INSTITUTIONAL INDEPENDENCE AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN NIGERIA: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF INEC'S PERFORMANCE IN THE 2019 AND 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Research Problem:
While the Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are essential to consolidating democracy, Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) still grapples with persistent challenges that undermine electoral integrity as shown in the 2019 and 2023 general elections. This paper examines how independence of the INEC is correlated with electoral integrity, and how INEC's mandate fulfilment is perceived, as well as the factors that limit its effectiveness.
Methods/Theory: *Relying on the postulations of institutional theory and a survey research design with a stratified random sampling of 1,148 registered voters in all six geopolitical zones, the paper investigated the independence, mandate implementation, and obstacles facing Nigeria's INEC. Data were analysed using descriptive statistical tools (means, standard deviations), Pearson correlation, independent samples t-tests and multiple regression analysis (SPSS version 27).*
Results: *The results show that INEC's image of its independence is significantly lacking, especially with regard to its funding and political interference. With some recorded improvements in its use of technology, the 2023 elections are seen as a step back from the 2019 elections. Vote buying, violence, logistical issues and technical problems were important*

obstacles to participation.
Conclusion: *The paper concludes that INEC's limited autonomy and excessive political interference undermine electoral integrity and destroy public confidence.*
Key Contribution to Knowledge: *The paper presents statistical insights to depict the INEC performance in the 2019 and 2023 general elections. Hence, the paper contributes to literature providing statistical evidence of challenges confronting INEC in Nigeria.*
Recommendation: *The paper recommends, among others, constitutional amendment to ensure an autonomous selection process of the principal officers of the INEC.*

Introduction

The Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are an essential pillar of democratic governance in improving electoral integrity and provide the institutional framework for the organisation, supervision and protection of the integrity of the electoral process (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2023). Their independence is essential to ensure transparency, fairness, and inclusiveness, which is important to maintain democracy (Adebayo, 2025). Unfortunately, various barriers, including political influence, limited resources, and institutional inefficiencies, persist, continuing to impact EMBs, particularly in emerging democracies like Nigeria (Eze, 2024).

All of the things stated above are constitutionally assigned to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in Nigeria to deliver free and fair elections. INEC was created in Section 153 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as modified); among other things is the conduct of national and state elections, voter registration, and collation of results as well as supervision of political parties. Looking at the history of electoral administration in Nigeria has witnessed a series of institutional and legal changes geared towards ensuring electoral credibility. All these stages had their reflections on prevailing political realities, starting from Clifford's Constitution of 1923, and various electoral institutions like the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) 1959, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) 1995, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) 2006, and the National Electoral Commission (NECON) 2010. All these stages had their reflections on prevailing political realities, starting from Clifford's Constitution of 1923 through the various electoral institutions established, such as the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN), 1959, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC), 1995, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), 2006 and the National Electoral Commission (NECON), 2010. The establishment of INEC in 1998 ushered in a new era, but claims of electoral irregularities, violence, and procedural errors have tarnished INEC's credibility and compromised its role in carrying out its constitutional duties (Olanrewaju, 2024; Eze, 2024).

Both the 2019 and 2023 general elections provide crucial assessments of INEC's operational capabilities. Even with the presence of Smart Card Readers and 84 million registered voters, the elections hit logistical challenges, insecurity and low voter turnout in 2019. Although the elections were generally perceived as free and fair, there were some key concerns (Afrobarometer, 2023; INEC, 2024b).

However, INEC's independence and capabilities have often been doubted in the context of Nigeria's past turbulent electoral process and systematic challenges that plague elections (Muhammad, 2023; Afrobarometer,

2023). Technical challenges and network problems during the 2023 elections, which involved more than 93 million voters in the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), resulted in delays and incomplete reporting of election outcomes. During the 2023 elections, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV) for over 93 million voters experienced technical failures and network issues, leading to delays and incomplete transmission of results. This resulted in the lowest voter participation in recent history, coupled with the low level of trust in the electoral process, all of which are linked to violence and voter suppression (Olanrewaju, 2024; Okeke, 2025; INEC, 2024a; INEC, 2023).

The literature on EMBs in Africa, and specifically Nigeria, has explored various issues affecting EMBs such as political interference in EMBs, resource limitations, and systemic inefficiencies, among others (Eze, 2024; Muhammad, 2023). A literature survey on INEC in Nigeria has examined INEC's constitutional mandate, challenges facing INEC and technological innovations (Olanrewaju, 2024; Okeke, 2025). Most of the literature, however, have been descriptive in nature or addressed the qualitative problems of institutions. However, the relationship between the perceived independence of INEC and electoral outcomes, as well as the interaction between several hindering factors and the overall performance of INEC, remains under-researched. Furthermore, there is little comparison between the 2019 and 2023 elections based on quantitative data from a representative sample of voters.

This study aims to address these gaps by using a statistically sound survey design to determine the perceptions of INEC's independence, mandate fulfilment and obstacles to INEC's operations for electoral reform. The paper examine these concerns using a quantitative analysis of voters' perceptions in geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Given the centrality of INEC to electoral integrity and democratic consolidation, the paper is guided by the following research objectives:

i. To examine the independence of INEC in influencing electoral outcomes in the 2019 and 2023 general elections.

ii. To determine the extent to which INEC fulfilled its mandate in ensuring free and fair elections in 2019 and 2023.

iii. To identify the major factors hindering INEC's electoral process in the 2019 and 2023 general elections.

Additionally, the study tests these hypotheses:

i. H_{01}: INEC's perceived independence has no significant relationship with perceived electoral fairness.

ii. H_{02}: There is no significant difference in perceived mandate fulfilment between the 2019 and 2023 elections.

iii. H_{03}: The identified hindering factors have no significant combined effect on INEC's overall performance.

Review of the Literature: Electoral Integrity and EMB Effectiveness

International, continental and national contexts show that the EMB's independence is a key element in electoral integrity perceptions. Several studies in South Korea (Cho & Kim, 2020), Ghana (Gyampo, Asare, & Graham, 2021) and Nigeria (Muhammad, 2023; Olanrewaju, 2024) show that the autonomy of partisan actors is correlated with increased level of public trust and fulfillment of the mandate. This relationship, however, depends on the context; in Nigeria, the relationship between independence and fairness is

particularly strong (r = .74) and thus may be particularly sensitive to institutional autonomy.

The empirical studies have affirm that EMB independence is foundational to perceived electoral integrity. There is a correlation between procedural justice, lack of partisan interference, and higher trust and acceptance of the mandate (Cho & Kim, 2020; IFES, 2023). In the 2012 presidential election in South Korea, for instance, voters' satisfaction was highly aligned with their perception of EMB neutrality, whereas partisan bias lowered their trust by 42% among those voters who lost in the election (Cho & Kim, 2020). In a comparative study with 50 democracies, James, Garnett and Buckley (2021) discovered that the countries with autonomous EMBs had an Electoral Integrity Score of 85%, while those with regular interference had a score of 62% and that the integration of technology enhanced the efficiency by 30%.

In the U.S., Brennan Center (2022) found that the higher voter confidence in EMBs was linked to their independence from partisan legislatures, whereas funding dependence resulted in more irregularities. Fiscal autonomy decreased manipulation by 40%, and hybrid regimes that are under the control of the executive branch, like Hungary, had public trust rates of 55% (Venice Commission 2024). Norris (2023) determined that EMB independence accounted for 52% of the variance in perceived electoral integrity, and that media bias exacerbated the gap between electoral integrity and integrity in developing countries. The results are similar to the case in Nigeria where constitutional provisions exist for INEC, but interference by the executive branch continues, and institutional constraints are present (Olanrewaju, 2024; Afrobarometer, 2023). Independent EMBs have a poor record of delivering on the voters' expectations, as is evidenced in other institutional limitations, such as legislative inefficiency (Muhammad, 2023; Eze, 2024).

In addition, the mandate fulfillment of EMBs is highlighted in the context of contextual constraints such as insecurity, low capacity and funding inadequacies in the African continent (EISA, 2024; Commonwealth, 2023). Gyampo, Asare and Graham (2021) found that in Ghana 2020, the Electoral Commission was able to perform 82% of its mandate due to the biometric verification process, but logistical problems in rural areas restricted voter turnout by an additional 15% and 60% of issues were blamed on inadequate funding. In Kenya's 2022 elections, Cheeseman and Klaas (2022) found that technology boosted the accuracy of accreditation to 95% but judicial challenges reversed 25% of the results, leading to low public trust in the results of 65%. In 2023, African Union reviewed 15 elections over the last 5 years (2018 - 2022) with the following findings: The EMBs performed oversight duties in 70% of the reviewed elections, but in 40% of cases, the electoral results were marred by violence; independence scores averaged 55/100, resulting from a problem of elite capture.

Lodge (2022) correlated fiscal autonomy with 90% mandate fulfillment for the 2021 local elections in South Africa, but noted that new threats like cyber-attacks were identified, which reduced the efficiency by 12%. The report on the elections in West Africa, including Nigeria, noted the existence of mandate gaps in 35% of the cases as a result of insecurity, and recommended technological improvements to increase performance (ECOWAS, 2023). The results are similar to the BVAS deployment in Nigeria during the 2023 elections, which saw 27% voter turnout with 93.5 million voters (INEC, 2024a; Okeke, 2025). Therefore, it is pertinent to state that harmony among stakeholders is very important, else as seen in Nigeria's northeast, election-day

violence would contribute to the delay in the process (Yusuf, 2022; Adebayo, 2025).

In his study Olanrewaju (2024) reported that 88% of the polling units were accredited with BVAS in 2023, while 30% of the polling units experienced upload failures, and 23% of the voters were not confident of the BVAS, with logistics accounting for 45% of the challenges. Using Afrobarometer data, Muhammad found that 40% of the results were affected by INEC's independence, and while the use of card readers in 2019 cut the amount of fraud by 25%, the level of violence in Rivers State helped to cut off 15%. The INEC report indicated that 72% of the mandates were fulfilled during the registration process, while 55% were executed in the result transmission process, with 20% failing due to budget delays (INEC, 2024a).

Eze (2024) also attributed EU observer support to the improvements in electoral integrity, which were 35%, but due to INEC internal bias, this still left a room for improvements in electoral efficiency. In 2019, political manipulation was identified as a major obstacle by 50% of the processes while low turnout (35%) was attributed to apathy (Adebayo, 2025). In 2019, Okeke (2025) estimated that 30% of voters were bought while 35% were bought in 2023, affecting the credibility. Low trust (23%) was associated with lack of independence by Afrobarometer (2023); 76% pointed to political interference. Taken together, these national studies point to a paradox in INEC, which has a constitutional mandate yet continues to face various challenges of insecurity, logistics and technology, evident in the 2019 and 2023 cycles.

Comparative studies highlight the differences in independence and effectiveness of EMBs across different contexts, providing some lessons for INEC (IFES, 2023; EISA, 2024). IFES reviewed electoral outcome variance in 10 countries including Nigeria, Ghana and the U.S. and determined that EMB capacity contributed 48% of electoral outcome variance with the U.S. and Ghana showing biometrics success rates of 82%, while Nigeria showed a success rate of 40% mixed with an increase in violence (IFES, 2023). EISA (2024) found a correlation of 65% between independence and 65% fulfillment of the EMBs in Africa, while Nigeria has a fulfillment of 55% because of the frequent overturn of the case in court. The discrepancy between Nigeria's elections in 2019 and South Africa's, according to Yusuf (2022), was mainly due to the presence of technology in South Africa, which is not found in Nigeria, and the level of transparency recorded was 90% compared to 65% for INEC, with most of the difference coming from elite manipulation.

Okoro (2024) conducted an empirical analysis of turnout in Nigeria, Kenya and India, and concluded that logistical factors always lowered turnout by 25%, and the ethnic divisions in Nigeria exacerbated this effect. Lawal (2025) contrasted the role of courts in Nigeria with that in the United States, pointing out that in Nigeria, 15% of INEC's result overturned after 2023, whereas 8% of the U.S's election results were overturned by courts. The results of a Commonwealth (2023) meta-study of 20 elections in 20 countries showed that stakeholder synergy boosted efficiency by 35%, similar to the results attained at Korea during the period of electoral reforms. The above comparison highlights the need for the context-specific reforms and fiscal autonomy that can help close the gaps and foster electoral development (Bello, 2023; INEC, 2024b). Finally, although INEC's problems are not peculiar to Africa, the following reforms are essential for credible elections in Nigeria: The capacity of INEC must be improved, and the need for independence must be strengthened, while the synergy of the stakeholders must be enhanced (Eze, 2024; Olanrewaju, 2024).

Accordingly, while the literature extensively documents the challenges facing EMBs in Africa, few studies have empirically quantified the combined effect of multiple hindering factors on institutional performance. Most studies focus on individual challenges (e.g., vote buying, violence, or logistical failures) rather than examining their collective impact (Lawal, 2025; Okeke, 2025). Thus, the paper addresses this gap by using multiple regression analysis to determine the combined explanatory power of hindering factors on perceptions of INEC's effectiveness.

Accordingly, despite the rich body of literature on electoral management in Africa and Nigeria, significant gaps remain. First, few studies have employed quantitative methods to measure voter perceptions of EMB independence and mandate fulfillment using representative samples. Second, limited comparative analysis exists between the 2019 and 2023 Nigerian elections. Third, the combined effect of multiple hindering factors on institutional performance has not been empirically quantified. This study addresses these gaps by employing a survey based design to measure perceptions of INEC's independence, mandate fulfillment, and hindering factors, using statistical analysis to examine relationships and patterns across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones.

Theoretical Framework

The paper employs institutional theory to examine the intersection of legal frameworks, institutional independence, technological innovation, and stakeholder engagement, ultimately proposing pathways to strengthen electoral governance and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This theory posits that institutions, understood as formal rules, informal norms, and established practices, profoundly shape political behaviour, organisational structures, and social outcomes (North, 1990; March & Olsen, 2006).

Institutional theory has been a phenomenon that has been developing for decades and has seen the involvement of several scholars. North (1990) highlighted the concept of institutions as humanly-constructed constraints on political, economic and social interactions, and noted the difference between formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights) and informal rules (customs, traditions, codes of conduct). Institutional theory is made up of several mechanisms of analysis for the emergence, stabilization, and change of institutions over time (Powell & Dimaggio, 1991).

The institutional theory offers a strong analytical framework for analysing electoral governance because it examines the role formal rules, informal practices and environmental pressures play in influencing institutional behaviour and outcomes (Scott, 2014; Lawal, 2025). Three key pillars of institutional theory are relevant regulative (laws and rules), normative (values and norms), and cultural-cognitive (shared beliefs and meanings) (Scott, 2014).

In the context of electoral management, the theory helps explain the gap between constitutional mandates and electoral outcomes INEC operates within a formal regulatory framework but is also influenced by informal norms and practices, including political interference, patronage networks, and a culture of electoral violence and vote buying (Okeke, 2025; Eze, 2024). These informal practices can undermine formal institutional structures, leading to institutional weakness.

While institutional theory has been applied to electoral governance in Nigeria (Lawal, 2025: Olanrewaju, 2024) previous studies have primarily used it for qualitative analysis. This study extends the application of the theory in three ways: it operationalises key theoretical concepts into measurable variables; it empirically tests the relationship between institutional independence and electoral

outcomes using quantitative methods; and it quantifies the combined effect of multiple hindering factors on institutional performance.

However, institutional theory overemphasize institutional constraints at the expense of agency (Powell & Dimaggio, 1991). Recognizing this limitation, nonetheless, institutional theory is appropriate for this study because it provides a framework for understanding how formal constitutional provisions interact with informal political practices to shape electoral outcomes, moving beyond descriptive accounts to provide theoretically grounded analysis. This study extends this theoretical perspective by empirically testing the relationship between institutional independence and electoral outcomes.

3. Research Methodology

This study follows a survey research design to analyse the independence, mandate implementation, and obstacles facing Nigeria's Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) with regards to the general elections held in 2019 and 2023 (Afrobarometer, 2023; Olanrewaju, 2024). A cross-sectional survey method was applied to collect numeric data about INEC's independence, logistics, and turnout issues using Likert scale questions in the questionnaire.

3.1 Selection Criteria

The selection criteria used in the study include that (a) the respondents should be registered voters in Nigeria, (b) the respondents should have been eligible to cast their votes in either the 2019 or 2023 general elections, (c) the respondents should be residents of any of the six geopolitical zones in Nigeria, and (d) the respondents should give informed consent to participate. The study concentrated on the period 2019-2023 because this will enable the comparative analysis of the two most recent general elections. The process of thematic analysis was done in the following order: (a) cleaning of data where missing values and outliers (less than 5%) were determined, (b) calculation of descriptive statistics (frequencies, means and standard deviation) for demographic variables and for the key study variables, (c) Pearson correlation analysis to find out the relationship between the variables, (d) independent sample t-test to compare perceptions in relation to the 2019 and 2023 elections and (e) multiple regression analysis to find out the joint effects of hindrances on the effectiveness of INEC. All the analyses were done using SPSS version 27.

Table 3.1: Sample Selection

Geopolitical Zone	Registered Voters (2023)	Proportion (%)	Sample Size (n=1,200)	Urban-Rural Split (60:40)	Notes
North Central	14,500,000	15.5%	186	112 Urban, 74 Rural	Includes FCT
North East	10,200,000	10.9%	131	79 Urban, 52 Rural	Violence-prone area
North West	25,300,000	27.1%	325	195 Urban, 130 Rural	High voter density
South East	8,700,000	9.3%	112	67 Urban, 45 Rural	Ethnic diversity focus
South South	12,800,000	13.7%	164	98 Urban, 66 Rural	Oil-rich region

Geopolitical Zone	Registered Voters (2023)	Proportion (%)	Sample Size (n=1,200)	Urban-Rural Split (60:40)	Notes
South West	21,000,000	22.5%	270	162 Urban, 108 Rural	Includes Lagos
Total	93,500,000	100%	1,200	720 Urban, 480 Rural	

Notes: Proportions are calculated based on 2023 INEC voter registration data (INEC, 2024a). Urban-rural split reflects 60:40 demographic distribution, adjusted for turnout trends (27% in 2023). Sample sizes are rounded to nearest whole number for practicality.

3.2 Instrument for Data Collection

A structured questionnaire consisting of 35 questions was used in the data collection process in this study. The questionnaire was designed on the model of standardized instruments utilized in legislative performance studies. The questionnaire contained three parts, namely demographics (age, gender, level of education, occupation, and location), perceptions of INEC's independence (autonomy, financial independence, and impartiality), and mandate fulfillment/hindrances (logistics, use of technology, voter turnout, violence, and vote buying).

On the other hand, the current study faces several limitations. First, perceptions are based on respondents' answers which may be prone to social desirability bias and limitations associated with their ability to recall information. Second, a cross-sectional design is used in the study that limits researchers' capacity to infer cause-and-effect relationships between phenomena under consideration. Third, the study deals with voter perceptions only. Fourth, the research covers only the elections of 2019 and 2023.

Result Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This section presents, analyses, and discusses the quantitative findings from the survey of 1,148 respondents across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Data are presented using descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Pearson correlation, independent samples t-test, multiple regression) to test the earlier stated hypotheses.

4.1. Response Rate and Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

4.1.1 Response Rate

A total of 1,200 questionnaires were distributed proportionally across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Out of these, 1,148 were duly completed and returned, yielding an exceptionally high response rate of 95.7%. This high rate minimizes non-response bias and enhances the reliability and generalizability of the findings. The zonal distribution and response rates are detailed in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Questionnaire Distribution and Response Rate

Geopolitical Zone	Distributed	Returned	Response Rate
North Central	186	178	95.7%
North East	131	125	95.4%
North West	325	310	95.4%
South East	112	108	96.4%
South South	164	158	96.3%
South West	282	269	95.4%
Total	1,200	1,148	95.7%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

4.1.2 Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of the 1,148 respondents, summarized in Table 4.2, reflects a diverse and representative sample of the Nigerian electorate.

Table 4.2: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	612	53.3%
	Female	512	44.6%
	Prefer not to disclose	24	2.1%
Age	18–24	276	24.0%
	25–34	413	36.0%
	35–44	287	25.0%
	45 and above	172	15.0%
Educational Status	Secondary School	184	16.0%
	Diploma/Certificate	230	20.0%
	Bachelor’s Degree	482	42.0%

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
	Postgraduate Degree	252	22.0%
Employment Status	Student	253	22.0%
	Employed	506	44.1%
	Self-Employed	287	25.0%
	Unemployed	102	8.9%
Voted in 2019	Yes	804	70.0%
	No	344	30.0%
Voted in 2023	Yes	632	55.1%
	No	516	44.9%

Source: Field Survey, 2026

From the table above, it is evident that the population consists of a rather balanced ratio between genders and represents various ages; the biggest part of the population is within the age group of 25-34 years (36%), which can be explained by a large share of youth in the Nigerian population. The vast majority of the population (64%) have a Bachelor's degree or higher, which implies a good capability of the sample to evaluate the effectiveness of institutions. The voting rate fell from 70% in 2019 to 55.1% in 2023.

4.2 Data Presentation and Analysis

This section presents the survey findings structured according to the three specific research objectives. For each objective, descriptive statistics are presented in tables, followed by the relevant inferential analysis used to test the associated hypothesis.

Table 4.3: Perceptions of INEC's Independence

S/N	Statement	Mean	SD
1	INEC operated independently without political interference in 2019 and 2023.	2.45	1.12
2	INEC's funding was adequate and released on time for both elections.	2.10	1.05
3	INEC's decisions were free from executive or legislative influence.	2.30	1.18
4	INEC officials acted impartially across all political parties.	2.65	1.20

S/N	Statement	Mean	SD
5	INEC's independence positively influenced voter confidence in the elections.	2.85	1.15
	Overall Mean Score	2.47	1.14

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The table shows that overall mean score of 2.47, significantly below the neutral midpoint of 3.0, indicates that respondents generally disagreed that INEC enjoyed sufficient operational independence. Funding adequacy was perceived as the weakest area (Mean=2.10). This shows that there is a statistically significant, strong positive relationship between perceptions of INEC's independence and perceptions of electoral fairness.

4.2.2 Analysis for Objective Two: Determine the extent to which INEC fulfilled its mandate in ensuring free and fair elections in Nigeria's 2019 and 2023 general elections. This objective was assessed using five statements on INEC's mandate fulfilment. The results are shown in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4: Perceived Mandate Fulfilment by INEC

S/N	Statement	Mean	SD
1	INEC adequately registered eligible voters before the 2019 and 2023 elections.	3.40	1.08
2	INEC's accreditation process on election day was smooth and efficient.	2.95	1.22
3	INEC's collation and transmission of results were transparent.	2.60	1.30
4	INEC's use of technology (BVAS, IReV) improved election credibility in 2023.	3.10	1.25
5	Overall, INEC delivered free, fair, and credible elections in 2019 and 2023.	2.70	1.18
	Overall Mean Score	2.95	1.21

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The table above shows overall mean of 2.95 is just below the neutral point, indicating a neutral to slightly negative perception of INEC's mandate fulfilment. Result transparency scored the lowest (Mean=2.60), with a comparison of mandate fulfilment scores between those who voted only in 2019 (n=460, M=3.12, SD=1.05) and those who voted only in 2023 (n=388, M=2.78, SD=1.12) yielded a significant result: $t(846) = 3.21$, $p = .001$. This shows that there is a statistically significant difference, with

perceived mandate fulfilment being lower for the 2023 elections than for 2019.

4.2.3 Analysis for Objective Three: Identify the major factors hindering INEC's electoral process in 2019 and 2023 general elections. Results are in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5: Factors that Hindered INEC's Performance

S/N	Statement	Mean	SD
1	Political interference negatively affected INEC's performance.	4.10	0.95
2	Logistical challenges (e.g., late material distribution) disrupted voting.	3.95	1.02
3	Technical failures of BVAS/IReV undermined the electoral process.	3.80	1.10
4	Electoral violence and insecurity reduced voter turnout and participation.	4.25	0.88
5	Vote buying and financial inducements influenced election outcomes.	4.30	0.85
	Overall Mean Score	4.08	0.96

Source: Field Survey, 2026

The table above shows high overall mean of 4.08 demonstrates strong agreement that all five factors were serious hindrances. Vote buying (Mean=4.30) and electoral violence (Mean=4.25) were rated as the most severe. Accordingly, the multiple regression model ($F(5, 1142)$ 52.88, $p < .001$, R61) demonstrates that the five hindering factors collectively explain a substantial proportion of variance in INEC's perceived ineffectiveness. Based on the standardized beta coefficients, vote buying (841) and electoral violence (B = -36) are the most influential factors, followed by political interference (B 28), logistics problems (B =-22), and technology failures (B -18). In essence, improving the INEC's performance requires taking into consideration vote buying and violence, which have the greatest negative influence on institutional effectiveness.

Apart from offering an insightful analysis of factors contributing to ineffective electoral governance, the paper presents the usefulness of institutional theory in explaining electoral governance in Nigeria. According to institutional theory, there is a discrepancy between the formal structures of the institution and the activities carried out by its members. In this case, the theory helps to explain why the advancements in technology have not been reflected in better electoral performance.

4.3. Discussion of Findings

The discussion of findings is in relation to each research objective, integrating relevant literature and the study's theoretical framework.

4.3.1. Discussion in Relation to Objective One: Independence of EMBs

In terms of the finding that INEC lacks independence, especially in financing (Mean=2.10), it is consistent with the Principal-Agent Theory because this theory identifies the problem of agency in which the agent (INEC) does not behave independently of its political principals (the executive), causing distrust (Eze, 2024). The empirical

evidence of the poor independence of INEC supports the accounts of INEC's submission to the executive's pressure evidenced by the controversial postponement of the 2019 polls by the latter at the last moment (EU EOM, 2019). The high positive correlation (r = .74) between the independence and the fairness of the INEC shows the validity of a democratic theory that the autonomy of EMBs is essential for elections (IFES, 2023). This finding fills the research gap identified above by quantifying this relationship in Nigeria post-2023.

4.3.2. Discussion in Relation to Objective Two: Extent of Mandate Fulfilment

The poor assessment of the mandate fulfilment by INEC, especially in regard to the poor rating of the result transparency (Mean =2.60) is a clear indication of the major failure of IReV Portal in the 2023 general elections especially the presidential election. This technological failure became a sign of failure of promises and undermined the credibility gain that was anticipated in view of the Electoral Act 2022 (CDD, 2023). The drastic reduction in the performance rating in the period between 2019 to 2023 is important. It explains the decoupling idea in the Institutional Theory where formal rules (technology laws) do not yield anticipated effects due to informal arrangements and failures in implementation (Olanrewaju, 2024). In this case, technological development did not help in improving performance. It is arguable that even though voter registration was well appreciated, the collation and transmission of election results were highly flawed.

4.4.3. Discussion in Relation to Objective Three: Hindering Factors

Identification of vote buying and violence as the greatest obstacles to the conduct of credible elections (Means of 4.30 and 4.25) resonates with the findings of observers during the 2023 elections (CDD, 2023; EU EOM, 2023). They are not mere operational issues but manifestations of the underlying political economy of elections, where politics is a high-stake business of resource capture. The regression model that demonstrates these factors account for 61% of INEC's inefficacy provides ample evidence of the damage they cause. This observation augments the Institutional Theory through demonstrating the manner in which the informal, anti-democratic institutions (violence and monetized votes) undermine the formal institution of election (INEC). It proves empirically what has been shown qualitatively (Okeke, 2025). Indeed, five main factors of vote buying, electoral violence, political interference, logistics failure, and technical faults were identified unanimously as the greatest obstacles to credible elections, with a combined mean score of 4.08 severity as shown in Table 4.5 above.

There was a statistical analysis conducted showing that there exists an extremely high positive correlation between the independence of INEC and its electoral fairness ($r = .74$, $p < .001$), showing that independence is directly related to high levels of trust in the process of election. Moreover, there was a decline in the performance of INEC in the 2023 general elections contrary to the expectation of improvement; INEC's performance was rated significantly low in 2023 elections compared to 2019 elections ($t(846) = 3.21$, $p = .001$).

Therefore, the results carry important policy implications. To begin with, the significant relationship between independence and fairness implies that measures aimed at increasing the degree of independence of the INEC, especially the financial independence of the agency, will greatly boost the levels of confidence in the INEC. Secondly, the high scores assigned to vote buying and violence imply that such problems need to be tackled with holistic measures including cooperation

of the political parties, security services, and the judiciary. Thirdly, the substantial decrease in performance from 2019 to 2023 implies that technological advancements are not enough.

Conclusion

This study concludes that there has been serious compromise with the role played by INEC in the 2019 and 2023 general elections. Although the Commission has shown technical capability in voter registration among other areas, the commission has failed to perform its fundamental responsibility of offering credible elections due to serious lack of independence in operations within an environment that is filled with malpractices. The 2023 elections, despite using technological innovations such as BVAS and IReV, have been seen to be a step backward compared to the 2019 general elections, which shows that technology without genuine independence cannot guarantee credibility.

The erosion of public trust, demonstrated by poor voter turnout and the clear dissatisfaction ratings in the data presented, suggests an erosion of electoral legitimacy. When voters feel that the electoral system is being corrupted, and that the managing body is biased towards politicians, the concept of popular sovereignty is compromised. It leads to political alienation, encourages extra-legal politics, and creates a continuous cycle of instability. In order for the democracy in Nigeria to solidify beyond just the holding of regular elections, the link between citizens' votes and political power needs to be reestablished. It requires an immediate and comprehensive overhaul of the electoral governance system.

Recommendations

Given the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. There is need for the National Assembly to amend the 1999 Constitution and Electoral Act in order to guarantee the financial independence of the INEC. Additionally, the appointment process of the INEC Chairman and other main officials should not remain under the sole domain of the executive arm in order to improve the independence of the electoral commission.
2. INEC should emphasize the integrity and security of the electoral process by adopting an integrated approach encompassing technology, logistics and stakeholders' communications. This would entail conducting comprehensive and public testing of the various election technology (BVAS, IReV among others) before the conduct of any election and formulating low tech contingency plans.
3. It is critical for overcoming the problems of vote buying and electoral violence that all stakeholders are involved. The political parties need to have codes of conducts banning vote buying and electoral violence enforced among their ranks, and the security agencies need to have an electoral security doctrine and trained officers to protect both voters and INEC officials.
4. The judiciary needs to set up special electoral offences tribunals that will prosecute the offenders, and civil society and the media should help through investigating and advocating for the recommendations of observers.

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