

The 2023 Nigerian presidential election and the question of political credibility

**¹Kalu, Nnaemeka Uduma; ¹Saba, Habibat Ladidi; ²Oparaocha, Ndubuisi Onesimus,
and ¹Ochiogu, Harrison Ojielo**

¹Department of Political Science, UNN.

²Department of Criminology & Security Studies, UNN.

Correspondence: Nnaemeka.kalu@unn.edu.ng

Abstract

Nigeria's political environment is marked by poverty, unemployment, underemployment, social and political marginalisation, and other socioeconomic challenges that have been identified as major drivers of electoral violence. This study examined the challenges that undermined the credibility of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election and proposed strategies for improving the conduct of future presidential elections. A survey research design was adopted, and the study was conducted in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. The study population comprised 250 respondents—42 lecturers and 208 first-year students—all of whom participated in the study. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire. The findings revealed that the ineffectiveness of security agencies, a culture of impunity, and weak penalties for electoral offences were among the major factors that hindered the credible conduct of the 2023 presidential election. The study therefore recommends the passage of legislation establishing an Electoral Offences Commission to ensure the prompt investigation and prosecution of electoral offenders. Effective enforcement of electoral laws would deter future violations and enhance the credibility of subsequent elections in Nigeria.

Keywords: credibility, electoral malpractice, electoral violence, election, political system.

Introduction

Nigeria, often hailed as Africa's largest democracy, held its presidential and National Assembly elections on February 25, 2023, followed by gubernatorial and State Assembly elections on March 18. Despite the high hopes surrounding these elections, the aftermath ignited fierce debates, public discontent, and a flurry of legal challenges from opposition parties (Nwolise, 2023). While 18 political parties put forward candidates for the presidency, the race was largely shaped by three key players: Bola Ahmed Tinubu from the All Progressives Congress (APC), who secured 8,794,726 votes and won in 12 states; Atiku Abubakar of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), with 6,984,520 votes, also claiming 12 states; and Peter Obi from the Labour Party (LP), who attracted 6,101,533 votes and triumphed in 11 states,

including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). After the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) announced the results, opposition supporters, including the so-called “Obidients” and “Atikulants,” raised numerous challenges (Ugiagbe, 2023).

Many citizens voiced their disappointment with INEC’s management of the electoral process, directing their frustrations at Prof. Mahmood Yakubu’s leadership. Concerns emerged regarding INEC's failure to electronically transmit presidential results from polling units using the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), which contradicted their previous commitments (Balogun, 2023). Critics labeled this a breach of public trust, particularly in light of the digital advancements that were supposed to enhance the 2023 elections.

Even with over ₦355 billion allocated for the elections and strong backing from international partners and civil society organizations, the commission faced backlash for logistical issues and technological failures. Reports of violence surfaced in states like Rivers, Kogi, and Lagos, along with delays and procedural inefficiencies in parts of the South-East and South-South.

Observers have raised concerns that a large chunk of the presidential results wasn’t uploaded in real time, which could jeopardize transparency and create opportunities for vote manipulation (Ugiagbe, 2023). The credibility of the electoral process took another hit with reports of voter intimidation, ballot box snatching, underage voting, and the complicity or inaction of law enforcement agents (Afolabi, 2023). Even though the INEC Chairman assured everyone of thorough preparation and strategic planning during his speech at Chatham House earlier in January 2023 (Balogun, 2023), the events on election day painted a picture of disorganization and disappointment. These ongoing issues have once again raised doubts about the commission’s ability to conduct credible elections in Nigeria.

The ongoing decline of public trust in Nigeria’s electoral process poses a serious threat to the legitimacy of the country’s democratic governance. Despite significant investments, both

financially and strategically, INEC has continually fallen short of meeting the expectations of Nigerians. From inadequate technological deployment to accusations of institutional bias and operational failures, the credibility of the electoral system is under intense scrutiny.

For many Nigerians, elections are seen not as a means of democratic choice but as arenas for the elite to maintain control, often exploiting ethnicity, religion, and regional loyalties for political gain. In this kind of environment, political violence and conflict are likely outcomes of contested processes. Sadly, the 2023 elections were tainted by such incidents, including politically motivated violence and community unrest. These trends raise serious questions about the ability of key players, including INEC, political parties, security agencies, and civil society, to uphold democratic integrity.

What's really concerning is the uncertainty surrounding how the allocated ₦355 billion, along with contributions from international partners like the EU and the US government, were used to achieve technological and procedural efficiency (Afolabi, 2023). This disconnect between available resources and actual performance calls for immediate institutional reforms. The issue this study tackles isn't just about administrative mistakes during one election cycle; it's about the wider implications of INEC's perceived shortcomings on the legitimacy and credibility of Nigeria's democratic framework.

Thus, the study is poised to answer the following questions: What were the significant challenges that undermined the conduct of a credible 2023 presidential election in Nigeria? What strategies can be put in place to enhance the credibility and transparency of upcoming presidential elections?

This research offers a thorough evaluation of electoral credibility and its impact on Nigeria's political landscape. It is crucial for voters, especially those who are new or considering voting, to grasp the risks associated with electoral malpractices and a more informed citizens.

Literature Review

Electoral Malpractice in Nigeria since 1999

Electoral malpractice, which we often think of as vote manipulation or fraud, involves twisting the electoral process for the benefit of certain parties. This can mean breaking the rules that are supposed to govern elections, all to ensure that specific individuals or political groups come out on top (Zion, 2022). Since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999, the country has held seven general elections (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023) (Akagha, 2022). The elections in 1999, marking the start of the Fourth Republic, were relatively peaceful, thanks in part to the shift from military to civilian rule. However, there were still issues like delays in getting voting materials, registered voters being left out, polls closing too early, and voters being bribed.

The 2003 elections were the first organized by a civilian government and were seen as a crucial test for Nigeria's democracy. Unfortunately, international observers reported significant credibility issues, claiming that the ruling party tried to skew the results (Anifowose, 2020). The 2007 elections faced serious procedural and logistical problems, leading to harsh criticism from observers around the world. The International Crisis Group called the process a total failure, while Africa Confidential described the transition as deeply troubled. The elections were marred by violence, which really shook public trust in the democratic system (Alemika, 2021).

Taking a closer look at the data from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), we can't help but notice a troubling trend: voter turnout has been on a steady decline over the years. Back in 2015, just 43.65% of registered voters made it to the polls for the presidential election, and that number dropped even further to 35.66% in 2019, despite an increase in the number of people registering to vote (Gani, 2021). This decline is compounded by various

election-related misconducts, such as voter intimidation, underage voting, impersonation, diversion of electoral materials, and ballot box snatching. The lack of effective legal reforms has made it tough to implement innovative solutions that could really tackle these issues.

Political and Electoral Violence in Nigeria

When we talk about political violence and electoral violence, it's important to recognize that while they are related, they have different scopes and expressions. Grasping this distinction is crucial for a comprehensive analysis. Political violence refers to a broader range of aggressive actions within a political system, extending beyond just election times. It includes threats or acts of physical harm aimed at gaining, maintaining, or consolidating power, and can happen regardless of whether elections are taking place (Nwolise, 2023). Often, this kind of violence arises from power struggles among various political players and factions.

On the other hand, electoral violence is specifically tied to the electoral process and is often used to sway voter behavior, intimidate opponents, or contest electoral results. This type of violence targets individuals, institutions, or infrastructure involved in elections. It can occur before, during, or after elections and includes actions meant to undermine democratic principles and peaceful transitions (Zion, 2022; Gberevbie, 2021). Pre-election violence usually involves attacks on candidates and their supporters, while post-election violence often stems from dissatisfaction with the results or claims of rigging.

Alemika (2021) identifies various forms of electoral violence, including homicide, arson, abduction, physical assault, and the destruction of electoral equipment. These acts are typically carried out by individuals or political factions aiming to manipulate electoral outcomes or hinder democratic processes. Moses and Ngomba (2022) contend that electoral violence is part of a larger spectrum of political violence, highlighting its origins in ongoing political conflicts and struggles for power.

Effects of Electoral Malpractice in Nigeria

Electoral malpractice poses a serious threat to the consolidation of democracy by undermining the legitimacy of elected officials and discouraging voter engagement. Its repercussions go beyond just the election period, eroding public trust in governance. During the 2023 general elections, widespread disillusionment among citizens resulted in apathy during the gubernatorial elections, with many voters expressing skepticism about the integrity of the presidential results due to allegations of rigging and misconduct.

Additionally, electoral fraud paves the way for unaccountable leadership. Leaders who come to power through dishonest means often lack the moral authority needed to govern effectively. This has been a persistent challenge in Nigeria, where tainted elections have led to administrations marked by inefficiency, corruption, and a disconnect from the needs of the populace (Obakhedo, 2021). The long-term effects include poor policy development, economic stagnation, and sluggish national progress.

Electoral malpractice also stirs societal unrest. The cycle of post-election violence seen in various electoral periods has resulted in loss of life and property destruction. The offenders, often supported by influential political interests, frequently escape prosecution, fostering a culture of impunity. Such incidents not only damage the nation's democratic framework but also obstruct peaceful civic participation.

To turn this situation around, we really need to focus on comprehensive electoral reforms, establish stronger accountability measures, and ensure that everyone involved is dedicated to upholding democratic values.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in the theoretical framework of violent political behavior as outlined by Grundy and Weinstein (1974). In the realm of sociology, this theory has played a crucial role

in understanding the violence that can emerge from political contests, particularly during elections. It connects with broader ideas like frustration-aggression theory, aggressive cue theory, relative deprivation, rising expectations, systemic hypothesis, and group conflict theory (Green & Donnerstein, 2022). At its core, this framework suggests that aggression can be sparked by environmental factors or social conditioning that make such behaviors seem acceptable in a given socio-political setting.

Grundy and Weinstein's theory delves into the complexities of political violence by examining its various forms, motivations, and the ideologies that justify it. Developed in the 1970s, it highlights the intricate nature of violence as a means of political engagement.

Core Concepts of the Theory

- **Spectrum of Violence:** The theory places political violence on a spectrum, ranging from subtle psychological tactics to more overt actions like war and terrorism.
- **Ideological Rationalizations:** It presents four main justifications for resorting to violence:
- **Self-Defense:** Protecting individuals or groups from perceived threats.
- **Revolutionary Motive:** Using violence to challenge and dismantle existing systems or power structures.
- **Civilizing Rationale:** Justifying the use of force under the guise of promoting certain values or norms.
- **Retributive Motivation:** Employing violence as a means of revenge for historical or perceived injustices.

The theory of imperialism and systemic violence highlights how colonial and imperialist systems often normalize violence against marginalized communities while simultaneously

condemning any resistance from those same groups. This creates a troubling moral contradiction, often referred to as “dual morality.”

- **Ideological Bias:** Some scholars point out that the framework's focus on ideological motives might overshadow the socio-economic or institutional factors that can also trigger violence.
- **Cultural Contextualization:** There's an ongoing debate about how well this theory applies across various political and cultural landscapes, particularly in non-Western societies where local dynamics can differ greatly.
- **Ambiguity of Definitions:** The subtle differences in violent behavior make it challenging to clearly distinguish between what constitutes legitimate and illegitimate actions.

Even with its limitations, this framework offers a compelling perspective for exploring the origins and expressions of politically motivated violence. It remains significant for:

- **Conflict Mitigation Strategies:** Gaining insight into the justifications for violence can help policymakers and stakeholders create more effective peace-building initiatives.
- **Human Rights Advocacy:** The theory provides valuable insights that can enhance efforts to protect rights and ensure justice.
- **Political Philosophy:** It plays a role in ongoing discussions about the use of force in political contexts and the limits of political legitimacy.

Nigeria's socio-political landscape is marked by deep-rooted issues like systemic marginalization, high youth unemployment, poverty, and governance struggles—factors that often lead to violent reactions during political events. As pointed out by Gottfredson and Hirschi (2019), places where the rule of law is weak tend to see aggression and violence as signs of a larger breakdown in regulation.

From a sociological viewpoint, violent behaviors are often seen as learned responses over time. When these behaviors go unaddressed and are even rewarded in the political arena, they can become normalized, if not institutionalized. In Nigeria, electoral violence has increasingly turned into a recurring and almost expected part of the political landscape. The rampant availability of light weapons, combined with ongoing socio-economic frustrations, creates a perfect storm for aggressive outbursts during elections.

Typically, the response to systemic injustices starts with emotional reactions like frustration and anger. These feelings can escalate into negative attitudes towards the political system, ultimately leading to the justification of violence as a valid form of political engagement.

Methods

This study employed a survey research design, which is well-suited for collecting public opinions on the 2023 presidential election, the integrity of Nigeria's political system, and potential solutions to the electoral challenges identified.

The research took place at the University of Nigeria, targeting a population of 250 individuals: 42 academic staff members from the Department of Public Administration and 208 first-year students in the same department.

For gathering data, we used a structured questionnaire that was split into two main sections:

- Section A: This part focused on collecting demographic details about the respondents.
- Section B: This section was further divided into two clusters:
 - Cluster A: This explored the challenges faced in conducting a credible presidential election in 2023.
 - Cluster B: This sought suggestions for ensuring that future elections are credible.

To ensure the questionnaire was effective, it was validated by three experts from the Department of Political Science at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Their feedback helped refine the clarity, relevance, and overall effectiveness of each question. We made sure to incorporate all their recommendations in the final version.

To tackle the two research questions, we primarily used mean rating as our statistical tool. Additionally, we applied an independent sample t-test to evaluate the null hypotheses at a significance level of 0.05, along with the relevant degrees of freedom. We recorded responses using a four-point Likert scale. Items that scored a mean of 2.50 or higher were interpreted as agreement (Strongly Agree), while those below 2.50 were seen as disagreement (Strongly Disagree). We retained the null hypothesis when the calculated t-value was less than the critical t-value, indicating no significant difference. On the other hand, we rejected the hypothesis as significant when the calculated t-value was greater than the table value.

Findings of the Study

What are the major challenges that hindered the successful conduct of a credible 2023 presidential election in Nigeria?

Table 1: Mean Ratings of Lecturers and Students on Identified Challenges
N₁ = 42 (Lecturers), N₂ = 208 (Students)

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_t$	Decision
1	Ineffectiveness of Security Forces and Impunity	3.14	3.36	2.25	SA
2	Prevalence of Poverty and High Unemployment	3.71	3.20	1.96	SA
3	Inadequate Sanctions for Electoral Offenders	2.57	3.34	2.36	SA
4	Proliferation of Illicit Small Arms	3.41	3.43	2.42	SA
5	Corruption and Weak Governance Institutions	3.28	2.70	2.49	SA
6	Legislative Gaps Regarding Electoral Violence	3.86	3.19	2.03	SA
7	Executive Interference in Electoral Processes	2.56	2.78	2.62	SA

Key:

$\bar{X}_1$ = Mean of Lecturers' Responses; $\bar{X}_2$ = Mean of Students' Responses; $\bar{X}_t$ = Combined Mean;
SA = Strongly Agree

Interpretation:

Table 1 illustrates that each of the seven variables listed received mean scores above the threshold of 2.50 from both groups. This indicates a consensus among respondents that these factors constituted significant impediments to the successful and credible execution of the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria.

What are the proposed strategies for improving the credibility of future presidential elections in Nigeria?

Table 2: Mean Ratings of Lecturers and Students on Suggested Strategies
N₁ = 42 (Lecturers), N₂ = 208 (Students)

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_t$	Decision
1	Intensive Voter Education on Electoral Integrity	3.11	3.26	2.26	SA
2	Cessation of Government Interference in Elections	3.77	3.26	1.66	SA

S/N	Item Statement	$\bar{X}_1$	$\bar{X}_2$	$\bar{X}_t$	Decision
3	Upholding Judicial Neutrality in Electoral Matters	2.57	3.14	2.16	SA
4	Adequate Deployment of Security at Polling Units	3.51	3.63	2.42	SA
5	Orientation Programs for Political Actors	3.88	2.75	2.49	SA
6	Strategic Planning by the Electoral Commission	3.86	3.39	2.03	SA

Key:

$\bar{X}_1$ = Mean of Lecturers' Responses; $\bar{X}_2$ = Mean of Students' Responses; $\bar{X}_t$ = Combined Mean;
SA = Strongly Agree

Interpretation:

As presented in Table 2, all items received mean scores above 2.50, demonstrating a high level of agreement from both academic staff and students regarding the strategic steps required to enhance the credibility of future presidential elections in the country.

Hypothesis Testing

Table 3: T-Test Analysis on Challenges Affecting the 2023 Presidential Election

$N_1 = 42$ (Lecturers), $N_2 = 208$ (Students)

S/N	Item Statement	SD ₁	SD ₂	t-cal	Decision
1	Ineffectiveness of Security Forces and Impunity	1.12	0.98	-0.42	NS
2	Poverty and Unemployment	0.88	1.20	-10.90	NS
3	Inadequate Penalties for Electoral Offences	0.05	1.13	0.77	NS
4	Proliferation of Small Arms	1.40	1.47	-0.05	NS
5	Weak Governance and Corruption	0.70	1.70	-0.19	NS
6	Ineffectual Laws on Electoral Violence	0.88	1.07	-0.69	NS

S/N	Item Statement	SD ₁	SD ₂	t-cal	Decision
7	Government Influence on Electoral Process	1.07	1.03	1.90	NS

Interpretation:

Results from the t-test in Table 3 show that for all the items under review, the computed t-values are less than the critical table values. Consequently, the null hypothesis is retained for each item, signifying that there is no statistically significant difference between the perceptions of lecturers and students regarding the challenges that undermined the 2023 presidential election.

Table 4: T-Test Analysis on Strategies for Future Elections

N₁ = 42 (Lecturers), N₂ = 208 (Students)

S/N	Item Statement	SD ₁	SD ₂	t-cal	Decision
1	Voter Education and Awareness Campaigns	1.22	0.93	-0.42	NS
2	Political Neutrality of the Incumbent Government	0.78	1.20	-10.90	NS
3	Judicial Objectivity in Electoral Adjudication	0.15	1.23	0.77	NS
4	Deployment of Adequate Security Personnel	1.40	1.47	-0.05	NS
5	Attitudinal Reorientation of Politicians	0.70	1.70	-0.19	NS
6	Comprehensive Electoral Planning by INEC	0.78	1.27	-0.69	NS

Interpretation:

As shown in Table 4, all calculated t-values fall below the corresponding critical values. This outcome supports the acceptance of the null hypothesis for all listed strategies, indicating that

there is no statistically significant difference between the views of lecturers and students on how to ensure credible future presidential elections.

Recommendation/ Conclusion

The success of a democratic system hinges on the conduct of free and fair elections, which are essential for fostering accountability, transparency, and good governance. To ensure the integrity of the electoral process, it's crucial to address the root causes of electoral malpractices. This can be achieved through a multi-faceted approach that involves various stakeholders.

1. Government agencies, such as the National Orientation Agency, should be empowered to carry out their responsibilities effectively. Additionally, collaboration between the government and civil society can help educate citizens on the importance of violence-free elections.
2. Creating employment opportunities is also vital, as unemployed and underemployed youth are often exploited by corrupt politicians to perpetrate electoral violence.
3. Furthermore, establishing an Electoral Offences Commission can help ensure speedy trials and stiff penalties for electoral offenders, serving as a deterrent to future violators.
4. Other measures that can be taken include removing immunity clauses, decentralizing police control, and addressing the proliferation of arms.
5. The government should also take steps to curb hate speech and other forms of inflammatory rhetoric that can incite violence. Voters should be encouraged to prioritize credibility and character over financial inducements when casting their ballots.
6. Moreover, addressing the underlying causes of electoral violence, such as political exclusion and economic deprivation, is essential for creating a level playing field for all political parties.

7. Ultimately, a concerted effort is required from all stakeholders, including government, civil society, and religious leaders, to promote a culture of democracy, accountability, and good governance. By working together, Nigeria can move towards more peaceful, credible, and sustainable elections that reflect the will of the people.

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