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## Myth or Reality: Evaluating the Impact of Electoral Integrity on Democratic Legitimacy in Nigeria from 1999 to 2023 within the West African Context.

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between electoral integrity and democratic legitimacy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic (1999–2023), situating the analysis within the broader West African democratic landscape. Employing qualitative methodology and comparative review of seven electoral cycles, this paper investigates whether electoral integrity genuinely influences democratic legitimacy or remains a theoretical ideal disconnected from political reality. Findings reveal a paradoxical pattern where, despite periodic elections, persistent irregularities including vote buying, result falsification, and violence have undermined both electoral credibility and citizen trust. Notably, voter turnout declined precipitously from 52.3% in 1999 to a historic low of 26.7% in 2023, signaling a profound legitimacy crisis. The study concludes that while electoral integrity significantly impacts democratic legitimacy, institutional constraints and political interference have transformed this relationship into a contested myth, necessitating urgent institutional reforms to restore public confidence.

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria's transition from decades of military rule to democratic governance in 1999 represented far more than a constitutional realignment it symbolised a national reawakening and the collective hope of over 200 million citizens yearning for political freedom, accountable leadership, and meaningful participation in public life. The inauguration of the Fourth Republic was not merely a political event; it was a profound psychological turning point for a country long burdened by authoritarianism, systemic repression, and the arbitrariness of military decrees (Wuam *et al.*, 2017). As Africa's most populous nation and its largest economy, Nigeria's democratisation was expected to set a continental benchmark, radiating stability across West Africa and reinforcing the region's commitment to civilian rule.

Yet, more than two decades into this democratic journey, the optimism that once animated public discourse has faded into widespread skepticism. Despite the symbolic value of conducting seven consecutive general elections between 1999 and 2023, an achievement many neighbouring states have struggled to replicate, Nigeria continues to grapple with unresolved tensions surrounding the credibility, transparency, and legitimacy of its electoral processes. Citizens increasingly describe elections not as moments of genuine civic empowerment but as ritualised performances whose outcomes rarely reflect popular will or meaningfully alter the governance landscape (Brady *et al.*, 2024).

This contradiction lies at the heart of Nigeria's democratic predicament. On the surface, the country exhibits the institutional architecture associated with liberal democracy: regular multiparty elections, a constitutional framework, periodic transitions of power, and a vibrant

political party system. Nevertheless, these structures coexist with persistent deficits in democratic substance. As Schedler (2002) conceptualises in his notion of "electoral authoritarianism," regimes may adopt the outward appearance of democracy while subtly manipulating electoral processes to reproduce power and diminish genuine competition. Cheeseman's (2015) metaphor of a "menu of manipulation" further illuminates how incumbents strategically deploy administrative, legal, and coercive tools to distort outcomes while maintaining a façade of procedural legitimacy.

Nigeria's experience aligns with these theoretical insights. The recurrent patterns of vote-buying, logistical failures, judicial controversies, voter suppression, digital transmission breakdowns, and violence during elections raise critical questions about whether electoral processes reinforce democratic legitimacy or merely recycle elite dominance (Akindai *et al.*, 2025). The persistence of these problems over seven electoral cycles suggests not just episodic failures but deep-seated structural and institutional constraints that hinder democratic consolidation.

This study therefore seeks to interrogate the widening gap between Nigeria's democratic aspirations and the lived realities of its citizens. By exploring the theoretical foundations of electoral integrity, analysing historical trajectories across the Fourth Republic, and engaging in comparative reflection with other West African democracies, the research aims to determine whether electoral integrity in Nigeria meaningfully translates into democratic legitimacy. The central inquiry driving this paper is thus both empirical and normative: Does the presumed link between credible elections and democratic legitimacy hold true in Nigeria, or has it evolved into an

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aspirational myth an ideal repeatedly invoked in political rhetoric but rarely experienced by the electorate?

In addressing this question, the paper foregrounds citizens' perceptions, institutional performance, and regional benchmarks to assess the extent to which Nigeria's democracy has moved beyond symbolic structures to embody substantive legitimacy. Ultimately, the study contributes to broader debates on democratisation in Africa by highlighting how electoral systems can simultaneously sustain democratic rituals while undermining democratic trust.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptual Framework

#### Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity refers not only to the technical correctness of elections but to the broader commitment of state institutions, political actors, and society to uphold democratic norms across the entire electoral cycle. As Norris (2014) argues, integrity is grounded in compliance with internationally recognised standards and domestic legal provisions that regulate every stage of electoral governance from the design of legal frameworks, boundary delimitation, and voter registration to political campaigning, polling day procedures, vote counting, transmission of results, and post-election adjudication. It is therefore a holistic concept, emphasising that credible elections are the cumulative product of multiple interdependent processes rather than a single event.

In the Nigerian context, integrity deficits extend far beyond isolated acts of ballot stuffing or physical manipulation at polling units (James & Clark, 2019). They are embedded within deeper structural weaknesses and political dynamics that compromise the neutrality of key electoral institutions. Scholars such as Omotola (2010) have highlighted how incumbent political elites often exert undue influence over electoral management bodies, undermining their autonomy and eroding public trust. This institutional capture manifests in partisan appointments, budgetary constraints, opaque decision-making, and inconsistent enforcement of rules all of which create an uneven playing field long before voters arrive at the polls.

Importantly, electoral integrity is best understood not as a binary variable where elections are either free or fair or fraudulent but as a continuum along which electoral processes display different levels of credibility across distinct dimensions (Monsiváis-Carrillo, 2022; Norris, 2017). An election may, for instance, demonstrate strong procedural integrity in areas such as voter registration or vote counting, yet perform poorly in campaign finance regulation or the protection of voters from intimidation. This multidimensional nature underscores why electoral assessments in Nigeria must move beyond simplistic judgments to interrogate the complex interplay between laws, institutions, political behaviour, and citizen perceptions.

#### Democratic Legitimacy

Legitimacy constitutes the normative foundation upon which all stable political orders are built. It is the intangible yet powerful societal endorsement that converts raw power the mere capacity to compel into recognised authority, or the accepted right to rule. Lipset's (1959) seminal formulation captures this essence by describing legitimacy as a political system's ability to cultivate widespread belief that its institutions, rules, and decision-making processes are the most appropriate for society. In this sense, legitimacy is not imposed by the state; it is conferred by citizens through sustained trust, acceptance, and voluntary compliance.

In democratic systems, this public endorsement is principally expressed through the electoral process. Elections serve not only as mechanisms for selecting leaders but also as symbolic reaffirmations of the social contract, representing the governed's consent to be governed (Okoye *et al.*; 2025). When citizens believe that elections are conducted transparently and fairly, they are more inclined to accept both the winners and the policies that follow, even when outcomes do not align with their personal preferences.

However, when electoral processes are widely perceived as flawed, manipulated, or lacking integrity, the democratic chain of legitimacy begins to fracture. The first casualty is input legitimacy, which refers to the perceived fairness, inclusiveness, and credibility of the political process itself. Bratton and Mattes (2001) argue that once citizens doubt the procedural integrity of elections, their willingness to accept governmental decisions often diminishes, resulting in weakened output legitimacy the degree to which policies, governance outcomes, and state actions are considered acceptable or beneficial.

In contexts such as Nigeria, where electoral controversies recur across successive cycles, this erosion of input and output legitimacy creates a dangerous feedback loop. Disputed elections undermine trust in institutions; diminished trust depresses civic participation; weakened participation further entrenches elite manipulation (Hamid, 2025). Over time, the state may retain formal democratic structures, yet lose its moral authority in the eyes of the people it claims to represent.

#### Electoral Authoritarianism

Schedler's (2006) notion of electoral authoritarianism offers a powerful analytical lens for understanding political systems that outwardly embrace democratic rituals while subverting the very norms that give democracy meaning. In such regimes, elections are held regularly and often with great fanfare, yet the underlying conditions lack of genuine competition, manipulation of rules, repression of opposition, and compromised institutions render these elections instruments of authoritarian control rather than vehicles of democratic choice. What emerges is a hybrid political order in which the form of democracy is carefully preserved, but its substance is hollowed out.

This conceptual framework is particularly illuminating when applied to Nigeria's political trajectory since 1999 (Onapajo & Fatai, 2021; Adejumbi, 2010). On paper, the country boasts 24 uninterrupted years of civilian rule, periodic general elections, constitutional governance, and a multiparty system (Ityokura, 2025; SAIS Review, 2024). These features reinforce the national and international narrative of Nigeria as a consolidating democracy. Yet beneath this veneer lies a more troubling reality: persistent electoral manipulation, elite capture of institutions, selective rule enforcement, systemic voter suppression, and recurrent post-election crises (SAIS Review, 2024). These contradictions expose a structural tension between democratic aspiration and authoritarian practice.

The paradox, therefore, is not simply that Nigeria conducts elections, but that these elections often function as mechanisms for legitimising incumbent dominance rather than reflecting the sovereign will of the people. The persistence of such practices has contributed to a perceptible decline in public trust, as citizens increasingly question whether the democratic project genuinely serves collective interests or merely reinforces elite power (Selepe & Mehlap, 2023). Schedler's concept thus helps unpack Nigeria's dual identity the myth of sustained democratic continuity coexisting with the reality of entrenched autocratic tendencies.

In this respect, electoral authoritarianism becomes more than an abstract theoretical category; it becomes a lived experience for millions of Nigerians who witness the symbolic performance of democracy without enjoying its substantive rewards. This dissonance underscores the urgency of interrogating how democratic institutions can appear intact while legitimacy erodes steadily from within.

**Theoretical Orientation: Electoral authoritarianism**

This study is grounded in the theoretical insights of electoral authoritarianism, as articulated by Schedler (2006), which helps explain how political systems may adopt the outward forms of democracy regular elections, constitutional frameworks, and multiparty competition while simultaneously undermining their substantive meaning through manipulation, elite capture, and institutional bias. Complementing this, theories of electoral integrity and democratic legitimacy (Norris, 2014; Lipset, 1959) underscore that credibility and fairness in elections are crucial for citizens to confer legitimacy on governing authorities. In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, these frameworks illuminate the paradox where repeated electoral exercises coexist with declining voter trust and civic engagement, revealing a hybrid system in which formal democratic structures mask persistent authoritarian practices. By situating Nigeria's experience within this theoretical lens, the study highlights how deficits in electoral integrity translate into contested legitimacy, offering a robust explanation for the observed erosion of democratic confidence despite the country's sustained electoral processes.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs qualitative research design

underpinned by historical-comparative analysis. The longitudinal component systematically examines seven consecutive electoral cycles (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023) to trace electoral integrity evolution and corresponding legitimacy shifts. The comparative element contextualizes Nigeria's challenges within the broader West African landscape.

Data sources include official INEC documentation, election observation reports (EU EOM, AU, ECOWAS, Yiaga Africa), judicial records, peer-reviewed scholarship, and regional governance indices (Afrobarometer). Analysis proceeds in three stages: descriptive analysis documenting electoral integrity indicators; legitimacy assessment tracking voter turnout and public trust surveys; and comparative analysis situating Nigeria within West African trends.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**The Trajectory of Decline Electoral Integrity in Nigeria (1999–2023): Key Trends**

Nigeria's electoral trajectory across the Fourth Republic reveals a consistent pattern of integrity deficits that persist despite periodic institutional reforms and shifts in political leadership. Each election cycle has been shaped by a complex interplay of elite interests, administrative capacity, legal reforms, and citizen expectations, producing a mixed legacy of progress, stagnation, and regression.

The 1999 elections, though marred by logistical weaknesses and pockets of irregularities, benefited from an overriding elite consensus that prioritised a peaceful transition to civilian rule after decades of military authoritarianism. This shared commitment to regime change helped moderate electoral tensions and contributed to a relatively high turnout of 52.3% (Uchegbue & Ezirim, 2023). While the elections were far from exemplary, they carried significant symbolic weight, serving as a foundational step in rebuilding public trust and repositioning Nigeria within the global democratic community.

By contrast, the 2003 general elections reflected a consolidation of political competition but also a deterioration in electoral standards. Voter turnout surged to 69.1%, the highest in the Fourth Republic, signalling heightened public engagement (Obasun, 2025). Yet this increase coincided with a marked rise in electoral misconduct. Domestic and international observers reported widespread ballot stuffing, intimidation of voters, destruction of materials, and blatant falsification of results. The elections exposed the fragility of democratic institutions and demonstrated how incumbents could manipulate the process to entrench political dominance.

The 2007 elections represent the lowest point in Nigeria's contemporary electoral history. Observers from the European Union, the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute, and domestic monitoring organisations uniformly condemned the process as deeply flawed (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2007). The EU Election Observation Mission famously noted that the elections "cannot be considered credible," a

rare diplomatic censure that underscored the scale of malpractice. Irregularities reached systemic proportions: pre-marked ballots circulated widely, results were inflated at collation centres, security agencies openly aided partisan actors, and violence was pervasive (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2007). More than 300 Nigerians lost their lives in election-related conflict. Paradoxically, President-elect Umaru Musa Yar'Adua's public admission that the process was flawed simultaneously weakened the legitimacy of his mandate while laying groundwork for subsequent reforms, including the establishment of the Uwais Electoral Reform Committee (Oruonye, 2018).

The 2011 elections marked a notable, though incomplete, improvement. Under the leadership of Attahiru Jega, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced biometric voter registration and implemented more transparent administrative procedures (Independent National Electoral Commission, 2011). International observers commended the process as a step forward. However, the elections were marred by tragic post-election violence, particularly in northern states, where more than 800 people were killed (Grokopedia, 2025). This underscored the fragile nature of electoral peace and the deep-seated grievances that remained unresolved. The 2015 elections stand out as a democratic watershed: for the first time in Nigeria's history, an incumbent president was defeated at the ballot box. The victory of Muhammadu Buhari over Goodluck Jonathan reflected several enabling factors an INEC leadership perceived as impartial, the successful introduction of card reader technology to curb over-voting, and Jonathan's statesmanlike decision to concede defeat and prioritise national stability (Al Jazeera, 2015, Ogundare, 2021). Despite these advances, voter turnout declined to 43.7%, signalling early signs of voter disengagement.

The 2019 elections intensified concerns about democratic backsliding. Administrative inconsistencies, logistical failures, last-minute postponements, and elevated levels of violence eroded public confidence. Turnout fell sharply to 34.8%, the lowest since 1999 at the time, reflecting growing apathy and scepticism toward the electoral process (Onapajo & Babalola, 2020).

The 2023 elections produced the most acute legitimacy crisis of the Fourth Republic. Although the 2022 Electoral Act and the deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) were expected to enhance transparency, implementation failures proved catastrophic (Adamu *et al.*, 2023). BVAS devices malfunctioned across multiple states, real-time transmission of results collapsed, and observers documented extensive irregularities, including disruptions, suppression, and opaque collation procedures. Voter turnout plummeted to 26.7%, meaning that barely one in four registered voters participated (Abowei, 2023; Adamu *et al.*, 2023). This historic low underscored a deepening crisis of confidence an unambiguous signal that many Nigerians

no longer believe elections can deliver meaningful political accountability or leadership renewal.

Taken together, these electoral cycles highlight a recurring tension between reform and relapse. While certain elections demonstrated incremental improvements, the broader pattern reveals a democracy trapped in a cycle where innovations are routinely undermined by entrenched political interests. The persistent decline in voter turnout despite technological upgrades and legal reforms suggests a growing disillusionment among citizens who increasingly view elections as symbolic rituals rather than genuine avenues for political change.

### Legitimacy Indicators

The precipitous 43-percentage-point decline in voter turnout between the 2003 peak and the 2023 elections constitutes far more than a statistical fluctuation; it is a powerful indicator of a deepening crisis of democratic legitimacy in Nigeria (Oyuru, 2023). Such a dramatic collapse in electoral participation reveals a public increasingly alienated from the institutions and processes that are supposed to represent them. Elections the primary avenue through which citizens confer democratic consent are gradually losing their meaning for a large majority of the population.

This trend aligns with mounting evidence from Afrobarometer surveys, which consistently document widespread distrust in state institutions. An overwhelming 70% of Nigerians perceive the police as corrupt, 65% believe members of parliament engage in corruption, and 77% express dissatisfaction with the way democracy functions in the country (Afrobarometer.2025). These numbers reflect not just isolated frustration, but a systemic pattern of disengagement grounded in lived experiences of unaccountable governance.

When two-thirds of citizens view core governing institutions as corrupt, the erosion of institutional legitimacy becomes almost inevitable. However, when this perception coincides with the reality that nearly three-quarters of registered voters abstained from participating in the 2023 general elections, the consequences are even more profound. Together, these trends suggest that the moral and procedural foundations of democratic authority have been severely weakened. Citizens are effectively withdrawing their consent not through revolt, but through silence, disengagement, and the refusal to participate in a process they no longer trust.

This dual crisis of participation and perception underscores a fundamental paradox in Nigeria's democratic project: formal institutions continue to function, yet their social anchoring has eroded. The state retains the appearance of democratic governance, but the citizenry's belief in its integrity is collapsing. Such conditions pose serious risks for political stability, as legitimacy deficits once entrenched are difficult to reverse and often invite further authoritarian tendencies, elite consolidation, or democratic fatigue.

### **Institutional Analysis: Mediating Mechanisms**

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)

Despite its constitutional designation as an autonomous electoral management body, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) continues to operate under significant structural and political constraints that challenge its ability to deliver credible elections (Adamu *et al.*, 2023; Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025). Although formally independent, INEC's institutional architecture embeds subtle but powerful dependencies. The presidential appointment of the INEC Chairman without broad bipartisan confirmation mechanisms creates an inherent vertical accountability to the executive (Lewis, 2015). This design flaw heightens the risk of perceived or actual partisan alignment, especially in highly competitive electoral environments. Compounding this is INEC's financial dependence on executive-controlled budgetary allocations, which grants the ruling party substantial leverage over the timing, scope, and efficiency of electoral preparations (Alabi, 2025). In practice, delays or reductions in funding can undermine logistics, training, voter education, and technological deployment, further weakening electoral credibility.

Moreover, internal vulnerabilities ranging from bureaucratic inefficiencies to corruption and susceptibility to political pressure often neutralize the promise of Nigeria's robust electoral laws. Even the most progressive legislative reforms lose their transformative potential when the implementing body lacks full autonomy, operational integrity, or adequate safeguards against elite interference (Akindoyin & Olufemi, 2022).

Technological innovation, though frequently promoted as a panacea, cannot compensate for institutional fragility. The introduction of Smart Card Readers in 2015 exemplified how technology, when properly implemented, can enhance transparency. Their success contributed to reducing incidents of multiple voting and helped facilitate Nigeria's first meaningful transfer of power between political parties. However, the 2023 elections offered a stark contrast. The deployment of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), intended to deepen credibility, was undermined by widespread malfunctioning, logistical inconsistencies, and failures in real-time results transmission (Adamu *et al.*, 2023). Rather than bolstering confidence, the technological breakdowns amplified public distrust and severely damaged INEC's legitimacy.

Leadership quality has proven to be a decisive factor in the Commission's performance. The tenure of Professor Attahiru Jega (2010–2015) demonstrated how principled, strategic leadership can elevate institutional credibility and enable landmark democratic outcomes (IFES, 2015). Under his stewardship, INEC gained public confidence, strengthened administrative processes, and delivered the 2015 elections widely regarded as the most transparent in the Fourth Republic. In contrast, the current leadership has struggled to recover from the integrity failures

associated with the 2023 elections (Omotola, 2021). The Commission's performance has not only invited public criticism but also intensified debates over whether INEC's structural vulnerabilities are being exploited to undermine Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Collectively, these dynamics reveal that electoral integrity cannot be achieved through legal reforms or technology alone. Without institutional insulation, accountable leadership, adequate funding, and genuine political neutrality, INEC remains vulnerable to manipulation. Strengthening Nigeria's democratic future therefore requires addressing the Commission's structural dependencies and cultivating leadership committed to transparency, independence, and public trust.

### **The Judiciary and Security Agencies**

Courts play constitutionally mandated roles in electoral dispute resolution, yet widespread perceptions of judicial corruption and executive influence undermine public authority (Onapajo & Uzodike, 2014; Omenma, 2019). Politicized appointments compromise independence, while tribunals rarely overturn results at levels affecting power distribution, reinforcing impunity culture. Security forces ostensibly ensure peaceful elections, yet frequently face accusations of partisanship favoring ruling parties and systematic failure to arrest electoral offenders. Beyond partisan abuse, chronic insecurity Boko Haram insurgency, banditry, communal violence acts as profound structural constraint, effectively disenfranchising millions.

Comparative Analysis: Nigeria in West African Context  
Nigeria's electoral governance challenges must be situated within the wider regional landscape, where democratic backsliding has become increasingly pronounced across West Africa. Evidence from the V-Dem Institute (2023) reveals that no West African country currently qualifies as a "liberal democracy," underscoring the region's broader institutional fragility. Between 2020 and 2023, the subregion witnessed six successful military coups two in Mali, two in Burkina Faso, one in Guinea, and one in Niger (Baltoi, 2023; ADF Magazine, 2025; POLAC VS NDA, 2025). These events not only reversed years of democratic gains but also shattered long-held assumptions that West Africa had entered a stable post-coup era. The resurgence of militarism demonstrates how weak institutions, widespread corruption, elite factionalism, and declining state legitimacy can converge to produce abrupt regime breakdowns.

Within this turbulent context, Ghana stands out as a significant outlier, offering a comparatively resilient model of democratic consolidation. Ghana's repeated peaceful alternation of power most notably in 2000, 2008, and 2016 illustrates a political culture where elite actors generally respect electoral outcomes and were institutional guardrails function with greater integrity (Selormey & Akagbor, 2025; Ofori *et al.*, 2025). The Ghanaian Electoral Commission (EC), though not without criticism, enjoys comparatively higher independence, more consistent administrative competence, and stronger

public trust than Nigeria's INEC (Aliyu & Ambali, 2021; Bello *et al.*, 2025). This institutional strength is complemented by an independent judiciary, which plays a decisive role in electoral dispute resolution, and a vibrant civil society, which actively monitors elections and demands accountability. The Ghanaian example offers valuable lessons: durable democracy requires not only credible institutions but also elite commitment to democratic norms and a political culture that rewards constitutionalism rather than impunity.

At the regional level, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has long positioned itself as a guardian of democratic stability. Through its 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, ECOWAS articulates robust standards on constitutional order, electoral processes, and human rights. Yet, a persistent gap remains between normative ambition and enforcement (Aliyu & Ogundare, 2025). While ECOWAS has acted decisively in condemning and sanctioning military coups, it has been far more hesitant in addressing "constitutional coups" instances where incumbents manipulate term limits, undermine judicial independence, or engineer electoral processes to remain in power. This selective enforcement has generated perceptions of double standards, eroded ECOWAS's moral authority and weakening its deterrent capacity (Aliyu & Ogundare, 2025).

The inability of ECOWAS to prevent the recent wave of coups or to compel credible, timely transitions has further damaged its credibility. The organization finds itself trapped between normative commitments and geopolitical pragmatism, often opting for diplomatic caution over decisive action (Ossai Chiyenugo *et al.*, 2025). As a result, its role as a regional democratic watchdog has been significantly compromised at precisely the moment when member states face heightened risks of authoritarian resurgence and institutional decay.

Taken together, Nigeria's electoral challenges, Ghana's relative resilience, and ECOWAS's credibility crisis illuminate the structural forces shaping democratic trajectories in West Africa. They reveal a region grappling with the tension between democratic aspiration and institutional weakness, where the future of democratization depends heavily on strengthening independent institutions, depoliticizing electoral governance, and rebuilding regional enforcement mechanisms capable of defending constitutional order.

### **Why Electoral Integrity Deficits Persist**

The persistence of electoral integrity deficits in Nigeria cannot be attributed to a single factor; rather, it emerges from the complex and mutually reinforcing interaction of institutional, political, socioeconomic, and security dynamics (Nwale, 2025). These forces collectively shape an electoral environment where manipulation becomes structurally embedded and often rational for political actors.

### **Institutional Weakness**

At the heart of Nigeria's integrity challenges is the persistent weakness of its electoral management body. Despite constitutional guarantees of autonomy, INEC lacks the institutional strength, operational capacity, and insulation necessary to enforce electoral standards consistently (Husaini, 2023). Chronic underfunding, logistical limitations, internal corruption, and susceptibility to executive pressure create a system where accountability for electoral violations is minimal. As Omotola (2010) argues, Nigeria's electoral environment is characterized by a culture of impunity, one in which the risks of manipulating elections are low while the rewards of success are high. Even when legal reforms strengthen the electoral framework on paper, weak enforcement mechanisms erode their transformative potential.

### **Political Economy of Oil and Power**

Nigeria's oil-dependent political economy significantly compounds electoral challenges. Control of the federal government grants access to extensive patronage networks, rents, and state resources, making political office enormously valuable (Mark *et al.*, 2023). This "winner-take-all" dynamic fosters an intensely competitive, zero-sum political culture in which maintaining or capturing power becomes not just a political objective but an economic imperative. Within such a system, electoral manipulation becomes a rational strategy, as the immediate financial and political gains far outweigh the weak penalties for misconduct (Lewis, 2015; Okenu, 2025). Consequently, political elites often view elections as battles for economic survival rather than civic exercises in democratic choice.

### **Socioeconomic Conditions and Voter Vulnerability**

Pervasive poverty and deep socioeconomic inequality further entrench electoral malpractices. Impoverished citizens, struggling with unemployment, inflation, and limited social protection, are particularly vulnerable to vote buying and clientelist inducements (Jensen & Justesen, 2014; ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, n.d.). For many voters, accepting financial rewards or material benefits during elections is not merely a transactional choice but a reflection of daily survival pressures. These socioeconomic realities weaken democratic norms, reduce the value of political accountability, and diminish voter agency. At the same time, widespread economic frustration contributes to political disengagement, as citizens lose confidence that electoral participation can meaningfully improve their lives.

### **Security Challenges and Disenfranchisement**

Escalating security crises ranging from the Boko Haram insurgency in the Northeast to banditry in the Northwest and farmer-herder conflicts across the Middle Belt profoundly undermine electoral participation. In many communities, insecurity renders polling stations

inaccessible or unsafe, effectively disenfranchising millions of citizens. Armed groups, political thugs, and partisan elements exploit insecurity to systematically suppress turnout, particularly in opposition strongholds or contested zones (Thaddaeus & Albert, 2025). Electoral violence is often deployed deliberately to intimidate voters, deter observers, or disrupt voting logistics, further eroding the credibility of electoral outcomes.

Ethnic and religious cleavages further entrench Nigeria's electoral vulnerabilities. Rather than functioning as benign markers of pluralism, these identities are routinely instrumentalised by political elites who frame elections as existential contests between groups (Edward, 2021). This transforms diversity into a zero-sum political arena, where voters are mobilised along ethnic or sectarian lines and democratic choice becomes subordinated to identity loyalty. Such mobilisation deepens mistrust, fuels polarisation, and weakens the incentives for programmatic politics, ultimately undermining the prospects for credible electoral competition and national cohesion (Wardani, 2025).

Taken together, these intertwined forces create an electoral system in which structural weaknesses, economic incentives, social vulnerabilities, and security threats combine to sustain persistent integrity deficits. Overcoming these challenges requires not only technical reforms but also deep institutional restructuring, socioeconomic empowerment, and a shift in political incentives that currently reward manipulation more than transparency.

### Discussion: Myth or Reality?

#### The Integrity-Legitimacy Relationship: Confirmed but Complex

Empirical evidence strongly indicates that electoral integrity is a decisive determinant of democratic legitimacy, confirming that the connection between credible elections and legitimate governance is a reality rather than a mere aspirational ideal. Across Nigeria's Fourth Republic, patterns of declining voter participation consistently align with periods marked by widespread electoral irregularities. Public trust in governing institutions ebbs and flows in tandem with these integrity deficits: elections widely regarded as relatively credible, such as the 2015 polls, coincided with the highest levels of legitimacy and public confidence, whereas elections plagued by severe irregularities, notably 2007 and 2023, precipitated profound legitimacy crises and heightened citizen disillusionment (Obi & Herbert, 2024).

Nevertheless, the integrity legitimacy relationship is not linear or unconditional. Its effects are heavily mediated by governance performance, socioeconomic conditions, security challenges, and institutional capacity. Even elections conducted with procedural fairness may yield limited legitimacy if governments fail to deliver basic services, address inequality, or protect citizens from violence (Zhang *et al.*, 2021; Ikoko & Latif, 2025). Conversely, robust governance and inclusive development

can partially mitigate the reputational damage of minor electoral shortcomings.

Thus, while the principle that electoral integrity underpins democratic legitimacy remains empirically validated, the persistence of an integrity legitimacy gap illustrates how structural, political, and contextual factors can transform this well-established relationship into a "contested myth" in everyday political practice. In Nigeria, this paradox manifests as formal democratic structures coexisting with fragile legitimacy a reality that underscores the complexity of democratic consolidation and the multifaceted nature of political trust.

#### The Implementation Gap

The persistent divergence between Nigeria's electoral laws and their practical application effectively transforms a theoretically sound democratic framework into a contested myth. The Electoral Act of 2022, for instance, aligns closely with international standards on paper, offering detailed provisions for voter registration, accreditation, result transmission, and dispute resolution (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2022). Yet, in practice, implementation remains chronically deficient: the rules exist, but enforcement is inconsistent and selective. This enforcement gap reflects deep institutional incapacity electoral bodies like INEC often lack the financial, technical, and operational resources to administer complex elections independently. Moreover, it reflects a profound deficit of political will among elites, whose nominal commitment to integrity is frequently undermined by the incentives embedded in Nigeria's rentier political economy, where controlling state power directly translates into access to vast patronage resources (Adamaagashi *et al.*, 2024; Bolarinwa & Osuji, 2022). In this context, legal frameworks alone cannot guarantee democratic legitimacy; without empowered institutions and genuine elite adherence, the promises of law remain largely aspirational.

#### The Paradox of Democratic Persistence

Despite enduring and profound legitimacy deficits, Nigerian democracy endures. Elections are conducted every four years, and since 1999, power has transferred between political parties twice, while the military has largely remained confined to the barracks. This apparent paradox highlights that even a compromised democracy retains substantial residual value this agree with the assertion of della Porta *et al.* (2018). It provides formal mechanisms for political contestation, platforms for citizens to express grievances, and avenues albeit imperfect for peaceful change. These institutional and symbolic functions are significant enough that, despite widespread dissatisfaction, the populace is reluctant to fully embrace authoritarian alternatives. In essence, the persistence of Nigerian democracy underscores the resilience of democratic forms and processes, even when their substantive legitimacy is contested. This Nigeria's experience has the same notion with the study of

Daßler *et al.* (2024) on how negative institutional power moderate's contestation: Explaining dissatisfied powers' strategies towards international institutions. It suggests that the survival of democratic structures can coexist with, and sometimes even benefit from, ongoing efforts to address underlying integrity and governance deficits.

## CONCLUSION

This study investigates whether the link between electoral integrity and democratic legitimacy in Nigeria is a demonstrable reality or an aspirational myth. The evidence confirms a foundational reality: declines in electoral quality correlate directly with eroded public trust and plummeting voter participation.

However, this reality is systemically obscured. The primary barrier to reform is a lack of political will among the elite. In Nigeria's rentier economy, where state control grants access to vast wealth, the incentive for manipulation remains high. This reflects a broader trend of democratic backsliding across the ECOWAS region.

Paradoxically, Nigerian democracy endures despite these deficits. Citizens continue to view democratic processes as essential platforms for grievance and contestation, even when compromised. Bridging the "implementation gap" requires moving beyond aspirational laws toward substantive institutional autonomy and rigorous enforcement. Ultimately, transforming electoral integrity from a contested myth into a lived reality depends on a sustained commitment to institutional reform and the genuine political will to protect the vote.

## Recommendations

Based on findings that the integrity-legitimacy relationship is reality obscured by implementation gap, this study offers five critical recommendations:

1. Enhance Institutional Autonomy: Ensure financial and administrative independence for INEC through direct constitutional funding mechanism decoupled from executive control, reducing political influence over key appointments.
2. Restore Judicial Accountability: Establish specialized electoral courts with strict, expedited timelines for dispute resolution. De-escalate politicization of judicial appointments to restore public faith.
3. Address Impunity through Sanctions: Empower INEC and security agencies to enforce sanctions consistently against political elites and electoral offenders, making manipulation costs politically unbearable.
4. Strengthen Civil Society Oversight: Formalize accredited domestic observers' role in result verification to provide trusted independent oversight, mitigating INEC technological failure impacts.
5. Implement Reform Committee Recommendations: Fully implement Justice Uwais Electoral Reform Committee recommendations, specifically transferring appointment power to neutral body like National Judicial Council and establishing dedicated Electoral Offences Commission.

The recommendations provided underscore that strengthening Nigeria's democracy requires more than periodic elections it demands credible institutions, accountable leadership, and genuine public trust. By enhancing INEC's autonomy, depoliticising the judiciary, enforcing sanctions, empowering civil society, and implementing long-delayed reforms, Nigeria can begin to close the integrity legitimacy gap. These steps are essential for transforming elections into true expressions of the people's will and restoring the democratic confidence that has steadily eroded.

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