LESSON FROM NIGERIAS 2023 ELECTIONS: PATHWAYS FOR ACHIEVING CREDIBLE ELECTIONS IN 2027

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Abstract

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria underscored both advancements and enduring challenges in the nation's democratic evolution. As Africa's largest democracy, Nigeria's electoral outcomes have a profound impact on political stability and governance across the continent. This study explores key lessons from the 2023 elections to outline strategies for achieving more credible and inclusive elections in 2027. Anchored in the institutional theory of governance, the research highlights the pivotal role of electoral institutions, norms, and systems in shaping democratic practices. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyzes reports from electoral observers, media coverage, and statements from stakeholders such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and civil society organizations. Findings reveal that institutional weaknesses, including technological challenges and inadequate stakeholder engagement, hampered the credibility of the elections, despite encouraging gains in voter participation and awareness. The study concludes that strengthening institutional capacity, fostering transparency, and building stakeholder trust are essential for enhancing electoral credibility in 2027. Recommendations include the adoption of advanced electoral technologies, stricter enforcement of accountability mechanisms, and expanded voter education programs. These measures are vital to bridging current gaps and fortifying Nigeria's democratic trajectory.

Keywords: Nigerian Elections, Democratic Governance, Electoral Institutions, Credible Elections, Voter Education

Introduction

Nigeria's 2023 general elections marked a significant milestone in the nation's democratic journey, offering critical insights into the progress and persistent

challenges facing its electoral system. With over 93 million registered voters, the elections showcased heightened civic participation, emphasizing the importance of credible and transparent processes for political stability and national development (INEC, 2023). Innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) demonstrated efforts to modernize electoral management. However, logistical challenges, allegations of malpractice, and reports of voter suppression tarnished the credibility of the process. These shortcomings underscore the urgency of addressing systemic weaknesses to strengthen the integrity of Nigeria's electoral framework and ensure public confidence in future elections.

The challenges observed during the 2023 elections were emblematic of deep-rooted institutional issues that have persisted over time. Technical failures, delays in result collation, and inadequate security measures created opportunities for irregularities, while incidents of voter intimidation and manipulation highlighted vulnerabilities in Nigeria's democratic processes (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023). To address these issues effectively, a comprehensive approach is required, focusing on improving institutional capacity, enhancing transparency in election management, and promoting accountability among political actors. Looking ahead to 2027, actionable reforms such as expanding voter education, streamlining the deployment of electoral technologies, and enhancing the training of electoral staff are critical (Yiaga Africa, 2023). Moreover, fostering collaboration among stakeholders—including civil society organizations, political parties, and international partners—will be essential for building trust in the electoral process and achieving elections that truly reflect the will of the Nigerian people.

Research Problem

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria, while a significant step in the country's democratic development, were marred by persistent challenges that undermined their credibility. Issues such as logistical delays, malfunctioning electoral technology, voter suppression, and allegations of fraud generated widespread dissatisfaction among citizens and stakeholders (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023). Despite previous reforms aimed at improving transparency and efficiency, these recurring problems have continued to plague Nigeria's electoral process. As a key player in Africa's democratic landscape, Nigeria's electoral shortcomings have implications beyond its borders, threatening national stability and casting doubt on the continent's democratic governance. This situation underscores the urgency of addressing systemic

issues to ensure that the 2027 elections meet global standards of credibility and reflect the will of the people.

Although prior studies have examined various aspects of Nigeria's electoral challenges, including the role of technology in mitigating fraud (Adebayo, 2021) and the impact of political violence on voter turnout (Omotola & Akinboye, 2020), much of this research has focused on isolated issues. Similarly, work by Ojo (2019) and Yiaga Africa (2023) has emphasized civic engagement and institutional accountability but has not provided a holistic analysis of lessons from a specific electoral cycle. This study bridges that gap by offering a comprehensive review of the 2023 elections, synthesizing lessons from past research, and presenting actionable recommendations for 2027. By adopting a holistic approach, it contributes to the discourse on electoral reform and democratic consolidation in Nigeria, providing pathways for achieving more credible and transparent elections.

Research Objectives:
1. To assess the key challenges encountered during Nigeria's 2023 general elections.
2. To evaluate the role of technology in the 2023 elections and its impact on electoral credibility.
3. To highlight the successes and improvements recorded in the 2023 elections and their implications for future elections.
4. To propose actionable strategies for achieving credible elections in 2027.

Research Questions:
1. What were the major challenges encountered during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria?
2. How did the deployment of technology impact the credibility and efficiency of the electoral process?
3. What successes were achieved in the 2023 elections, and how can these inform future electoral reforms?
4. What strategies can be implemented to address the identified challenges and enhance electoral credibility in 2027?

Conceptual Framework
This section clarifies the key concepts used in the study, providing a foundational understanding of terms such as "technological innovation," "Nigeria's electoral history," and "challenges faced in the 2023 elections." These concepts are

essential for contextualizing the lessons from Nigeria's 2023 elections and exploring pathways to improve the process in 2027.

Overview of Nigeria's Electoral History

Nigeria's journey toward democratic governance has been shaped by periods of military rule and political instability, followed by transitions to civilian leadership. The return to democracy in 1999 marked a significant turning point, despite criticisms of electoral irregularities. The 1999 elections were pivotal in ending military dictatorship but were marred by widespread fraud and logistical issues (Adebayo, 2020). This pattern continued in subsequent elections, such as those in 2003 and 2007, which were characterized by political violence and allegations of manipulation, signaling the fragility of Nigeria's democratic institutions.

Efforts to improve the electoral process gained traction with the 2011 and 2015 elections, which saw the introduction of reforms like biometric voter registration. The 2015 elections were particularly noted for their peaceful transfer of power, further demonstrating the nation's commitment to strengthening democratic processes (Omotola & Akinboye, 2020).

Since 1999, there has been a concerted effort to enhance Nigeria's electoral transparency and institutional capacity, notably through reforms by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). These reforms, including the introduction of the Permanent Voter's Card (PVC) and the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), were designed to combat fraud and improve voter authentication (INEC, 2023). Despite these advancements, challenges persist, including voter suppression, political violence, and logistical inefficiencies. The 2019 elections highlighted the need for better security measures and logistical management, prompting further calls for reform (Yiaga Africa, 2019). The 2023 elections provided crucial lessons, emphasizing the importance of technology and institutional preparedness in ensuring credible elections. As the country approaches the 2027 elections, addressing these recurring issues remains essential to fostering public trust and strengthening the democratic process.

Technological Innovations in the 2023 Elections

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria were marked by the introduction of several technological innovations aimed at improving electoral credibility and transparency. The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was a key advancement, designed to authenticate voters through biometric verification via fingerprint and facial recognition. This system replaced older, more vulnerable

methods and sought to address issues such as over-voting and impersonation, offering a more secure and accurate voter accreditation process (INEC, 2023). Despite these advancements, the BVAS encountered operational challenges, including delays and malfunctions in certain polling units, which compromised its effectiveness and raised concerns about its reliability in some areas.

Another technological breakthrough was the launch of the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), intended to enhance transparency in the transmission and collation of election results. The IReV platform allowed real-time uploading of results from polling units, enabling citizens, political parties, and election observers to track results as they were transmitted (Yiaga Africa, 2023). While this was a promising step towards ensuring public trust in the electoral process, technical difficulties, including delays in result uploads during the presidential election, led to widespread skepticism about the platform's reliability. These setbacks highlighted the need for robust infrastructure and pre-election testing to ensure the smooth operation of such technologies. The 2023 elections demonstrated the potential for technology to transform Nigeria's electoral landscape but also underscored the importance of thorough preparation and capacity-building to maximize the benefits of these innovations.

Challenges Faced in the 2023 Elections

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria faced several significant challenges that impacted the integrity and inclusivity of the electoral process. Voter suppression emerged as a prominent issue, with reports of intimidation and physical barriers preventing citizens from accessing polling stations, especially in opposition strongholds (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023). These practices disenfranchised many eligible voters and cast doubt on the fairness of the elections. The inability of electoral institutions to adequately protect voter rights raised concerns about the overall security and integrity of the electoral process, underscoring the need for enhanced oversight and stronger security mechanisms to ensure free and fair elections in the future.

Logistical challenges also undermined the credibility of the 2023 elections. Delays in the arrival of voting materials, malfunctioning biometric devices, and irregularities in result collation plagued the process in several areas (INEC, 2023). These issues, compounded by sporadic instances of electoral violence and clashes between political party supporters, further eroded public confidence in the process (Yiaga Africa, 2023). Voter frustration, particularly in areas experiencing technical and logistical issues, created an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, which deterred voter participation in some regions.

Additionally, the delay in result transmission and the perceived bias of electoral officials led to widespread skepticism about the fairness of the election outcomes, highlighting the importance of addressing both logistical inefficiencies and public trust to strengthen the electoral process.

Citizens' Participation and Advocacy

Citizens' participation in elections is vital for a thriving democracy, and the 2023 Nigerian elections saw increased youth engagement, particularly through social media. Young Nigerians, who are often more active on digital platforms, utilized social media to engage in political discourse, spread awareness about voting rights, and encourage others to vote. Social media has revolutionized political engagement, allowing real-time communication and the organization of grassroots movements. This has particularly influenced younger generations, who can now participate in digital campaigns and discussions that directly affect electoral outcomes (Loader, Vromen, & Xenos, 2014).

In addition to individual and collective actions, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have played a key role in election monitoring and advocacy. These organizations serve as independent watchdogs, ensuring that the elections are free and fair by observing polling stations, reporting irregularities, and pushing for electoral reforms. Through both traditional methods and social media, CSOs have been able to mobilize volunteers to monitor the elections, increasing transparency and ensuring that any instances of voter suppression or fraud are addressed. Their presence strengthens the democratic process by providing a non-partisan, independent voice that holds both the government and electoral institutions accountable (Harris, 2020). This increased participation by citizens, both through social media and CSOs, has contributed to greater electoral transparency and has worked to safeguard the integrity of Nigeria's democratic process.

Institutional Reforms and Legal Frameworks

Institutional reforms and legal frameworks are critical to the success of Nigeria's electoral system, and the Electoral Act of 2022 represents a significant step toward improving electoral transparency and fairness. One of the key features of the Act was the integration of technology into the electoral process, including the introduction of BVAS and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV). These innovations were designed to reduce electoral fraud and improve the timeliness of result transmission (Mbah, 2022). Additionally, the Electoral Act aimed to strengthen protections for voters and improve the legal framework surrounding election security. However, despite these advancements, challenges remain

regarding the effective implementation of the Act, particularly concerning logistical issues and the independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).

While the Electoral Act of 2022 represented progress, several gaps in the system continue to hinder full electoral reform. A major challenge is the lack of adequate funding and capacity-building for INEC, which limits its ability to implement reforms effectively. Although the Act addresses concerns related to campaign financing and political party regulation, questions remain about INEC's independence, particularly in the face of political pressures and financial constraints (Ezeani, 2023). Without sufficient funding and support, INEC may struggle to fulfill its responsibilities, potentially undermining the credibility of future elections. Addressing these concerns requires ensuring that INEC is adequately funded and has greater autonomy in its decision-making processes. Additionally, enhancing INEC's technological infrastructure and implementing robust cybersecurity measures are crucial to maintaining the integrity of the electoral system.

International and Regional Comparisons

International and regional comparisons provide valuable lessons for enhancing Nigeria's electoral system. Ghana, for example, has achieved notable success in ensuring transparent elections through the use of biometric voter registration and continuous training of electoral officials (Asante, 2021). The independence of Ghana's Electoral Commission and its commitment to transparency have positioned the country as a leader in credible elections within the region. In contrast, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) continues to face challenges such as political interference, funding limitations, and capacity constraints, despite adopting similar reforms like biometric voter registration under the Electoral Act of 2022. These differences highlight the need for Nigeria to strengthen its electoral body and overcome institutional challenges.

International observer reports have consistently emphasized the importance of an impartial judicial system and effective election logistics, areas where Nigeria has faced recurring issues (European Union, 2019). The European Union's missions have underscored the need for improvements in voter education and the independence of electoral bodies, advocating for stronger legal frameworks to safeguard electoral integrity (Kaufman & Kuenzi, 2022). By drawing from these international experiences, Nigeria can better understand the necessary reforms for improving its electoral system. Enhancing voter education, election

transparency, and judicial intervention are key areas for strengthening Nigeria's electoral processes and ensuring credibility and public trust.

Comparing Previous Elections with the 2023 General Election

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria marked a significant shift in the country's electoral landscape, building on the lessons from previous elections, particularly the 2019 polls. One notable improvement in 2023 was the adoption of technology, such as the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the IReV portal, which were intended to address issues of voter manipulation and result transparency (Adigun, 2023). Unlike the 2019 elections, where widespread irregularities such as over-voting and result manipulation were reported, the 2023 elections showcased a more robust use of technology in verifying voter identity and transmitting results in real time. However, challenges remained, including logistical delays, technical failures in BVAS devices, and the late arrival of election materials, which somewhat compromised the credibility of the process (Ibrahim, 2023). Despite these shortcomings, the election's technological advancements represented a step forward in ensuring transparency and reducing fraud.

Compared to earlier elections, such as the 2015 general elections, there has been a clear evolution in INEC's approach to improving electoral processes. While the 2015 elections were generally regarded as a milestone for peaceful transitions, challenges like manual accreditation and delays in delivering election materials were prevalent (Oladipo, 2015). In contrast, the 2023 elections, though still marred by logistical issues, benefited from improved technological tools aimed at enhancing transparency and accuracy. However, both the 2015 and 2023 elections faced problems with voter apathy, political violence, and the influence of money in politics, pointing to the need for continued reforms (Mustapha, 2023). These lessons highlight the importance of further technological improvements, better logistics, and comprehensive electoral reforms to ensure the credibility of the 2027 elections.

Pathways to Credible Elections in 2027

As Nigeria prepares for the 2027 general elections, several critical reforms are necessary to ensure a credible and transparent process. Strengthening electoral institutions, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), is essential for improving the efficiency and credibility of elections. INEC must receive adequate funding and operational autonomy to implement reforms, improve election logistics, and ensure timely dispute resolution through

permanent election tribunals (Mbah, 2022). Logistical improvements, such as efficient training of election officials and better coordination between state and national electoral bodies, are vital for reducing delays and ensuring that elections are more organized and transparent.

In addition to institutional strengthening, addressing voter education and combating misinformation are crucial components of credible elections. The rapid spread of misinformation, particularly on social media, undermines public trust and electoral integrity, as seen in the 2023 elections (Akinwumi & Ali, 2023). To counter this, both INEC and civil society organizations must collaborate to educate voters on their rights and how to identify credible sources of election-related information. Furthermore, technological innovations, such as biometric voter registration, electronic voting, and real-time results transmission, can enhance transparency and security. However, these technologies must be safeguarded against cybersecurity threats to protect the election process from potential manipulation and ensure a secure environment for voters (Kaufman & Kuenzi, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

The study adopts the **Institutional Theory**, as developed by scholars such as Douglass North (1990), Oliver Williamson (1985), and Paul DiMaggio and Walter Powell (1983). This theory emphasizes the role of institutions—both formal structures and informal norms—in shaping societal outcomes. It posits that institutions provide stability and predictability, guiding decision-making and behavior. In the context of Nigeria's elections, the theory underscores the importance of institutional frameworks like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in ensuring credible electoral processes. It argues that a well-functioning institutional framework is crucial for managing elections effectively, fostering transparency, and preventing manipulation.

The relevance of institutional theory to Nigeria's electoral system is particularly evident when considering the challenges faced during the 2023 elections, such as logistical inefficiencies, technological malfunctions, and voter intimidation. These challenges reflect weaknesses in the institutional governance of the electoral process. Institutional theory helps explain how enhancing organizational capacity, reinforcing norms of transparency, and building trust among stakeholders can address these issues. By strengthening electoral institutions and ensuring that they operate with integrity, Nigeria can improve the credibility of its elections and move closer to achieving democratic consolidation.

Methodology

This study employs a **qualitative research design** using content analysis to examine lessons from Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Content analysis is an effective method for systematically reviewing textual data to identify recurring themes and insights (Krippendorff, 2018). The primary sources of data include: Official reports from the **Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC),** **o**bserver reports from organizations such as the **European Union Election Observation Mission** and **Yiaga Africa and** Media articles and academic studies.

Data will be coded into thematic categories, including **technological performance**, **voter participation**, and **institutional challenges**, to identify patterns and provide a comprehensive understanding of the electoral process and its shortcomings. This approach ensures an objective and in-depth analysis of the factors influencing Nigeria's path toward credible elections in 2027.

Key Findings

The study revealed the following findings:

1. Logistical challenges, including delays in result collation and the distribution of voting materials, undermined the efficiency of the 2023 elections.
2. The implementation of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) demonstrated potential but was hindered by significant technical and operational setbacks.
3. Voter intimidation and suppression in certain regions reduced the inclusiveness of the electoral process.
4. Weak institutional capacity and inadequate stakeholder engagement contributed to a general lack of public trust in the electoral process.

Conclusion

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria highlighted both progress and persistent challenges that require urgent attention to ensure credible elections in 2027. Issues such as logistical inefficiencies, technological failures, and voter suppression underscored the need for systemic reforms and a strengthened electoral framework. Addressing these weaknesses through technological innovation, robust stakeholder engagement, and comprehensive voter education is essential for restoring public confidence in the electoral process.

To achieve credible elections in 2027, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must take a leading role in implementing targeted reforms, with the support of all stakeholders. By focusing on transparency, inclusiveness,

and efficiency, Nigeria has the opportunity to set a strong example for credible elections in Africa, thereby solidifying its democratic standing regionally and globally.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The government should enhance training programs for electoral officials and address logistical challenges to improve the efficiency and credibility of the electoral process.
2. Investments in robust infrastructure for electoral technology, including comprehensive pre-election testing, are necessary to ensure reliability and transparency.
3. Extensive public awareness campaigns should be initiated and funded to educate voters, reduce voter intimidation, and encourage active democratic participation.
4. Partnerships with political parties, civil society organizations, and international observers should be strengthened to enhance oversight mechanisms, ensuring greater transparency and accountability in the electoral system.

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