godfathers play a decisive role in candidate selection, often imposing candidates on political parties.

According to Ayoade (2006) godfatherism is rooted in Nigeria's prebendal political culture, where public offices are treated as avenues for personal enrichment. This perspective aligns with Joseph's (1987) theory of prebendalism, which explains how political elites appropriate state resources for private gain. These godfathers typically possess substantial financial resources, extensive social connections, and political influence which they deploy to determine who gets nominated as candidates and eventually wins elections (Olarinmoye, 2018).

Accordingly, Albert (2005) describe godfatherism as a "*kingmaker phenomenon*", where electoral outcomes are largely decided before voters go to the polls. Again, Albert (2019) argued that godfatherism in Nigerian politics evolved from traditional patron-client relationships common in many African societies but has taken more problematic forms in contemporary politics. The concept differs from legitimate political mentorship which is based on guidance and support, godfatherism involves control and extraction where political officeholders are expected to serve the personal interests over public welfare and democratic principles. Godfathers typically operate

as kingmakers who remain outside formal political offices while wielding enormous influence over those they help elect.

Okafor and Mohammed (2020) provided numerous characteristics of political godfathers in Nigeria. First, they command significant financial resources necessary for expensive election campaigns. Second, they maintain extensive networks across political, business, traditional, and sometimes criminal circles. Third, they control party structures at local, state, or national levels. Fourth, they possess the ability to mobilize voters through various means, including legitimate campaigning and sometimes intimidation or vote-buying. Fifth, they often enjoy protection from legal consequences due to their political connections.

The 2019 and 2023 elections demonstrated various manifestations of a more sophisticated and entrenched form of godfatherism where in many cases retiring governors handpicked their successors and mobilized state resources to ensure their election. In other instances, business elites or former political office holders used their wealth and connections to sponsor candidates across different political parties (Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2022). Ayoade (2006) however argued that godfatherism thrives due to weak party institutions and lack of ideological politics.

## **2.2 Democratic Governance**

Democratic governance refers to a system where authority is derived from the people, characterized by free and fair elections, accountability, and adherence to the rule of law. It encompasses principles and practices that allow citizens meaningful participation in decision-making processes that affect their lives. According to UNDP (2022), key elements of democratic governance include regular free and fair elections, respect for human rights, accountability of public officials, transparency in government operations, rule of law, separation of powers, and active citizen participation beyond elections.

Ibrahim (2022) argues that effective democratic governance requires strong institutions rather than powerful individuals. These institutions include independent electoral bodies, functional legislatures, impartial judiciaries, free media, and active civil society organizations. When these institutions function properly, they provide checks and balances that prevent concentration of power and ensure government responsiveness to citizen needs (Ameen, 2021).

Transparency forms a central pillar of democratic governance. Government decisions and actions should be open to public scrutiny, with citizens having access to information about how public resources are allocated and used (Omotola, 2021). This transparency enables accountability, where public officials answer for their actions and face consequences for misconduct.

Citizen participation represents another essential aspect of democratic governance. Beyond voting in periodic elections, citizens should have opportunities to influence policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation through various channels, including public consultations, community organizations, and civil society advocacy (Nwankwo, 2020).

The practice of godfatherism directly contradicts these principles of democratic governance. When godfathers control political processes, citizen participation becomes meaningless as elections no longer determine who governs. Government transparency suffers when elected officials make decisions to benefit their godfathers rather than serve public interests.

Accountability breaks down when political leaders feel responsible to their sponsors rather than voters. Sadly, this is what Nigeria's democracy has been relegated and often reflects what Diamond (2002) terms "electoral democracy without liberal depth", where procedures exist but outcomes are constrained.

### **2.3 Empirical Review**

Several empirical studies highlight the nexus between godfatherism, elite capture and political patronage. Empirically, the 2019 and 2023 electoral cycles demonstrate how political clientelism has evolved from overt physical intimidation to a sophisticated model of Institutional and Digital Clientelism. In a study conducted by Ezeabasili (2023) on Vote Buying and the Integrity of the 2019 and 2023 General Elections in Nigeria. The work utilizes the Principal-Agent theory as its theoretical basis while adopting quantitative research design method and content analysis. Findings of the work reveals vote buying was widespread in both 2019 and 2023 elections which significantly distorted electoral integrity and voter choice, contributed to low voter turnout and declining public trust further strengthening elite control over electoral outcomes. Based on these, the study recommends among other things; Strengthen legal sanctions against vote buying, improve voter education and the adoption of biometric systems to reduce manipulation.

Ishaka, Mohammed, & Angulu (2022), studied the implication of politics of godfatherism on the socioeconomic and political development of Nigeria. Indeed, godfatherism has permeated every fabric of the country and has seriously affected the political system. The paper is qualitative in nature; data were obtained from secondary sources. In elucidating the topic under examination, the researcher used Elite theory. The study found that the politics of godfatherism has a negative impact on the socio-economic and political development of the nation by confining power in the hands of the few elites at the expense of the masses (electorates). This has affected the socio-economic and political development of the nation, and by extension led to inter-party and intra-party defections, decampings and conflicts among the party members. The study therefore recommends the implementation of the direct primary election in selecting candidates into elective positions. In addition to that, INEC should make a law that will discourage money politics and should as well punish culprits involved in such an illegal political act.

Musa, Ibrahim & Yahaya (2024) relying on mixed methods of survey to decipher the nexus between “Vote Trading and Turnout Buying in Kebbi State (2023 Elections)” observed that vote buying occurred at multiple stages (before, during, after elections) and that all major political parties are involved what he termed “turnout buying” (paying people to show up). His recommendations include; Strengthen monitoring of electoral processes, increase transparency in party financing and the need to reform electoral laws. Relying on clientelism theory his work demonstrates that godfatherism operates through systematic financial strategies, not isolated incidents.

Edigin (2022) Political Conflicts and Godfatherism in Nigeria: A Focus on the Fourth Republic. The conflict arising from godfatherism has become one of the greatest problems facing the Nigerian political system. The holder of the political position becomes a stooge to his godfather because he that pays the piper dictates the tune. The finding of the study indicates that godfatherism in Nigeria politics is as a result of societal decay, which has encroached into spheres of the Nigerian polity. It is therefore suggested that godfatherism should not be treated as a party affair, but should be offered political, social and legal treatment by the government and the stakeholders in Nigeria.

Nwambuko, Uchechukwu, and Omiunu (2024) examined the politics of godfatherism and democratic governance in Nigeria with preference to Rivers State political crisis aimed at identifying the environmental factors influencing the politics of godfatherism in Rivers State; and

its impact on democratic governance in Rivers State. The study adopted the elite theory, applied a descriptive survey research design, used both primary and secondary sources of data and a structured questionnaire as the instrument for data collection. The data collected via questionnaire were analyzed using table and percentages, while the hypotheses were tested using the chi-square. The findings of the study revealed that there are environmental factors inciting politics of godfatherism in Rivers State; that politics of godfatherism has adversely impacted on democratic governance in Rivers State; and that there are strategic measures to abate politics of godfatherism in Rivers State. The study thus recommended the prevention of undue influence from political godfathers, enforcement of campaign finance regulations, promotion of a level playing field for all candidates before and during elections in Nigeria among others.

On his part, Onwuegbu (2024) who conducted research on ‘Godfatherism and Political Party Financing in the 2023 Elections’ also through a mixed-method approach and document analysis with interviews relying three theoretical perspectives i.e Elite Theory, Patron–Client Theory and Political Economy Theory to Godfatherism and Political Party Financing in the 2023 Elections, the findings of his work shows political parties depend heavily on godfathers for funding which often undermines internal party democracy and accountability and invariably lead leads to elite domination of political processes. The central recommendations of the work include; Reform campaign financing laws, introduce public funding for parties and strengthen regulatory institutions as a panacea for an acceptable electoral outcome.

Also using Patron–Client Theory and Political Economy Theory to decipher Godfatherism, Power Dynamics and Economic Growth in Nigeria Nnajiето & Ihejiето (2024) a case study Owerri zone he adopted a Qualitative and empirical analysis the study linking godfatherism to governance failure. Findings shows that Godfatherism influences policy decisions and resource allocation which often leads to poor governance outcomes and slowed development and recommended that we strive to reduce political patronage, strengthen institutional checks and promote transparency.

Igbini & Okolie, (2020) examine godfatherism and its threat to Nigeria's nascent democracy. Democracy has promoted political and socio-economic development far more effectively than any other political system across many countries and centuries of history. The paper reflects on the nature, causes and effect of godfatherism on Nigeria’s nascent democracy. We anchored our investigation on some basic propositions arising from the elite theory and argue that politics of

godfatherism negates peaceful coexistence, law and order and poses a threat to the Nigeria's nascent democracy. His paper which is theoretical in nature draws its argument basically from secondary data which include journal articles, textbooks and internet sources. Requisite conclusions and recommendations were provided in the light of the theoretical findings.

Oghuvbu (2023) studies Godfatherism and Its Effects on Nigeria's Democracy through lens Elite Theory and the adoption of Qualitative institutional method of analysis the study concludes that that godfatherism is structural, not incidental. Findings reveal that Godfatherism weakens democratic consolidation, restricts political participation and undermines governance efficiency. The studies thus recommend the Strengthening of democratic institutions, promotion of political transparency and reducing elite dominance.

Collectively, these empirical findings suggest that while the mechanisms of delivery have modernized, the core impact of political clientelism remains the systematic marginalization of independent candidates. As Ibrahim and Okafor (2023) conclude, the erosion of internal party democracy in the most recent cycles is not a failure of technology, but a triumph of the patron-client bond over institutional safeguards.

## **2.4 Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on Elite Theory (Pareto, 1935; Mosca, 1939) complemented by Clientelism theory (Scott, 1972). The importance of the adoption and application of the elite theory and clientalist theory to this study is to theoretically explain or describe how the politics of godfatherism impact on democratic governance in Nigeria with particular reference to the 2019 and 2023 elections in Nigeria. The two theories provide complementary perspectives for understanding godfatherism in Nigerian politics during the 2019 and 2023 elections.

### **2.4.1 Elite Theory**

Elite theory provides a useful framework for understanding godfatherism in Nigerian politics. Developed by scholars like Vilfredo Pareto (1935) and Gaetano Mosca (1939), elite theory is based on the assumption that every society contains a small group of individuals who holds disproportionate power and influence over major decisions affecting the whole population (Higley, 2018).

Central to elite theory is structures, especially authority structures. It is founded on the premise that elite behaviour has a causal impact on the state-society dynamic while insiders have more authority and power over the state than the people”.

The theory thus argues that political power is concentrated in the hands of a small group of elites who control key resources, occupy strategic positions, and possess networks that allow them to maintain their privileged status. In the Nigerian context Political elites (godfathers) determine who gets nominated by political parties since they control party structures and electoral resources hence influence governance outcomes after elections. For instance, in Kano State, political influence revolves around elite actors such as Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso, Abdullahi Umar Ganduje, and Ibrahim Shekarau whose networks shape electoral competition in the state.

#### **2.4.2 Clientelism Theory**

This study is primarily anchored on the **Clientelism Theory**, a framework pioneered and popularized by scholars such as **James Scott (1972)** and **Carl Landé (1977)**, and later refined for modern political analysis by **Herbert Kitschelt and Steven Wilkinson (2007)**. Clientelism is defined as a sophisticated, asymmetric chain of personal favors between a "patron" (the political godfather) and a "client" (the protégé), where political support and institutional access are traded for private benefit rather than public policy. Unlike standard democratic representation, where power flows upward from the voter to the representative, clientelism creates a system of "**downward accountability.**" In this arrangement, the elected official remains tethered to the patron who facilitated their ascent, transforming elective offices into "purchased assets" where the primary duty of the officeholder is the repayment of political debts.

**Critique and Weakness of the Theory** A significant weakness of the Theory of Political Clientelism is its tendency toward **economic determinism**. Critics, such as **Gay (1994)**, argue that the theory often assumes voters and protégés are passive actors driven solely by material poverty, thereby overlooking the role of ideology, agency, or genuine communal loyalty in political choice. Furthermore, the theory is sometimes criticized for being "static"—failing to account for how patronage networks survive or collapse when faced with modernizing institutions and technological transparency.

**Justification and Application to the Study** This study intends to address these theoretical gaps by demonstrating the **adaptive resilience** of clientelist networks. While critics suggest the theory struggles to explain behavior in modernizing democracies, this research argues that in Nigeria, clientelism has not disappeared but has instead evolved into "**digital and economic clientelism.**" In spite of the aforementioned weaknesses, the Theory of Political Clientelism remains the most potent analytical tool for this work. It provides a direct mechanical explanation for the **100% performance gap** in budget transparency identified in the findings. No other theory—including Social Exchange or Elite Theory—so precisely captures the "downward accountability" that occurs when a godfather's financial monopoly bypasses the electorate's will. Thus, the theory is utilized here not as a static descriptor of poverty, but as a dynamic lens to view the structural subversion of Nigerian democratic consolidation during the 2019 and 2023 electoral cycles.

### **Integration of Theories**

As stated earlier, the two theories, Elite and Clientalism theory, provide complementary perspectives for understanding godfatherism in Nigerian politics during the 2019 and 2023 elections. While the Elite Theory explains who controls power, the Clientelist theory explains how that control is maintained.

Clientelism complements Elite Theory by explaining the patron-client relationships that underpin godfatherism. According to Scott (1972), clientelism involves reciprocal relationships where patrons provide resources in exchange for political support.

Together, they show that these theories help explain how and why Political elites dominate the system and how they sustain control through financial and patronage networks. In Nigeria, this connection is evident in the manner godfathers sponsor candidates and expect returns in the form of political loyalty and access to state resources.

However, the theoretical synthesis acknowledges both the analytical power and limitations of each individual theory. While Elite Theory effectively explains power concentration, it may underestimate possibilities for democratic change. Clientelism Theory illuminates exchange mechanisms but might overlook broader structural factors. By combining these perspectives, the study aims to develop a more nuanced understanding of godfatherism that acknowledges both its entrenched nature and potential vulnerabilities.

This theoretical synthesis thus provides the analytical foundation for examining how godfatherism manifested during Nigeria's 2019 and 2023 elections, its effects on democratic governance and electoral processes, and the factors that enabled its persistence despite democratic ideals and reform efforts.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This article employs a qualitative research design, relying on secondary sources, content analysis, and comparative case studies. A qualitative approach proves appropriate for this research because it allows for in-depth exploration of complex political relationships, processes, and their consequences (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). The phenomenon of godfatherism involves subtle power dynamics, informal relationships, and contextual factors that quantitative methods alone might not adequately capture. The design focuses on analyzing relationships between godfather influence and specific democratic governance outcomes during and after the elections under study.

#### **3.2 Sources of Data**

The study draws data from academic Journals, works by Nigerian scholars and election observers reports (EU EOM, CDD, Yiaga Africa) and state level political developments.

#### **3.3 Method of Analysis**

The research utilized thematic analysis to identify recurring themes of godfatherism, state capture, vote buying, clientelism, and their interlinkages focusing on the 2019 and 2023 elections.

### **4. Findings**

This section presents the major findings on the nexus between godfatherism and electoral capture and democratic governance in Nigeria with a focus on the 2019 and 2023 general election in Nigeria.

A cursory review of Nigeria's transition to democratic rule in 1999, indicates that the country has conducted multiple general elections aimed at consolidating democratic governance. However, the persistence of political patronage systems, particularly godfatherism, has continued to distort democratic processes.

Consequently, the findings of the work highlighted that;

**Godfatherism and internal party democracy:** One key finding of this work is that both the 2019 and 2013 elections were characterized by intense intra-party conflicts through the imposition of candidates. Godfathers played significant roles in candidate selection, particularly within major parties such as APC and PDP. In many states, party primaries were manipulated to favor candidates loyal to political patrons. Due to lack of internal democracy, candidates were imposed and the space was restricted for potential aspirants to try their luck. Delegates were imposed through the whims and caprices of the powerful chieftains, especially the governor of the party. This aligned with the view of Adeoye (2009) whose findings demonstrate that candidate selection processes are often controlled by political patrons, undermining internal party democracy.

In states such as Lagos, Kano, and Rivers, political patrons played decisive roles in determining electoral outcomes. Studies reveal that electoral outcomes were influenced more by elite negotiations than determined by the electorates thereby undermining internal party democracy and reducing the credibility of the elections.

**2. Promotion of electoral malpractice:** The process of candidate selection, arguably the most critical stage in the electoral cycle, was heavily influenced by political godfathers who imposed candidates loyal to their interests. While the use of state resources and security agencies by political elites further distorted the electoral processes.

**3. Fostering corruption,** Political godfathers leveraged financial resources and political networks to influence electoral outcomes. The introduction of new electoral technologies did little to reduce elite influence. The 2023 elections witnessed a more sophisticated form of godfatherism characterized by increased monetization of politics, strategic elite alliances and digital campaign financing. Eke (2018) shows that public resources are diverted to satisfy political sponsors, resulting in corruption and inefficiency.

Evidence from the coverage of 2019 election in Nigeria by the EU EOM (2019) reports, indicates widespread vote buying and lack of transparency. While the CDD (2023) and Yiaga Africa (2023) document show an increased monetization, strategic elite alliances and persistent vote trading. According to the European Union Election Observation Mission (2019) “Vote buying was widespread and openly practiced in many polling units, with party agents distributing cash to voters in exchange for support.”

Vote buying and financial inducements transformed elections into transactional exchanges, where votes became commodities rather than expressions of political will. This aligns with clientelism theory, where political support is exchanged for material benefits. However, in the Nigerian case, this has evolved into mass vote commodification, undermining voter autonomy, electoral credibility and democratic legitimacy

It was also noted that though Godfatherism in 2023 became less visible but more powerful, operating through clandestine networks rather than individuals alone.

**4. Weak democratic institution and the Subversion of Democratic Structures:** Democratic governance depends on the autonomy and effectiveness of institutions such as electoral bodies (INEC), political parties, the judiciary, and anti-corruption agencies. Likewise, anti-corruption agencies also often face political interference, particularly when investigations involve powerful elites. This selective enforcement reinforces a culture of impunity by clientelists that facilitates institutional capture, through the co-option of these bodies by political elites.

**5. Electoral Institutions and Credibility Challenges:** Although institutions like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have introduced reforms, their effectiveness is often undermined by elite and clientalist pressure. For instance, even with the introduction of technological innovations such as BVAS, the broader political environment remains susceptible to manipulation of these elites who often influence the processes of electoral logistics like transportation, security deployment and result collation processes in their domain of control.

Again, the resilience of these networks against reforms like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) further highlights that the patron's power is tied to resource control rather than specific methods of fraud. When BVAS made manual manipulation difficult, the exchange shifted "upstream" to sophisticated, targeted vote-buying and digital clientelism. This adaptation ensures that the patron remains the primary gatekeeper, rendering technological fixes secondary to the underlying economic dependency of the electorate.

**6. Judiciary and Legal Contestation:** Again, the judiciary, which is purposed to serves as the arbiter of electoral disputes, is not immune to elite influence. Election petitions are sometimes perceived as extensions of political contests rather than impartial legal processes. This erodes public confidence in judicial outcomes which often undermines the legitimacy of elected governments and weakens democratic consolidation.

**7. Campaign Financing and Debt Politics:** Election campaigns in Nigeria are extremely expensive, and candidates often rely on godfathers for funding. Once in office, these candidates are expected to award inflated contracts, divert public funds or allocate strategic positions to loyalists. Consequently, public policies are often designed to serve narrow interests rather than collective welfare. Development projects may be prioritized based on patronage considerations rather than need or efficiency. This creates a cycle of “investment politics”, where governance is driven by the need to recoup campaign expenditures leading to policy distortion resulting into long term economic development, infrastructure provision, and social services challenges which over time contributes to persistent poverty, inequality and weak state capacity.

**8. Political Violence and Electoral Conflict:** Godfatherism often generates intense competition among elites, leading to political violence. This is particularly evident during elections, where rival godfathers seek to assert dominance. This violence may take several forms i.e from intimidation of voters to clashes between rival political groups and the destruction of electoral materials. This is why Omodia and Egwemi (2011) link electoral crises to conflicts among godfathers, highlighting the destabilizing effects of elite competition. Accordingly, Nkwede (2014) finds that godfatherism leads to poor governance outcomes due to divided loyalty between godsons and citizens.

Again, Conflicts between godfathers and their protégés, especially when the latter attempts to assert independence. Such conflicts have historically led to political instability in several Nigerian states; recent examples can be found in Rivers state between the incumbent state governor, Simi Fabura and the Minister of FCT, Barr. N. Wike resulting in the declaration of state of emergency in River state by President Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

This reinforces the perception that politics is a high-risk, elite-driven activity that discourages citizen engagement. Unfortunately, though, in many cases when godfather enjoys federal might and gets away with his/her overbearing dominance, over time citizens may come to accept electoral malpractice as the norm, further entrenching godfatherism.

**9. Voter Apathy and Democratic Disillusionment:** The consequences of electoral manipulation by godfathers are corruption, violence and widespread voter apathy. When citizens perceive that their votes do not count, they become disengaged from the political process. This has overtime led

to the declining voters' turnout across successive elections, reflecting growing disillusionment with the Nigerian electoral processes.

The cumulative impact of these entire findings is that, By utilizing the lens of Elitism and clientelism, the research clarifies that the high success rate of godfather-backed candidates is not merely a political trend but a structural bypass of democratic competition the impact of godfatherism is therefore not isolated, rather it represents a systemic crisis affecting multiple dimensions of governance where; electoral processes are compromised, accountability mechanisms are weakened, Institutions are captured while development outcomes are distorted thus creating a political system where democracy exists in form but not in substance.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study set out to assess the impact of godfatherism on democratic governance in Nigeria, using the 2019 and 2023 general elections as case studies. The study highlights the pervasive influence of godfatherism in political party financing in Nigeria, particularly during the 2019 and 2023 general elections. The study reveals that Godfathers remain entrenched in Nigeria's political landscape. These elites play a major role in determining electoral outcomes through their connections and finances. It operates through a complex network of elite dominance, financial control, and patron-client relationships that shape both electoral processes and governance outcomes.

Godfatherism undermines internal party democracy through the imposition of candidates and manipulation of party primaries. Electoral processes are further distorted by widespread vote buying, monetization of politics, and strategic use of state resources by political elites. Their activities impact negatively on democratic governance by fostering corruption, weakening accountability, and distorting policy formulation. Public resources are often diverted to satisfy political sponsors, resulting in poor governance and development outcomes. Democratic institutions, including electoral bodies and the judiciary, are often subjected to elite interference, thereby undermining their credibility and effectiveness.

Even though reforms of the Electoral Act (2022) and technological innovations improved procedural transparency, they did not necessarily dismantle elite control. Rather, godfatherism has transformed into more sophisticated and less visible forms, including digital clientelism and network-based political influence.

These cumulative undermines public trust as citizens increasingly perceive elections as predetermined and manipulated, public trust in democratic processes declines, weakening the legitimacy of governance structures.

The study therefore concludes that Nigeria's democracy remains largely procedural rather than substantive, as the dominance of godfatherism continues to constrain genuine political participation and accountability. Addressing this challenge requires not only institutional reforms but also a fundamental restructuring of the political and economic conditions that sustain elite dominance.

## **6. Recommendations**

Against the backdrop of the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are put forward:

**1. Dismantling Gatekeeping through Direct Primaries:** The National Assembly should mandate the use of strictly monitored direct primaries for all political parties. This shift would decentralize power from a handful of party patrons to the general membership, making it harder for "cross-party operators" to manipulate candidate selection.

**2. Embrace the culture of inclusiveness:** Political parties should embrace the culture of inclusiveness, accountability, transparency, participation and representation to promote internal structure of their parties in order to include party members in decision making processes and deliberations within the party structure.

**3. Proper Conduct of Party Primaries:** The electoral laws should be made to strengthen proper conduct of primary elections in order to enhance the right of the electorate.

**4. Institutionalizing Independent Candidacy:** Implementing constitutional amendments to allow for independent candidacy would provide a vital alternative for qualified individuals to seek office without the necessity of a clientelist contract. This would foster a more merit-based political environment and enhance upward accountability to the voters.

**5. Financial De-linking via Campaign Reform:** Anti-corruption agencies (EFCC and ICPC) must collaborate with INEC to strictly enforce campaign finance caps. By limiting the financial monopoly of individual patrons, the state can reduce the "cost of entry" for independent candidates and weaken the leverage of the patron-client bond.

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