INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION AND ELECTIONS CREDIBILITY: AN INQUIRY INTO THE DECIDER OF NIGERIA ELECTIONS

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Abstract

Research Problem:
Democracy presupposes that citizens possess the right to freely choose their leaders through credible elections. However, in Nigeria, the credibility of elections remains doubtful as outcomes often reflect elite manipulation rather than the will of the people. This study examines the extent to which the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) influences or undermines electoral credibility and investigates who truly decides electoral outcomes in Nigeria.

Methods/Theory:
The study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach, relying on secondary data from scholarly works and electoral reports. It employs Elite Theory to analyze how political elites and institutional weaknesses distort electoral integrity and undermine democratic choice.

Results:
Findings reveal that Nigeria's elections are frequently compromised by weak institutions, elite interference, and political manipulation. Decisive actors include political godfathers, INEC officials, the judiciary, and security agencies, whose actions often determine results and diminish public confidence in the process.

Conclusion:
The study concludes that the credibility of Nigeria's elections is undermined by institutional capture and elite domination, preventing genuine democratic consolidation.

Key Contribution to Knowledge:
The research deepens understanding of how institutional failure and elite control shape Nigeria's electoral outcomes, emphasizing that credible elections require institutional autonomy and integrity.

Recommendation:
The study recommends strengthening INEC's independence, enhancing technological transparency, ensuring neutrality of the judiciary and

security agencies, and enforcing sanctions on electoral offenders to restore electoral credibility.

Introduction

Democratic governance is often acclaimed as the best form of government globally, as it is believed to provide the most effective platform for realizing the yearnings and aspirations of citizens. However, in Nigeria, the practice of democracy has consistently faced challenges that question the credibility of its electoral process and the independence of its election management bodies. Elections are the backbone of democratic governance, as they provide the public with the opportunity to choose political leaders (Aliyu &Ambali, 2021). Since 1959, Nigeria has had five Election Management Bodies (EMBs): the Electoral Commission of the Federation (ECF), the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO), the National Electoral Commission (NEC), the National Electoral Commission of Nigeria (NECON), and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (Mmaduabuchi, Udegbunam&Obiora, 2019). These bodies were established to organize and conduct periodic, regular, and credible elections expected to be free and fair. For this to be achieved, EMBs must be neutral and independent of both government and political parties to guarantee equal treatment for all contestants and promote credible leadership. However, experience has shown that despite multiple electoral reforms, these EMBs—particularly INEC—have not been truly independent, often functioning as extensions of the executive or ruling party, resulting in widespread electoral malpractice and loss of public trust (Udu, 2019). When electoral bodies lack autonomy, democracy becomes vulnerable, stakeholder confidence diminishes, and electoral credibility is fundamentally undermined.

Research Problem

The credibility of elections remains a fundamental concern in Nigeria's democratic process. Although the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was established to conduct free, fair, and transparent elections, repeated experiences since 1999 suggest otherwise. Electoral processes have often been marred by irregularities, manipulation, and elite interference, raising doubts about INEC's autonomy and neutrality. Despite the legal and institutional reforms encapsulated in the 2010 and 2022 Electoral Acts, the Commission continues to operate under strong political and executive influence, limiting its effectiveness as an independent body. This persistent interference from political godfathers, the ruling elite, and state institutions such as the judiciary and security agencies undermines public confidence and compromises the sanctity of the ballot. While previous studies have examined election rigging and institutional failure broadly, limited attention has been paid to the interrelationship between INEC's institutional independence and the elite-driven manipulation that determines electoral outcomes. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by interrogating how INEC's operational independence—or lack thereof—affects electoral credibility and the actual deciders of Nigeria's elections.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify and analyze the key actors or forces that ultimately determine electoral outcomes in Nigeria despite the formal existence of democratic institutions.

2. To assess how elite manipulation and institutional weaknesses within INEC, the judiciary, and security agencies affect public trust in the electoral process.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, combining descriptive and analytical methods to provide both empirical and theoretical insights. The research design is primarily descriptive and empirical, relying on data collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Population and Sampling

The study population comprises eligible voters, INEC officials, members of political parties, civil society organizations, election observers, and legal practitioners involved in Nigeria's electoral processes. The total population is assumed to be large; hence, a representative sample is determined using Taro Yamane's (1967) formula for sample size determination. Based on an estimated target population of 1,200 respondents drawn from INEC offices, political parties, and civil society groups across the North-Central geopolitical zone, the sample size is approximately 300 respondents.

Sampling Technique

A multistage sampling technique will be employed. The first stage involves the purposive selection of three states from the North-Central zone—Benue, Kogi, and Niger—based on their electoral competitiveness and history of irregularities. The second stage involves stratified random sampling to select respondents from key stakeholder groups (INEC officials, voters, and observers).

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data will be collected using structured questionnaires and interviews, while secondary data will be obtained from INEC reports, electoral laws, academic publications, and media archives. Data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency tables and percentages) and qualitative content analysis to interpret patterns of electoral credibility and institutional influence.

Review of Related Literature

Elections

According to Lopez-Pintor (2000), one of the most critical ways elections can attain legitimacy is through the establishment of credible and independent election management institutions. Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) that are autonomous, impartial, and professional are essential for the conduct of free and fair elections, particularly in new democracies. Wall et al. (2006) caution that EMBs influenced by partisanship or excessive political interference lose public confidence, leading citizens to question the fairness of elections. Similarly, Kerevel (2009) argues that a lack of professionalism or perceived bias in election administration undermines trust in electoral results and may lead to voter apathy or public protest, as citizens doubt the accuracy of vote counting and the integrity of the process.

Elections remain the heartbeat of every democratic system and one of the most pervasive political institutions globally. As Rose and Mossawir (1967) note, voting represents the most widespread act of political participation undertaken by citizens in most nations. Jinadu (2005) further explains that elections serve as an institutional and psychological process that enables citizens to express their political preferences in an organized and routine manner. In this sense, Nohlen (1996) posits that the concept of elections lies at the core of liberal democracy, making it impossible to separate democratic practice from electoral processes. Similarly, Lindbergh (2004) emphasizes that all modern conceptions of representative democracy view

elections as the primary mechanism for selecting political decision-makers.

Ojo (2007) defines elections as the process of choosing individuals for specific positions through voting, distinguishing between direct and indirect elections. Direct elections allow citizens to vote directly for their preferred candidates, a method widely used in democratic societies. Conversely, indirect elections involve electing intermediaries who subsequently choose representatives, as described by Kapur and Vaishnav (2006).

Elections symbolize sovereignty and legitimacy in governance, serving as mechanisms through which citizens retain the power to hire and fire political leaders (Laakso, 2007). Iyayi (2005) describes elections as peaceful avenues for competing groups within the state to assert and negotiate power. They institutionalize democratic succession, providing a framework for political stability and leadership accountability (Hughes &Omotola, 2009). However, as Chiroro (2005) and Ojo (2007) caution, democracy should not be reduced merely to electoral rituals, even though elections remain the "heart of democratic order." Bratton (1998) concludes that while elections alone do not constitute democracy, they are indispensable for establishing democratic governments and achieving broader democratic consolidation.

Electoral Credibility

The central issue explored in this paper concerns the question of when elections can be objectively described as free, fair, and credible. According to Goodwin-Gill (2006), determining this is inherently difficult, particularly in polarized and fragile states such as Nigeria, where the concept of "free and fair" is often interpreted subjectively depending on the observer's political position. Despite this challenge, several international principles provide objective frameworks for assessing electoral credibility. For instance, Article 21 of the 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* asserts that every citizen has the right to participate in the government of their country, emphasizing that elections must reflect the will of the people. However, while the ideal is uncontested, the methods for measuring such credibility remain contentious.

To address this, Goodwin-Gill (2006) proposed ten broad criteria for assessing free and fair elections: (1) electoral law and system, (2) constituency delimitation, (3) election management, (4) the right to vote, (5) voter registration, (6) civic education and voter information, (7) candidates, political parties, and campaign funding, (8) electoral campaigns and media access, (9) balloting, monitoring, and result collation, and (10) complaints and dispute resolution. Similarly, the United States Mission to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (as cited in Adibe, 2019) defines free and fair elections as those characterized not only by transparent and well-managed polling but also by the presence of a vibrant civil society, independent political parties, a free press, and an impartial judiciary.

Adibe (2019) emphasizes that an election's freedom and fairness should not be judged solely by what transpires on Election Day, as manipulation can occur long before ballots are cast. However, he notes that Goodwin-Gill's and the U.S. Mission's indices assume objective measurability—an assumption that fails to hold in deeply polarized societies like Nigeria. Ethnic, religious, and regional divisions often distort institutional processes and citizens' perceptions of fairness. Consequently, even well-designed electoral laws and systems are filtered through these societal cleavages, undermining uniform benchmarks for credibility.

Adibe further argues that achieving consensus on what constitutes free and fair elections in Nigeria is unlikely given its history of electoral irregularities and weak institutional independence. In such fragile contexts, the universal standards espoused by Western democracies become subjective when

applied locally. Therefore, this paper contends that beyond institutional reform, Nigeria's electoral credibility could be enhanced through the incorporation of ethical and moral values—particularly Christian principles such as justice, honesty, and accountability—which can serve as guiding frameworks for electoral conduct and civic responsibility.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Elite Theory and Liberal Democratic Theory, both of which provide critical perspectives for understanding electoral credibility and institutional behavior in Nigeria's democratic process. These theories illuminate how the control of political power and the structure of democratic institutions influence electoral outcomes and determine whether elections genuinely reflect the will of the people.

Elite Theory

Elite theory, as developed by classical thinkers such as Vilfredo Pareto (1935), Gaetano Mosca (1939), and later expanded by C. Wright Mills (1956), postulates that in every society, power is ultimately concentrated in the hands of a small, cohesive group the elite who control political, economic, and military resources. According to this theory, democratic institutions, though ostensibly created to serve the masses, are often manipulated to perpetuate the dominance of the ruling elite. Mills (1956) describes this phenomenon as the "power elite," where a small network of political and economic actors influence key state decisions under the guise of democratic governance.

Applied to the Nigerian context, elite theory explains how a small circle of political godfathers, party leaders, and state officials dominate the electoral process. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing INEC's independence, political elites exert undue influence over its operations through appointment powers, funding mechanisms, and coercive control. This influence manifests in the manipulation of voter registration, vote buying, result falsification, and judicial interference all aimed at protecting elite interests rather than reflecting the electorate's genuine choice. As Ake (1996) observes, African democracies often evolve into "elite democracies" where elections serve to legitimize elite domination rather than empower citizens. Thus, INEC's structural dependence on the executive arm and vulnerability to political interference can be understood as a product of elite control over democratic institutions.

Elite theory, therefore, provides a lens for analyzing how Nigeria's ruling class determines electoral outcomes. The theory posits that even when procedural democracy exists—through regular elections, voter registration, and party competition—the real decision-making power lies with those who control the levers of the state and its institutions. This aligns with the study's argument that INEC, rather than being a neutral arbiter, often functions within the orbit of elite manipulation, making electoral credibility largely dependent on the interests and bargains of the ruling class.

However, the Nigerian experience reveals a significant divergence from these ideals. The prevalence of vote buying, elite interference, and institutional capture undermines the liberal democratic vision of representative governance. As Diamond (2008) notes, when electoral processes lose integrity, citizens become disillusioned, participation declines, and democracy risks regression into authoritarian tendencies. Thus, liberal democratic theory serves as both a framework for evaluating electoral performance and a benchmark for measuring INEC's adherence to democratic norms.

Synthetically, elite theory provides a comprehensive analytical foundation for this study. As it exposes the practical realities that hinder their realization in Nigeria. Together,

these theories explain the paradox of Nigerian elections: the coexistence of democratic institutions and practices with undemocratic outcomes. In essence, the credibility of Nigeria's elections cannot be fully understood without recognizing the persistent influence of elite power structures operating within ostensibly and INEC's ability or inability to deliver credible elections is thus a reflection of the tension between democratic ideals and elite domination. Therefore, this theoretical synthesis underscores the need for institutional reforms that promote independence, transparency, and accountability as essential preconditions for restoring electoral credibility and democratic consolidation in Nigeria

Elections in Nigeria

The process of choosing representatives in an organized manner at a particular period has been part of Nigerian democracy since 1999. The country has witnessed a four-year selection process whereby citizens can choose candidates they feel will protect their interests. The selection platform, which INEC permits, is done through registered and recognized political parties. Election has gradually formed part of the nation's political history. The return of Nigeria to democracy in 1999, after many years of autocratic governance, was with much hope and positive expectation from its citizens. The people hoped that after long exclusion from government affairs, a period of an 'all-inclusive' government was heralded. This governance style provides an opportunity for interested citizens, meeting the age requirement, to vote and to be voted for at all levels of government: federal, state, and local government. Elections are vital in democracy because the people have the ultimate say in governance.

However, elections since 1999 have brought various ignominious reactions. Elections in the nation have been marred with irregularities and malpractices. This has become a common phenomenon. The 2003 and 2007 general elections demonstrated a high level of election irregularities perpetuated by the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party. Intrigues and weapons such as thugs, money, underage voters, inflation of registered voters, and votes cast, among other vices, determined the results that were present by INEC in those election years. Again, the 2015 to 2023 elections showed a turn of events. Some civil society groups got involved in the pre- election activities to check future election fraud and malpractice. For instance, the Presidential Committee on Electoral Reform (PCER), led by Justice M. Uwais, received suggestions from these groups. This helped the Federal Government re-organize the Independent National Electoral Commission, making it fully independent (Aderonmu, 2013). Other efforts made by the government included educating voters, sensitizing the citizens, creating awareness among them of the need to perform their civic duty to society, and registering voters for citizens who were up to the constitutional voting age of 18.

Security agents from various law enforcement agencies to be used in the elections exercise, the Nigeria Police Force, Civil Defence Corp, EFCC, ICPC, etc., were trained in the duties they were expected to render during the polls. All these and the final turnout during the 2015, 2019 and 2023 general elections made international observers rate the 2011 general elections as the 'most open, transparent, and credible in Nigeria's democratic history (Election Observers Mission, 2023). The agitation for a change in government, particularly changing the ruling party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP), turned the tide in the polity in the 2015 General Elections. However, notable improvement was recorded in the pre-election preparations with the introduction of card readers by INEC to help detect fake voters' cards during the polls. Despite this, irregularities were noted, especially in the inflation of votes cast in parts of the country. This was majorly prevalent in the northern

region. Here, the electoral umpire was accused of accepting results that clearly showed that the number of votes cast exceeded the number of accredited votes.

Sadly, these allegations did not hold water' at that time because many Nigerians were clamoring for a change in the ruling party, which they perceived was no longer capable of stirring the boat of governance in the right direction. Secondly, the 2015 election was held amidst tension between southern and northern Nigeria. Here, the North had decried marginalization and felt power should shift to the North. This created regional, ethnic, and, to some extent, religious fractures in the 2015 election (Orji, 2015). For the first time in the history of Nigeria's democracy, the results of the 2015 presidential elections declared the opposition party's candidate, All Progressive Congress (APC), as the winner. In 2019, the seeming improvement witnessed in the conduct of the 2015 election was eroded. The commission battled with many administrative inadequacies, which it only admitted were present once it had to postpone the Presidential and Senatorial election, which was earlier scheduled to be held on the 16th of February 2019 to the 23rd of February 2019. The change in dates did not bring the required positive impact on the conduct of the elections that the Commission promised. The postponement was allegedly engineered by the ruling political class – although with no substantial proof (Onapajo& Babalola, 2020). All these indicate that the Independent National Electoral Commission needs to re-strategize to conduct credible elections in the future.

Problems Militating against Credible Election in Nigeria

Serious doubts persist about Nigeria's capacity and political will to conduct free, fair, and peaceful elections. Since independence in 1960, electoral processes have been plagued by violence, fraud, and corruption, suggesting a deeply entrenched culture of impunity among the political elite. The International Crisis Group (ICG, 2007) described the 2007 general elections as an "undemocratic charade," highlighting widespread irregularities, intimidation, and institutional compromise. Interrogating this assessment reveals that Nigeria's electoral crisis goes beyond administrative lapses; it reflects systemic institutional weakness where agencies like the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and security operatives often serve partisan interests rather than national integrity. Freedom House (2007) similarly, observed that these elections were the worst since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999. This assertion underscores the degenerating quality of Nigeria's democratic experience, where the ritual of voting seldom translates into genuine representation. However, this view also invites reflection on whether international standards sufficiently consider Nigeria's socio-political peculiarities, such as ethno-religious divides and economic deprivation, which shape political behavior. Building on these perspectives, Egwuch (2020) argues that none of Nigeria's elections since independence has met international credibility standards. This position, though arguably sweeping, captures the enduring erosion of public trust in electoral institutions and the growing disillusionment of Nigerians about democracy's viability a crisis that subsequent discussions must address.

Problems of Voters Empty

While Ojo (2009) rightly identifies the electorate as the most crucial actors in the electoral process, his classification of Nigerian voters, though insightful, underplays the deeper socio-psychological and structural factors shaping voter behavior. Ojo's four categories non-registrants, non-collectors of voter cards, passive voters, and active voters explain voter apathy descriptively, but do not sufficiently interrogate why these behaviors persist despite civic awareness efforts. My

perspective moves beyond categorization to interrogate the systemic alienation of citizens from the state as the root cause of electoral disengagement. Many Nigerians, particularly the youth, perceive elections as elite rituals where outcomes are predetermined; thus, non-participation becomes a form of passive resistance rather than indifference. The Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) record of over twelve million uncollected Permanent Voter Cards by 2018 illustrates not only apathy but also a trust deficit between citizens and institutions. Instead of viewing this as mere negligence, it should be interpreted as a symbolic protest against a political process that rarely translates votes into meaningful governance outcomes.

Similarly, those who collect PVCs but abstain from voting are not always apathetic but rational actors responding to perceived futility. The failure of successive governments to deliver on campaign promises reinforces this disillusionment. As such, restoring participation requires not just voter education but institutional credibility visible justice in electoral disputes, consistent performance accountability, and community-based political socialization. Furthermore, Ojo's treatment of vote buying as a moral lapse among the electorate overlooks its economic dimension. In contexts of widespread poverty, transactional voting becomes a survival strategy rather than mere greed. Addressing this demands not only electoral reforms but also socio-economic empowerment. In essence, voter apathy in Nigeria is less a behavioral failure of citizens and more a reflection of a broken social contract one that requires both moral and structural reconstruction to revive trust in democracy.

The Nigerian Electoral Commissions

Most Nigerians believe that electoral commissions are central to the problems associated with the conduct of elections in Nigeria. For example, the results of the 1999 elections were seen to have been pre- arranged with INEC so as to make the electoral process and results legitimate. Again INEC was seen as part and parcel of the enormous fraud that characterised the 2003 and 2004 elections (Iyayi, 2006). There have been instances when the election tribunals set up to adjudicate on the conduct of some elections had established that INEC was partisan, but the full weight of the law was never brought on those INEC officials (Olutola, 2009). Lack of punishment, of course, results in impunity. Elections are conducted with billions of naira, and with frequent nullifications and high turnover of results, billions of naira go down the drain as yet another huge amount of money is budgeted for yet another re-run. Nobody has been prosecuted for such huge waste of the country's resources. Overall, a lot of Nigerians don't see the successive electoral commissions in the country as independent umpires and this in turn, affect their perception of the credibility of Nigerian elections.

Poor Technological Management

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) was introduced to ascertain valid voter accreditation and to ensure the online transmission of results directly from the polling unit to be uploaded to the INEC website. At least, this was the public's understanding when the machine was introduced. However, after the presidential and senatorial elections, it was discovered that the BVAS was configured only to record the number of registered voters and accredited voters. It didn't have the function of identifying the number of votes cast for each political party registered by the Commission. INEC instructed each polling unit staff member to snap the results sheets they recorded and upload them to the Commission's website. Unfortunately, many polling units in several areas complained of network issues when uploading the information and could not send the results. The electorates faulted this process as a deliberate

technological mishap of the Commission manipulated the entire electoral process.

Prospects for Future Elections in Nigeria

The 2015 down to 2023 general showed some improvement compared with previous elections the independent national electoral commission has conducted in Nigeria. Yet, more can be done to improve the commission's effectiveness and efficiency in the future.

Preparing for the election should be continuous, and we should not wait until the election. Events such as voters' registration, distribution of permanent voters' cards, training, and re- training of INEC staff/ad hoc staff should be ongoing in the use of advanced election technologies and voting and counting procedures at the polls. Furthermore, the commission needs to strengthen its security in protecting election materials, especially permanent voters' cards. This will aid in reducing such occurrences that took place in the South-Eastern part of the country.

Similarly, the recruitment of more security personnel in future elections is non-negotiable. They need to be trained and well-equipped to tackle any security issues that may arise before, during, and after the election.

INEC needs to be more transparent in its operations by organizing orientations and workshops. Civil societies and the media can achieve this, which will allow the public to understand its procedures clearly.

INEC needs to enforce campaign rules and regulations to curb the activities of miscreants during political party campaigns. This may help restore citizens' confidence and enhance voters' participation.

Discussion of Findings

This study set out to interrogate two central objectives: first, to identify and analyze the key actors or forces that ultimately determine electoral outcomes in Nigeria despite the formal existence of democratic institutions; and second, to assess how elite manipulation and institutional weaknesses within INEC, the judiciary, and security agencies affect public trust in the electoral process. The findings reveal that while elections are formally structured as instruments of democratic choice, in practice, Nigeria's electoral outcomes are largely the product of elite negotiation, institutional compromise, and systemic manipulation.

Addressing the first objective, the study establishes that electoral outcomes in Nigeria are seldom decided by the electorate—the supposed custodians of democracy but by a constellation of elite actors who capture and direct the process. The theoretical lens of elite theory proves instructive here. As Pareto (1935) and Mills (1956) suggest, democratic systems often become façades where political and economic elites determine outcomes while maintaining an appearance of popular participation. In the Nigerian context, this is reflected in the overwhelming influence of political godfathers, INEC officials, judicial actors, and security operatives who act as "deciders" rather than "referees" in the electoral contest. This finding aligns with Ake's (1996) notion of "elite democracy" in Africa where elections legitimize domination rather than empower citizens but diverges from his deterministic conclusion that institutional capture is inevitable. This study posits that institutional capture in Nigeria is not merely a structural reality but a reversible outcome of weak accountability systems and compromised political culture. In responding to the second objective, the study interrogates the interplay between elite manipulation and institutional weakness, particularly within INEC and its allied state institutions. The evidence shows that INEC's constitutional independence is undermined by executive control over appointments and funding, thereby compromising its neutrality. This corroborates Udu (2019), who argues that the structural dependence of Nigeria's EMBs on

the presidency erodes their autonomy. However, the current study extends this argument by situating institutional weakness not just in external interference but also in internal administrative complicity where officials within INEC collude with political actors to subvert transparency. This insight advances existing literature by identifying institutional duality as a core factor: INEC operates simultaneously as a bureaucratic institution and a political instrument, depending on the prevailing balance of elite interests.

Conceptually, these findings reveal that electoral credibility in Nigeria cannot be understood solely through procedural reforms or legislative changes. The theoretical implication is that democratization must be re-conceptualized beyond institutional architecture to encompass the moral and ethical reconstruction of public institutions. The integration of liberal democratic theory into the analysis underscores this point: democracy is sustained not by the frequency of elections but by the credibility of their administration and the integrity of their arbiters. The recurring cycle of manipulated elections, from 1999 through 2023, reflects what Diamond (2008) describes as "democratic regression" where the form of democracy survives but its substance decays.

Furthermore, the study's findings diverge from earlier studies such as Lopez-Pintor (2000) and Wall et al. (2006), which emphasize the centrality of institutional autonomy for credible elections. While acknowledging the validity of that claim, this research argues that autonomy alone is insufficient in the absence of societal legitimacy. The erosion of public trust in INEC, evident in low voter turnout and disillusionment, demonstrates that credibility must be socially constructed and maintained through transparency, accountability, and justice. Thus, the findings affirm that Nigeria's electoral outcomes remain elite-determined and institutionally compromised, but they also highlight a path forward: the restoration of institutional integrity and civic agency as dual pillars of electoral credibility. This study, therefore, contributes to scholarship by reframing Nigeria's electoral crisis not merely as a procedural failure but as a deeper contest between democratic ideals and entrenched elite domination—one that demands moral reorientation alongside institutional reform.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, it is clear that Nigeria's electoral credibility is undermined primarily by elite interference, institutional weakness, and technological lapses. To address these challenges, the study recommends, first, the strengthening of INEC's institutional and financial independence through constitutional amendments that guarantee non-interference from the executive arm of government. This autonomy should include transparent appointment procedures for INEC officials and secure funding directly from the Consolidated Revenue Fund. Second, the Commission should establish a permanent capacity-building framework for its staff and ad-hoc personnel, incorporating training on ethics, technology, and neutrality. Third, electoral technologies such as BVAS and the Result Viewing Portal must be upgraded, tested, and protected against manipulation. Fourth, the judiciary and security agencies must operate with neutrality, and electoral offences should be swiftly prosecuted through a functional Electoral Offences Tribunal to deter future violations. Lastly, civic education and grassroots political reorientation should be prioritized by both INEC and civil society organizations to rebuild public trust, promote active participation, and ensure that elections genuinely reflect the will of the people.

Conclusion

This study's findings reaffirm that the credibility of Nigeria's elections is largely

determined not by the electorate but by entrenched elite structures and compromised institutions. Conceptually, this exposes the paradox of Nigerian democracy where formal democratic processes coexist with informal networks of elite control. Theoretically, the findings validate elite theory, which posits that power is concentrated in the hands of a few who manipulate institutions for self-preservation, while simultaneously challenging its determinism by suggesting that such dominance can be mitigated through structural and moral reforms. Similarly, from the lens of liberal democratic theory, the study demonstrates that democracy's substance credibility, accountability, and transparency cannot thrive in the absence of institutional autonomy. These findings differ from earlier studies, such as Ake (1996) and Udu (2019), which primarily attribute electoral failure to structural and legal dependence. This paper advances the discourse by uncovering institutional duality the internal complicity of INEC and allied institutions in sustaining elite dominance. It also emphasizes that moral and ethical reconstruction must complement institutional reform. Thus, the paper concludes that credible elections in Nigeria require not only stronger laws and better technology but a conscious cultural shift toward integrity, justice, and civic responsibility as the foundation for genuine democratic consolidation.

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