ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION, INTERNATIONAL OBSERVATION AND ARRESTED DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA'S 2019 AND 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Background: *In emerging democracies, elections serve as the standard method for renewing legitimacy. However, in many parts of Africa, they have been more effective at maintaining the status quo of current leaders than at enhancing democratic processes. Since 1999, Nigeria has consistently conducted elections without interruption, but each election cycle revives persistent concerns regarding their credibility.*
Objectives: *This article, therefore, examines the shift in electoral management from the 2019 to the 2023 cycles, analyses the impact of international monitoring, positions Nigeria in relation to Huntington's two-turnover test, and explores the consequences for the strengthening of democracy.*
Methods: *In pursuit of this goal, a comparative mixed methods approach is employed, integrating 130 valid survey responses from six different stakeholder groups, conducting twenty key-informant interviews, and analysing reports from five international observer missions.*
Results: *Evidence indicates that administration enhancements were selective instead of consistent: while voter registration saw a significant increase, the transmission of results worsened. Additionally, international observation maintained its legitimacy but had limited impact, as only the least challenging recommendations were implemented. In terms of the two-turnover test, Nigeria has experienced just one change in power, lagging behind countries like Ghana and Zambia.*
Conclusion: *As a result, Nigeria displays democratic structures that lack solid foundations, with its frequent electoral crises stemming from political issues rather than technical ones. Therefore, domestic political commitment cannot be replaced by either electoral technology or international monitoring.*

1.0 Introduction

In emerging democracies, few political events hold as much significance as a general election. Primarily, an election is designed to transform the consent of the populace into the governing authority, determine leadership without resorting to violence, and assure the public that power transitions can occur peacefully. However, when this assurance is

not fulfilled, elections can become the very catalysts for the violence they aim to prevent (Atidoga & Aduku, 2023). Since 1999, Nigeria, arguably the largest democracy in Africa, has consistently conducted general elections; yet, each election cycle revives concerns about credibility, manipulation, and legitimacy. This ongoing issue, despite two decades of reforms, forms the basis of this article's exploration.

The mechanisms Nigeria has put in place to tackle this issue have, paradoxically, intensified the problem rather than solved it. Each election cycle has introduced ambitious technological advancements and maintained the presence of international observers, under the assumption that improved tools and external oversight would protect the process from misuse. For instance, the 2023 general election, featuring biometric accreditation and an electronic result-viewing portal, was anticipated to signify a significant departure from past practices. However, it did not. Instead, the results were disputed, the transmission of results faltered at a critical moment, and the judiciary once again became the ultimate decider of the presidential race.

Although research on Nigerian elections has grown significantly, it remains fragmented, failing to address the current challenges comprehensively. Initially, one research focus examines the administrative efficiency of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and its technological tools, emphasising both the strengths and weaknesses of biometric accreditation and electronic transmission (Onapajo, 2020; Awopeju et al., 2024). Another research area delves into electoral violence and insecurity, analysing their political roots and effects on legitimacy (Abada et al., 2023; Amnesty International, 2023). Furthermore, a comparative literature body situates Nigeria within the wider African elections and democratisation context, questioning whether repeated elections genuinely strengthen democracy or simply reproduce its frameworks (Adejumobi, 2000; Lindberg, 2006). While these research areas illuminate various facets, they often operate in isolation and rarely connect administrative performance with the larger issue of democratic consolidation.

This research tackles the identified gap. Although prior studies have examined single elections, particular administrative elements, or the origins of electoral violence, there is a scarcity of systematic comparisons between two successive election cycles employing a mixed methods approach. This approach combines stakeholder perceptions, observer reports, and records of power transitions. Even fewer studies have linked administrative performance to Huntington's two-turnover test, as this research does. This article offers the comprehensive, comparative, and theoretically informed analysis missing from the existing literature.

To close that gap, consequently, the study pursues four objectives:

i. to assess the change in the quality of electoral administration between the 2019 and 2023 general elections across the principal dimensions of the process;

ii. to evaluate the influence of international election observation upon the reforms enacted between the two cycles;

iii. to determine Nigeria's position against Huntington's two-turnover benchmark for democratic consolidation; and

iv. to analyse the implications of these findings for consolidation theory and for the practice of electoral administration in emerging democracies.

The main argument uniting these goals is essentially that while Nigeria's elections have created democratic structures, they lack the essential foundations for consolidation. The

disparity between these elements is political, not technical: it hinges on whether influential figures will adhere to the limitations of democratic competition, rather than on perfecting election management tools. Furthermore, when the populace cannot trust the vote count, they have little incentive to accept the results, raising concerns about the stability of Nigeria's political landscape and the recurring inclination to resolve conflicts outside the electoral process (Birch, 2011).

The article is divided into eight parts. After the introduction, the second section examines the literature and identifies the gap; Section 3 outlines the materials and methods with the next section devoted to the theoretical framework. Correspondingly, section 5 reveals the findings while section 6 analyses them. Lastly, sections 7 and 8 provide the conclusion and recommendations, respectively.

2.0 Literature Review

The research relevant to this study covers five distinct areas, which are analysed by themes to facilitate comparison and highlight any collective omissions. Each theme is individually assessed to determine its contributions, areas of agreement or disagreement, and any unresolved issues. The section concludes by identifying the gap that this study aims to address.

2.1 Elections and Democratic Consolidation in Africa

The idea that holding elections repeatedly can inherently enhance democracy has a notable history. For example, Lindberg (2006) contended that simply having competitive elections repeatedly can have a self-reinforcing and civilising impact on political behaviour. However, Nigeria's situation complicates this optimistic view. Although the country has conducted seven consecutive general elections, the quality of these elections has not improved in the straightforward manner the theory suggests. The ongoing manipulation across election cycles indicates that repetition alone does not ensure improvement (Adejumobi, 2000; Abada et al., 2023). Thus, the prevailing consensus is that while elections are essential for democracy, they are not sufficient for its full establishment, as their developmental impact depends on the surrounding institutions.

2.2 Electoral Integrity: Concept, Measurement and Consequences

Another line of research has simultaneously aimed to define and quantify the factors that differentiate a credible election from one that is simply conducted. Norris (2014) conceptualises electoral integrity as adherence to international standards throughout the entire electoral process, providing the framework for subsequent evaluations. In contrast, Birch (2011) focuses on electoral malpractice and its repercussions, illustrating that when integrity is questioned, those who lose elections reject the results, and those who win lack true legitimacy. Additionally, Nigerian scholarship offers a more security-focused perspective: disputed election results not only undermine legitimacy but also pose significant dangers by creating grievances that can incite violence (Atidoga & Aduku, 2023). Collectively, these studies concur that integrity encompasses the entire electoral cycle rather than just election day; however, they differ on whether it should be assessed through perceptions, malpractice statistics, or the occurrence of subsequent violence.

2.3 International Election Observation: Effectiveness and Limits

To counteract the threat of electoral manipulation, the global community has made significant investments in election monitoring, based on the belief that external oversight increases the cost of fraudulent activities. However, extensive research has since challenged the validity of this belief. Initially,

Carothers (1997) chronicled the emergence of election monitoring and highlighted its inconsistent levels of professionalism. Later, Kelley (2009) revealed that observers often validate flawed elections for diplomatic purposes, introducing the concept of the "D-minus" election. Hyde (2011) further elaborated on the proliferation of election observation as an international norm that even authoritarian regimes feel obliged to adopt. The overall conclusion is that while observation can deter electoral fraud and promote reform, its effectiveness is limited by the readiness of local stakeholders to act on the findings. This body of literature provides a general framework that the current study applies specifically to the Nigerian context.

2.4 Technology and Electoral Administration in Emerging Democracies

In recent times, reliance on external oversight has been complemented by confidence in technology, with biometric verification and electronic communication being adopted as tools for ensuring integrity throughout the continent. Awopeju et al. (2024) explore these technologies in the context of Nigeria's 2023 election, acknowledging their potential but noting limitations due to infrastructure and trust issues. Onapajo (2020), on the other hand, identifies the root of the problem in the political handling of the electoral commission, suggesting that technology alone cannot shield an institution from external pressures. The growing consensus is one of caution: technology shifts the locus of manipulation rather than eliminating it, and its benefits for integrity are ultimately contingent on the political context in which it operates.

2.5 Party Institutionalisation and Power Alternation

A concluding body of research shifts focus from the process of elections to their results, particularly emphasising the power shifts that consolidation theory considers crucial. Fashagba (2023) examines power transitions in African democracies and convincingly asserts that their stability hinges on the institutionalisation of political parties. In contexts where parties are programmatic and stable, opposition victories and incumbent concessions are feasible; conversely, in environments where parties are fluid and reliant on patronage, power shifts are sporadic and reversible. This line of inquiry thus links administrative aspects with structural ones, proposing that credible elections and an institutionalised party system are complementary conditions necessary for consolidation, rather than interchangeable ones.

2.6 Synthesis and Research Gap

Collectively, these five areas of research demonstrate that while elections are essential, they alone do not ensure consolidation. They also show that integrity is a property relevant to the entire electoral cycle and security; observation influences only the periphery of domestic intent; technology shifts rather than eliminates manipulation, and that stable political change relies on the institutionalisation of parties. However, none of these works offers a comprehensive analysis that compares two consecutive Nigerian electoral cycles, triangulates perceptions, observer evaluations, and the record of political change, and links the fragmented performance of governance to the two-turnover test. This study specifically addresses that gap by providing such an integrated, comparative evaluation.

3.0 Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The research utilises a mixed methods approach with a comparative focus, analysing the general elections of 2019 and 2023 as paired instances. These elections are linked by

a common constitutional framework but differ in technological and political contexts (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Yin, 2018). A convergent parallel design was used, collecting quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, which were later compared to identify areas of agreement and difference.

3.2 Population, Sample and Sampling Strategy

The study involved 510 stakeholders who were directly engaged in the two cycles, categorised into six groups: electoral commission officials, international observers, civil society organisation members, political party representatives, media professionals, and academic experts. The sample size was calculated using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for finite populations, $n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$, with a total population of 510 and a 0.05 margin of error at a 95% confidence level, resulting in a required sample of 224. These 224 questionnaires were then distributed among the six categories using proportionate stratified allocation, ensuring each group was sampled according to its population share. For the qualitative component, twenty key informants were purposefully chosen from the same population, including ten international observers, five commission officials, and five other stakeholders.

Out of the 224 questionnaires distributed, 130 valid responses were collected, yielding an overall response rate of 58.0%. This rate varied among the different groups, and this variation is reported as it provides valuable insights. As shown in Table 1, international observers and media professionals had the highest response rates, which can be attributed to the researcher's established connections with these networks and the respondents' focus on reporting. Conversely, commission officials had the lowest response rate, reflecting the cautious nature of public officials, many of whom noted that participation required internal approval. This imbalance, which skews the sample towards observers and away from administrators, is recognised as a limitation. Consequently, the qualitative component was designed to address this, with electoral officials being significantly represented among the interviewees.

Table 1

Questionnaire Distribution and Response Rate by Stakeholder Category

Stakeholder category	Distributed	Returned	Rate (%)	Population
Officials of the electoral commission	53	20	37.7	120
International observers	105	70	66.7	240
Civil society organisations	22	12	54.5	50
Political party officials	13	6	46.2	30
Media practitioners	18	14	77.8	40
Academic experts	13	8	61.5	30
Total	224	130	58.0	510

Note. Sample determined by Taro Yamane's (1967) formula and allocated by proportionate stratified sampling. Data from field survey (2025).

3.3 Instruments, Validity and Reliability

Three tools were utilised: a structured questionnaire, a semi-structured interview guide, and a documentary analysis protocol. Initially, the questionnaire was divided into six sections, incorporating closed questions on five-point Likert scales (1 = very poor, 5 = excellent) alongside open-ended queries. It assessed administration across eight areas: institutional capacity, technology infrastructure, voter registration, polling procedures, vote counting, result transmission, transparency measures, and overall electoral integrity. Secondly, the interview guide focused on accreditation, observation methodologies, coordination with national authorities, administrative changes between cycles, and the outcomes of observer recommendations. Lastly, the documentary protocol examined reports from five international observer missions, including those from the European Union, the African Union, the Economic Community of West African States, the Commonwealth, and the joint delegation of the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, as well as the commission's plans, guidelines, and reform-implementation reports. Table 2 provides a summary of these sources.

Table 2

Summary of Data Sources

Data source	Type	Number	Focus	Cycle
Survey questionnaire	Quantitative	130 valid	Six stakeholder categories	2019 and 2023
Key-informant interviews	Qualitative	20	Observers, officials, others	2019 and 2023
European Union mission reports	Documentary	2	Integrity, recommendations	2019 and 2023
African Union mission reports	Documentary	2	Integrity, recommendations	2019 and 2023
ECOWAS mission reports	Documentary	2	Integrity, recommendations	2019 and 2023
Commonwealth mission reports	Documentary	2	Integrity, recommendations	2019 and 2023
NDI/IRI joint delegation reports	Documentary	2	Integrity, recommendations	2019 and 2023

Note. The specific mission reports analysed are listed in the References. Field report (2025).

Validity, in turn, was established on four fronts. Content validity was assessed by subject-matter experts, who judged whether the items covered the conceptual domains identified in the objectives; face validity, next, was assessed through a pilot with ten respondents, whose feedback informed revisions to sequencing and instructions; construct validity, further, was strengthened by aligning items with the established frameworks of Norris (2014) and of Mozaffar and Schedler (2002); and triangulation validity, lastly, was pursued through the convergent parallel design, in which the three strands were compared for convergence and divergence (Denzin, 2012). It is on that convergence,

rather than on any single instrument, that the reliability of interpretation is here claimed.

3.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was applied to the quantitative responses, utilising mean ratings on a five-point scale to monitor performance across eight dimensions and two cycles. The interview data underwent thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method: initially, transcripts were read to gain familiarity; next, initial codes were created inductively, closely reflecting the respondents' language; these codes were then organised into potential themes; the themes were subsequently evaluated against the coded extracts; finally, the themes were defined and aligned with the four objectives. Throughout the process, the validity was assessed by the convergence of the three strands rather than relying on any single source. It is important to note that all participation was voluntary, conducted with informed consent, and no respondent can be identified in the subsequent text.

Three limitations should, in fairness, be acknowledged. First, the achieved sample of 130 is modest and weighted towards observers, which constrains generalisation; the analysis compensates through the qualitative strand, yet cannot wholly remove the imbalance. Secondly, survey responses are liable to social-desirability bias, particularly among officials reporting upon their own institution, which is one reason the study anchors its conclusions in triangulation. Thirdly, observer reports, invaluable though they are, remain interested rather than neutral documents, and are therefore read critically rather than at face value.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

The analysis is organised by the theory of democratic consolidation, which emerged as scholars sought to understand what became of the states that transited from authoritarian rule during Huntington's (1991) "third wave". Its foundational statement is the two-turnover test: a democracy may be regarded as consolidated once the party that first came to power through an electoral alternation has itself been defeated at the polls and has surrendered office to another. Crucially, therefore, the test locates consolidation not in the holding of elections but in the demonstrated willingness of incumbents to lose them. Linz and Stepan (1996), building upon this, defined a democracy as consolidated when, behaviourally, attitudinally, and constitutionally, it has become "the only game in town". O'Donnell (1996) and Schedler (2002), however, later cautioned against teleological readings that treat consolidation as an inevitable destination, insisting instead that many polities settle into durable hybrid conditions.

That caution has been pressed furthest by Carothers (2002), whose critique of the "transition paradigm" questions the very assumption that states leaving authoritarian rule are necessarily moving towards democracy at all. This study takes the critique seriously, rather than setting it aside. It does not presume that Nigeria is consolidating; on the contrary, it asks whether it is, and finds, with Carothers, that the country occupies a durable intermediate condition which the linear model cannot capture. The consolidation framework is retained, accordingly, not as a prediction of Nigeria's destination but as a diagnostic for locating where it presently stands, which is precisely the use that O'Donnell and Schedler's refinements license.

What is novel in this application, moreover, is its integration of levels that previous Nigerian studies have treated separately. Whereas earlier work has applied the two-turnover test to Nigeria in isolation, or has examined electoral administration without reference to consolidation, this study

integrates the turnover test with a disaggregated analysis of administrative performance and with the record of international observation, thereby offering a more comprehensive assessment than either approach alone permits. The framework, in turn, yields a clear analytical expectation: if consolidation depends upon the acceptance of democratic constraints by those with the power to evade them, then improvements confined to the technical machinery of elections should leave the deeper condition largely untouched, and the decisive indicator should be sought not in the sophistication of the process but in the pattern of turnover and the conduct of the powerful.

So read, the Nigerian case contributes to consolidation theory in two ways. In the first place, it supports O'Donnell and Schedler's contention that hybrid conditions can persist indefinitely, by exhibiting a democracy that runs steadily better elections while remaining, in the sense that matters, unconsolidated. In the second place, it suggests that Huntington's two-turnover test, though necessary, is not sufficient, and must be supplemented by indicators of party institutionalisation; for it is the weakness of Nigeria's parties, and not the competence of its electoral administration, that most directly explains the arrested pattern of alternation.

5.0 Findings

5.1 A Trajectory of Selective, Not Steady, Improvement

The first objective concerns whether administration improved between the cycles. To that end, stakeholders rated the process across eight dimensions on a five-point scale in each year; and Table 3 presents the comparison, together with the change and its direction.

Table 3

Assessment of Electoral Administration Performance, 2019 and 2023 (Mean Ratings)

Dimension	2019	2023	Change	Direction
Voter registration	3.09	3.78	+0.69	Improved
Transparency measures	2.98	3.21	+0.23	Improved
Technology infrastructure	3.14	3.29	+0.15	Improved
Polling procedures	3.32	3.42	+0.10	Improved
Overall electoral integrity	3.05	3.15	+0.10	Improved
Institutional capacity	3.18	3.23	+0.05	Improved
Vote counting	3.16	3.16	0.00	Unchanged
Result transmission	2.75	2.63	-0.12	Declined

Note. Ratings are respondent means on a five-point scale (1 = very poor, 5 = very good). Data from field survey (2025).

What Table 3 records, therefore, is a process advancing on some fronts while slipping on others; and the pattern, tellingly, is anything but random. The single largest gain, in voter registration, rose from a mean of 3.09 to 3.78 and was, indeed, the only dimension to attain a "good" rating in 2023, a direct dividend of the biometric technology deployed at the point of entry to the process. Transparency and technology infrastructure likewise improved; and the modest lift in the overall integrity score, from 3.05 to 3.15, confirms that the process as a whole was judged marginally better in 2023 than in 2019.

Yet, significantly, the improvements cluster at the front end of the electoral chain, where citizens are registered and accredited, and thin out towards the back end, where votes are aggregated and results declared. The decisive exception to the story of progress is result transmission, the one dimension to deteriorate, falling from an already weak 2.75 to 2.63. The interview evidence, moreover, gives this back-end failure a sharper edge. An official of the commission conceded that the accreditation technology "was transformative but faced teething problems", with "inadequate network infrastructure in rural areas" hampering real-time transmission (INEC1); and a second official acknowledged that, although the portal "increased transparency significantly", backend systems lagged (INEC2). Observers, for their part, read the same asymmetry from outside: one noted "marked improvements in voter registration", yet found that "result transmission remained problematic due to technical glitches and inadequate backend infrastructure" (IO1). The stage most exposed to decisive manipulation, in short, was precisely the stage that reform failed to secure; and it was upon that stage that the 2023 presidential result ultimately turned.

5.2 The Bounded Reach of International Observation

The second objective concerns the influence of international observation. Accordingly, Table 4 sets the principal observer recommendations from 2019 against the response they received by 2023.

Table 4

Selected International Observer Recommendations and Their Adoption, 2019 to 2023

Recommendation (2019)	Response by 2023	Status
Strengthen voter accreditation	Biometric accreditation deployed nationwide	Adopted
Improve result transparency	Electronic result-viewing portal introduced under the Electoral Act 2022	Partially adopted
Modernise the legal framework	Electoral Act 2022 enacted	Adopted
Secure result transmission end to end	Backend infrastructure gaps left unresolved	Not realised
Address electoral violence and impunity	Limited operational or accountability response	Resisted

Note. Synthesised from the reports of five observer missions and the interview record. Data from field report (2025).

The missions were, to be sure, not without effect. A slight majority of respondents, some 51.5 per cent, credited observer recommendations with a significant influence upon the reforms that followed 2019; and the Electoral Act 2022 duly incorporated several provisions that echoed observer priorities, notably the legal backing given to electronic accreditation and result viewing. As one observer put it, the 2019 recommendations "particularly on result transparency, were partially implemented in 2023 through the IReV portal" (IO5). Observation, on this evidence, is far from mere theatre; on the contrary, it shapes the reform agenda and lends a vocabulary to domestic reformers.

The influence was real, however, only within distinct limits; and the pattern of what

was adopted, as Table 4 makes plain, is more revealing than the bare fact of adoption. Reforms that carried reputational benefit without threatening the distribution of power, biometric accreditation, a new legal framework, a transparency portal, were readily embraced; whereas those that would have constrained incumbents directly, end-to-end transmission integrity and a serious response to electoral violence, were left unresolved or declined. The interview evidence, once more, underscores the ceiling. Observers could name problems and recommend remedies, but they commanded no mechanism to compel implementation: one reported, pointedly, that international observers "documented numerous incidents, but our reports seemed to have minimal impact on accountability or security improvements for future elections" (IO10). External actors, in short, can raise the reputational price of manipulation; they cannot, however, pay the political price of reform on a reluctant government's behalf.

5.3 The Unfinished Turnover

The third objective concerns whether power actually changes hands through the ballot. Table 5, therefore, sets Nigeria against the two comparators most often invoked in the African literature.

Table 5

Power Alternation and the Two-Turnover Test: Nigeria in Comparative Perspective

Country	Electoral alternations of power	Number	Two-turnover test
Ghana	2000, 2008, 2016	3	Satisfied
Zambia	1991, 2011, 2021	3	Satisfied
Nigeria	2015	1	Not satisfied

Note. An alternation denotes a peaceful transfer of executive power to an opposition party through the ballot. Comparative framing adapted from Fashagba (2023) and Huntington (1991).

The contrast is stark and, for consolidation theory, decisive. Ghana and Zambia have each seen power pass to an opposition party three times, comfortably satisfying Huntington's benchmark; Nigeria, by contrast, has managed the feat but once, in 2015. The elections examined here, moreover, did nothing to advance that tally: the 2023 contest returned the incumbent party to the presidency, so that the party which first took office through alternation has yet to relinquish it through the ballot. Nigeria, accordingly, remains one turnover short of the threshold that consolidation theory sets.

The reason the single alternation has not been repeated is, following Fashagba (2023), as instructive as the count itself; for it connects the theory directly to the administrative findings. Nigeria's 2015 alternation was produced not by a durable opposition party but by a temporary merger coinciding with an implosion within the ruling party, a conjuncture unlikely to recur to order. Whereas Ghana's two dominant parties have persisted across successive cycles, and Zambia's opposition remained coherent until it prevailed, Nigeria's parties are, by contrast, weakly institutionalised, their membership fluid and their elites prone to defection. Consolidation, this comparison suggests, depends not only upon whether the commission can run a credible poll but upon whether the party system can generate an opposition capable of winning one and an incumbent willing to concede it. One academic respondent captured the resulting condition

precisely, describing a system of "electoral authoritarianism" in which "democratic forms co-exist with substantive democratic deficits" (ACAD1).

6.0 Discussion

The three aforementioned findings align to portray Nigeria as a nation exhibiting democratic features without the essential groundwork for consolidation. While it does have a permanent commission, an active multiparty system, and continuous electoral cycles, and has made notable improvements in its administrative front end, it lacks the deeper condition described by Linz and Stepan (1996): a widespread acceptance among influential figures that democratic processes are the sole legitimate path to power.

These findings also directly engage with the literature previously discussed. They challenge Lindberg's (2006) assertion that repeated elections inherently foster consolidation; Nigeria's seventh consecutive electoral cycle resulted in selective administrative improvements but no progress in power alternation, indicating that democracy deepens only when party institutionalisation allows, aligning more closely with Bratton and van de Walle (1997). Furthermore, they validate Kelley's (2009) argument about the limited impact of observation, illustrating it with Nigeria's selective adoption as shown in Table 4. Lastly, they expand Fashagba's (2023) discussion on party institutionalisation by linking it, through the two-turnover test, to the varied performance of administration.

The most crucial practical insight, however, pertains to the alluring nature of technical fixes for political issues. Nigeria's recent reforms aimed to instil integrity through biometric accreditation and electronic transmission; yet, the findings clearly reveal the limitations of this approach. Technology effectively secured the administrative front end but faltered at the decisive back end, where powerful interests focus their efforts. This highlights the trap of technological fetishism: the belief that a fundamentally political issue, such as the reluctance of the powerful to concede defeat, can be resolved with a clever tool. A portal cannot ensure a faithful outcome where incentives and enforcement are lacking, leading manipulation to shift to unprotected areas left by technology.

Moreover, the security ramifications of this analysis are substantial, warranting its inclusion in discussions about peace and stability. When voters lose faith in the transmission of results, they are driven to contest them through alternative methods. The violence, legal battles, and legitimacy issues observed in Nigeria's recent elections are foreseeable outcomes of an unresolved integrity gap (Amnesty International, 2023). When the underlying issues are patronage, elite capture, and a winner-takes-all mentality, elections transform into struggles for state control rather than routine contests for temporary positions, heightening the urgency to win at any cost. In this scenario, electoral integrity is not just a governance luxury but a vital security asset.

The study's contribution can now be clearly articulated. Theoretically, it expands consolidation theory by incorporating the two-turnover test with party institutionalisation and distinguishing between front-end and back-end administration, thus providing new evidence supporting O'Donnell and Schedler's assertion that hybrid conditions persist. Empirically, it presents the first systematic comparison of the 2019 and 2023 cycles using a mixed methods approach. Methodologically, it highlights the importance of triangulation in identifying patterns, such as the asymmetry between front-end and back-end processes, that no single source can reveal.

Finally, it must be emphasised that none of this warrants despair. Nigeria has continued to

conduct competitive elections, alternated power at least once, and has resolved its most intense disputes through the courts rather than coups. Undoubtedly, these achievements should not be overlooked in a region where reversals are common. The country is neither steadily consolidating nor collapsing into authoritarianism but is oscillating within the enduring hybrid condition anticipated by O'Donnell, Schedler, and Carothers. Ultimately, the task is less about certifying Nigeria's arrival and more about understanding how it might shift the balance from merely reproducing forms to building solid foundations.

7.0 Conclusion

This article set out to examine what Nigeria's 2019 and 2023 general elections imply for democratic consolidation theory and for the practice of electoral administration in emerging democracies. The evidence, on balance, supports a clear conclusion. Nigeria has built the apparatus of democratic elections and improved parts of it appreciably; and yet it has not built the political foundations that consolidation requires, the gap between the two being neither an accident of administration nor a failure of technology, but a reflection of political choices about who may lose power and how. Improvement in the mechanics of elections, it follows, need not translate into consolidation; and neither imported technology nor international observation can supply the domestic political will upon which integrity ultimately rests.

These conclusions must, of course, be read against the study's limitations. The achieved sample of 130 is modest and weighted towards observers, so that the perceptual findings are indicative rather than definitive, and would be strengthened by fuller representation of administrators. The reliance upon observer reports, which are not disinterested, and the potential for social-desirability bias, are further reasons the study anchors its claims in triangulation. These limitations, in turn, point towards an agenda for future research: comparative studies of other African states, to test how far the Nigerian pattern generalises; longitudinal work tracking consolidation across more than two cycles; and closer investigation of party institutionalisation, which this study identifies as the decisive, yet least examined, condition of durable alternation.

8.0 Recommendations

Four recommendations follow from the findings, each addressed to the political foundations of electoral integrity rather than to its technical surface alone.

i. Secure the back end of the electoral process. Since the evidence shows integrity failing at result transmission and collation, reform effort and independent scrutiny should be concentrated there, through legally mandated real-time transmission, transparent collation, and meaningful sanction for non-compliance.

ii. Extend observation across the full electoral cycle. International missions should, accordingly, move beyond episodic assessment towards sustained engagement, establishing standing liaison with domestic partners capable of tracking whether recommendations are implemented between cycles.

iii. Strengthen the institutionalisation of political parties. Because consolidation depends upon an opposition durable enough to win and incumbents habituated to conceding, reform should target the weak institutionalisation of parties directly, through rules that discourage patronage-driven defection.

iv. Treat electoral integrity as a security priority. Given the demonstrated link between doubted results and electoral

violence, integrity should be embedded in national frameworks for peace and stability, with early-warning, dispute-resolution, and accountability mechanisms designed to lower the incentive to contest outcomes by force.

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