



DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL INTEGRITY IN THE NIGERIAN 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS: AN ASSESSMENT.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the most profoundly complex factors that influenced the 2023 general election process and its outcome in Nigeria. Methodologically structured in qualitative method, it drew its data from secondary sources; textbooks, journals, internet, official INEC website and from over 26 Nigerian daily Newspapers. These were contently analyzed within the context of the subject matter under consideration. Findings reveal that despite the optimism generated by INEC's improved electoral technologies; Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System(BVAS) and INEC's Results Viewing Portal(IREV) which aimed at guaranteeing the transparency of electoral results, the 2023 general elections was held amid difficult environment characterized by wide spread insecurity and uncertain governmental policies, operational and logistics challenges, malfunctioning electoral technologies, violence and intimidation, electoral fraud, lack of transparency in communication and collation of results, inadequate infrastructure among others. From these findings the paper recommended the imperatives of strengthening the institution of INEC by making it truly independent and in this way, it can guarantee a fraud-free election which will be a reflection of the will of Nigerians. This will bolster democracy and foster a more stable future elections in the country.

KEYWORDS: Nigeria, Democracy, BVAS, 2023 General Elections, IREV, INEC.

INTRODUCTION

Nigerian researchers are engaged in the careful examination of the electoral procedures in Nigeria because of the ongoing difficulties in conducting peaceful, free, fair, and transparent elections, which are crucial for establishing and maintaining democracy. The fundamental aspect of democratic administration is preserving the integrity of the election process, which embodies the notion of equal citizenship through the "one person, one vote" concept as established in constitutional frameworks (Alemika, 2011).

However, implementing this principle relies on the fair, just, and reliable execution of elections. Regular, widely accepted, and highly respected elections are crucial for the progress of democracy, especially for governments that are moving towards democracy and aiming to strengthen their democratic institutions. The connection between the electoral process and democratic consolidation emphasizes how the equity and liberty of elections enhance the durability of democratic institutions (Huntington, 1991).

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The presence of unrestricted conditions and the absence of disputes during electoral processes are reliable indicators for exercising electoral liberties.

Democratic governance refers to a system in which eligible citizens in democratic countries possess the constitutional right to choose their leaders through fair and unbiased electoral processes. This establishes a social agreement between the governed population and those in positions of power. Voters impact the governance process by supporting or opposing political candidates in elections (Ifukor, 2010; Clapham, 1993). Democracy, according to Clapham (1993), involves a process that requires all parties involved to reach a consensus and establish agreements on how to handle political conflicts without resorting to increased violence, except in exceptional and controllable situations. Within this paradigm, rulers are held responsible to the governed by universally acknowledged processes that can be enforced in instances of failure to comply.

The widespread occurrence of electoral misconduct and the undermining of popular sovereignty have been persistent issues in Nigeria since gaining independence. These problems might be related to the characteristics of the state, which are commonly described as engaging in "politics of primitive wealth accumulation" in Africa (Luqman, 2009). A lack of consistency and effectiveness has characterised Nigeria's electoral history, as the electoral processes have consistently fallen short of the expectations of a democratic society since gaining independence. Violence, corruption, and fraudulent activities have marred electoral processes throughout the nation's political development, resulting in unsuccessful efforts to establish a stable democracy due to compromised voting procedures. The commercialisation of politics has worsened this scenario since election procedures have increasingly become arenas for conflict and competition (Odoziobodo, 2015).

Political elites share a large amount of blame for electoral failures, but the flaws inside electoral authorities have also played a major role in causing electoral anomalies. Previous electoral commissions in Nigeria have lacked independence from the executive branch and have failed to uphold impartiality, frequently aligning themselves closely with the current administrations in power. The electoral bodies

have demonstrated a deficiency in their autonomy, openness, fairness, and responsibility in their functioning, which has eroded the people's trust in the electoral procedure (Luqman, 2005). An analysis of Nigeria's electoral administration organisations from 1959 to the present uncovers a concerning trend of prejudice and incompetence in carrying out their responsibilities, thereby impacting the country's endeavours to develop a trustworthy and strong democratic system (Luqman, 2009). The military's involvement in Nigeria's political affairs exacerbated disruptions to the democratic process, highlighting the consequences of inadequate electoral supervision (Odoziobodo, 2015).

Nigeria has witnessed 10 general elections since obtaining independence in 1960. These elections took place in 1964, 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, and 2019. The elections in 1979, 1993, and 1999 marked the shift from military to civilian control, with civilian administrations subsequently overseeing electoral processes. Nevertheless, numerous civilian-administered elections were marred by credibility problems, as there were widespread beliefs of partiality and absence of impartiality, notably about the performance of electoral institutions, including FEDECO, NEC, NECON, and INEC. The 2023 elections received significant criticism from multiple election-monitoring organizations due to their inadequate execution, the lowest point in Nigeria's electoral history since gaining independence (Oronsaye, 2008).

Implementing innovative technology like the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV) and the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) for the 2023 elections was intended to improve transparency and accountability. Nevertheless, there were lingering doubts about these innovations' neutrality, objectivity, and effectiveness in guaranteeing a trustworthy democratic process. This article aims to examine the relationship between democracy and the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, specifically by assessing the efficacy of IREV and BVAS in aiding the electoral process and promoting democratic principles.

Overview of the 2023 Nigerian National Elections

The 2023 general elections are the seventh successive occurrence of this electoral event since democracy was restored in 1999. These elections signify 24 years where democratic governance has been consistently maintained,

making it the longest length of such governance in the history of Nigeria as well as the first nationwide election held in accordance with the new Electoral Act, which was passed into law by President

Buhari in February 2022. INEC employed two technological innovations to bolster the transparency and integrity of the voting procedure. As noted in Table 1, BVAS authenticates and validates voters, while the IREV is a nationwide voter calculation system utilised by the INEC.

Table 1: Electoral Statistical Information

Election Date	Figures
Presidential and National Assembly elections	February 25, 2023
Governorship and State Houses of Assembly elections	March 18, 2023
States	36 States and the Federal Capital Territory
Local Government Areas (LGAs)	774 LGAs
Total no. of Registered voters	93,469,008
Males	49,054,162 (52.5 percent)
Females	44,414,846 (47.5 percent)
Persons with disabilities	85,362 (data from the 2021–22 registration exercise)
Youth (aged 18–34) years	37,060,399 (39.65 percent)
Registration areas/wards	8,809
Polling units	176,846
No of Electoral Constituencies for the Available seats	
Presidential constituency (36 States and the FCT)	1
Governorship seats	28 States
Senatorial district seats	109
House of Representatives seats	360
State Houses of Assembly seats	993
Total	1,491
Political parties	18 registered political parties
Total no. of Candidates	15,309
Men	91.7 percent
Women	8.3 percent
Youth	28.6 percent
Campaign expenditure limit based on the type of position competed for	
Presidential candidates	5 billion naira (\$10,848,800 USD equivalent)
Governorship candidates	1 billion naira (\$2,169,760 USD equivalent)
Senate candidates	100 million naira (\$216,976 USD equivalent)
House of Representatives candidates	70 million naira (\$151,883 USD equivalent)
Houses of Assembly candidates	30 million naira (\$65,092 USD equivalent)

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into percentage was made by the Researchers).

The prelude to the 2023 general election in Nigeria was characterized by ambiguity and unpredictability. Their previous encounters primarily shaped the Nigerian voters' doubt regarding the effectiveness of their votes. This concept derives from perceptions of powerlessness in selecting their elected officials at several levels.

Nigeria, Africa's largest country in terms of GDP and population, experienced at least thirty years under military dictatorship following its independence in 1960. Since the inception of democracy in 1999, the country has had ten general elections within its Fourth Republic. Certain elections have exhibited irregularities, but others have been notably flawed. President Umar Musa Yar'Adua assumed power during the 2007 general election. Yar'Adua subsequently acknowledged that the election was not carried out in an impartial and transparent manner. As a result, he decided to give higher importance to improving the election process. The 2023 general election in Nigeria was characterized by intense competition, making it one of the "most intensely contested elections in history". In 2015, a considerable number of Nigerians viewed the election of President Muhammadu Buhari as an occasion to enhance the country's circumstances following a notable deterioration linked to the previous administration's perceived incompetence. The Buhari administration committed to tackling security issues, specifically, the intractable threat posed by Boko Haram and its splinter offshoot, Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP), in the northeastern part of the country (Aina, 2023). Other commitments that garnered the backing of Nigerians at that time included prioritising the economy and addressing corruption.

Although Nigeria has made significant progress in reducing Boko Haram and ISWAP in the past eight years, President Buhari's claim that the insurgency has been "technically vanquished" has encountered opposition from various opinion clusters, including policy professionals and opponents (Aina, 2023). The corruption fight is frequently perceived as being partial and motivated by political agendas. Furthermore, the country has demonstrated minimal progress in the economic domain over the past eight years, marked by a significant accumulation of debt and an unswerving inflationary surge. This has resulted in significant economic hardship for

Nigerians. According to a recent assessment by the National Bureau of Statistics, nearly 50% of the population is experiencing multidimensional poverty.

Furthermore, apart from failing to fulfil some commitments, the Buhari administration encountered further challenges. In the North-West region, the malevolent actions of armed bandits led to the fatalities of numerous individuals and forced a significant number of people to migrate. Indigenous People of Biafra have witnessed a surge in separatist movements in recent years, marked by the occurrence of violent crimes committed by their paramilitary force, the Eastern Security Network, as well as by Yoruba Nation militants. The government's handling of the EndSARS movement caused tensions between the Nigerian state and young individuals, who were demonstrating against police brutality that they perceived as largely targeting them. A more recent example relates to the timing of the poorly planned cashless policy imposed by the Central Bank of Nigeria. This approach not only caused a widespread lack of cash but also caused some harm to Nigeria's informal economy, negatively affecting small companies and households that depend on subsistence. Hence, the 2023 general election allowed Nigerians to choose a fresh group of political leaders.

The Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) provided guarantees before the elections, which included the implementation of sophisticated measures like the Bi-modal Voting Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal. These measures were intended to safeguard the credibility of the electoral process. The initial guarantees ignited the enthusiasm of novice voters, resulting in more than 9.5 million individuals enrolling to partake. In the lead-up to the general election, a noteworthy development was the sudden rise of a populist candidate, Peter Obi, from the Labour Party, along with his 'Obedient Movement.' This event marked a significant deviation from Nigeria's usual two-party electoral system.

INEC'S REQUIREMENT FOR IREV AND BVAS IN THE ELECTIONS.

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) is an electronic gadget designed to scan Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters' eligibility by analysing their fingerprints at a designated polling station.

The BVAS is a technological device utilised to authenticate voters' fingerprints and facial characteristics before casting their votes. The BVAS can be utilised to verify and authenticate a voter: by scanning the barcode or QR code on the voter's register, inputting the last six digits of the voter's identity number, or by entering the voter's last name. This process is carried out by the Assistant Presiding Officer (APO 1). Furthermore, the Z-pad will be replaced to promptly communicate the polling unit results to the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV) on election day. BVAS is the INEC Voter Enrollment Device (IVED) for voter registration. This tool has also eliminated the requirement for incident forms throughout the accreditation process on an election day.

INEC employed advanced technologies, such as BVAS (Biometric Voter Authentication System) and IREV (Integrated Results and Verification System), to improve the administration of the 2023 elections. The BVAS was employed for biometric voter authentication during the accreditation process and for digitally transmitting a photograph of polling unit-level outcomes to the IREV website at the end of election day. The utilisation of IREV to publish polling unit-level results was anticipated to augment electoral transparency during the 2019 elections significantly. However, the efficiency of these technologies depends on their administration, implementation on a nationwide scale, and the confidence of the populace in the systems (IRI/NDI report, 2023). INEC conducted trials of both methods in three non-standard elections but did not carry out a thorough nationwide stress test before the February elections.

After the purchase procedure was completed, the BVAS machines obtained for the 2023 elections underwent field testing at INEC state offices in January 2023. Yiaga-Africa citizen observers could see field testing in certain places, while the activity was not intended to be publicly disclosed (IRI/NDI report, 2023). INEC performed a public

simulation of the accreditation process on February 4. The results and accreditation data were transmitted to the IReV during this exercise using the BVAS devices. The experiment encompassed 436 polling units, constituting less than 0.3% of the total units nationwide, and experienced restricted public involvement.

ELECTION RESULTS

According to INEC's announcement on March 1, Bola Tinubu from the APC party obtained 8,794,726 votes, which accounts for 36.61% of the total votes. Atiku Abubakar from the PDP party earned 6,984,520 votes, representing 29.07% of the total votes. Peter Obi from the LP party ended in third place with 6,101,533 votes, making up 25.40% of the total votes. Rabiu Kwankwaso, a NNPP candidate, obtained 1,496,687 votes, representing 6.23 percent of the overall vote count. Of the total 93.5 million individuals who own registered for PVC cards, only 25 million individuals, accounting for 27 percent, participated in the voting process. YIAGA Africa (2023) stated that the presidential election results for Imo and Rivers states were inconsistent with their parallel vote counting.

The opposition parties, including the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), Labour Party (LP), and New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP), challenged the procedural integrity of the election results that resulted in Bola Tinubu being announced as the winner. PDP and LP are currently advancing their case to the Court of Appeal (COA). The Court of Appeal expeditiously granted the PDP and LP the right to obtain authenticated copies of INEC materials and technological data utilised in the elections held on February 25, on March 8. Furthermore, it enabled INEC to prepare its electoral technology for the upcoming March 18 elections. The LP and PDP alleged that INEC did not comply with court judgments in their favour, causing concerns about more judicial involvement. The PDP lodged an appeal with the Court of Appeal but subsequently retracted it on March 15, stating that INEC had commenced the provision of the necessary documents (Figure 1).

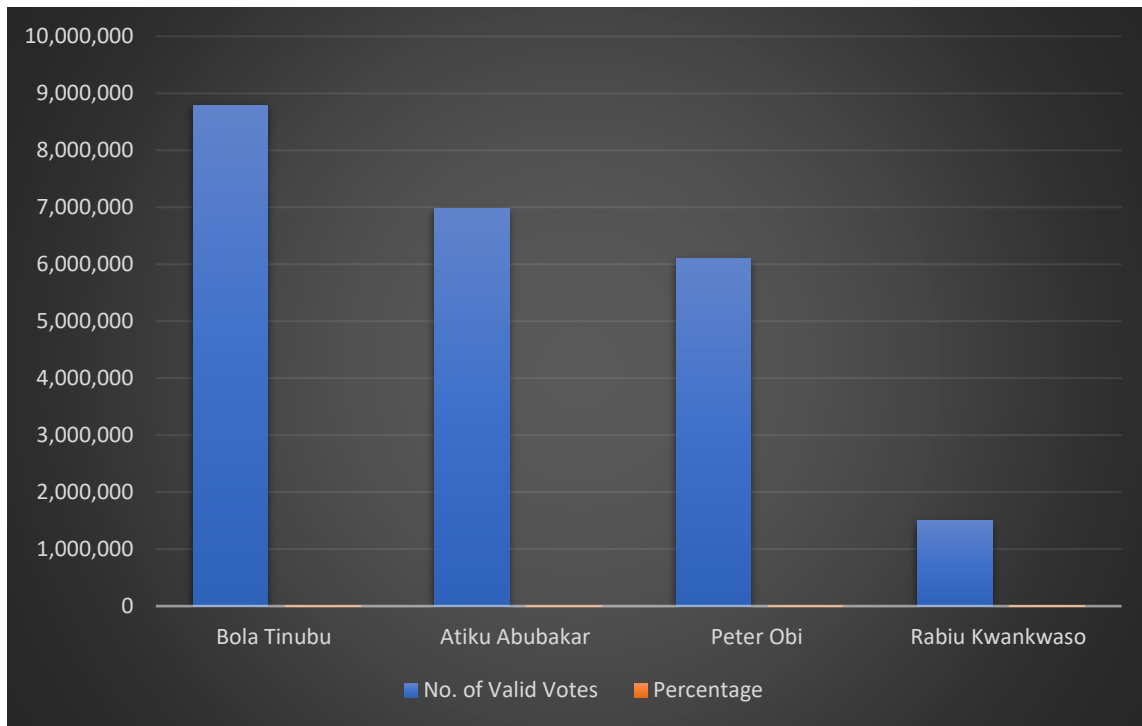


Figure 1: 2023 Presidential Election Results (as announced by INEC).

Source: BBC News Online (2023)

On March 16, the Labour Party criticized INEC for failing to adhere to their demands, despite being assured that the information would be transmitted. The Labour Party stated that the lack of adequate information impeded their ability to finalize the preparation of their petition. On February 25, the atmosphere following the election was predominantly tranquil, with political parties encouraging their supporters to maintain composure. Preceding the March 18 elections, there was an abrupt escalation in violence, encompassing more than twelve instances of physical attacks and kidnappings of candidates by criminals and unidentified armed individuals, resulting in multiple fatalities. The occurrence of violence shortly before and during Election Day appears to be intentionally targeted at diminishing voter participation.

INEC announced the names of the winners for 428 out of 469 National Assembly seats on March 7 through its Twitter account. Following the initial state-level ballots, there were unresolved outcomes in seven senatorial districts and 32 House of Representatives (HOR) seats. As a result, supplementary elections were held to determine the winners. Following the

assassination of the LP senatorial candidate in Enugu-East on February 22, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) decided to reschedule the elections in this district to coincide with the state-level polls. The Nigerian House of Representatives elections for the year 2023 were held on February 25, 2023. Voters employed the first-past-the-post electoral system to select representatives for the House of Representatives throughout all 360 federal constituencies. The last nationwide House elections for all districts occurred in 2019. The victors of this House election will begin their tenure in the 10th Nigerian National Assembly. Following the 2015 elections, the APC has consistently held a majority in the House of Representatives and further solidified its position in 2019. The official results indicated that the APC won a majority of 59 seats in the Senate and 176 members in the House of Representatives.

The PDP party won a total of 36 seats in the Senate and 118 seats in the House of Representatives. The LP party earned 8 seats in the Senate and 35 seats in the House of Representatives. The NNPP party secured 2 senatorial seats and 19 seats in the House of Representatives, as shown in Figure 2.

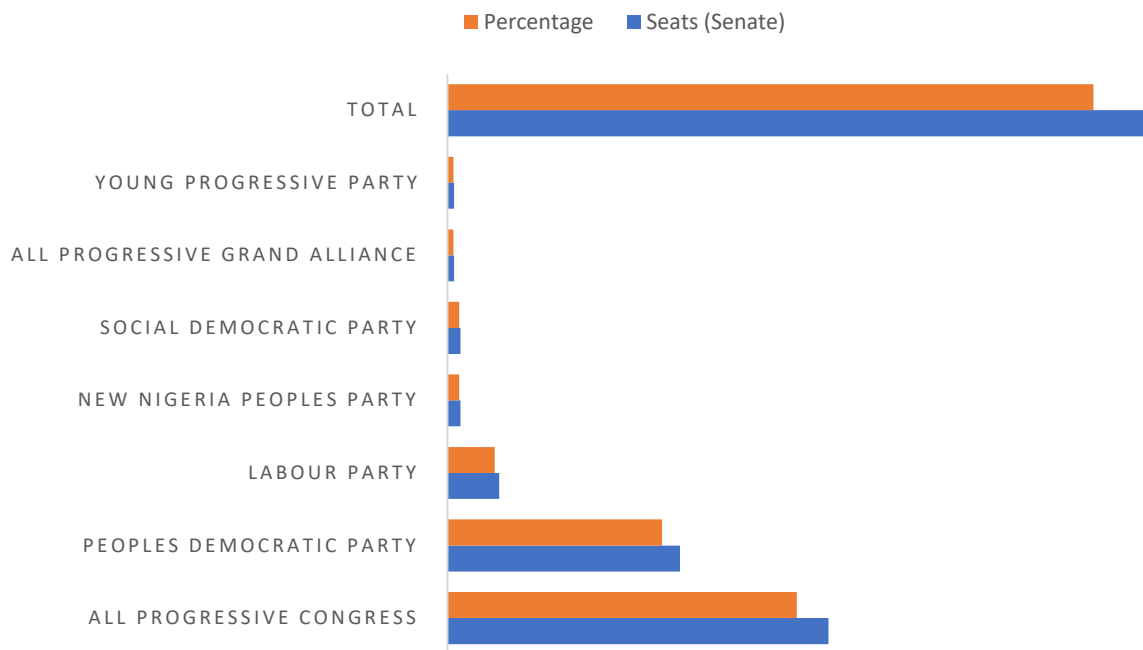


Figure 2: Result of 2023 National Assembly Elections (Senate and House of Representatives) as Declared by INEC.

Source: INEC (2023) (Computation into percentage was made by the Researchers).

Presently, the National Assembly is comprised of eight political parties. Female representation in the National Assembly since Nigeria's transition to

democracy in 1999 reached its lowest point, with only three senate seats and 14 House of Representatives seats being gained by women.

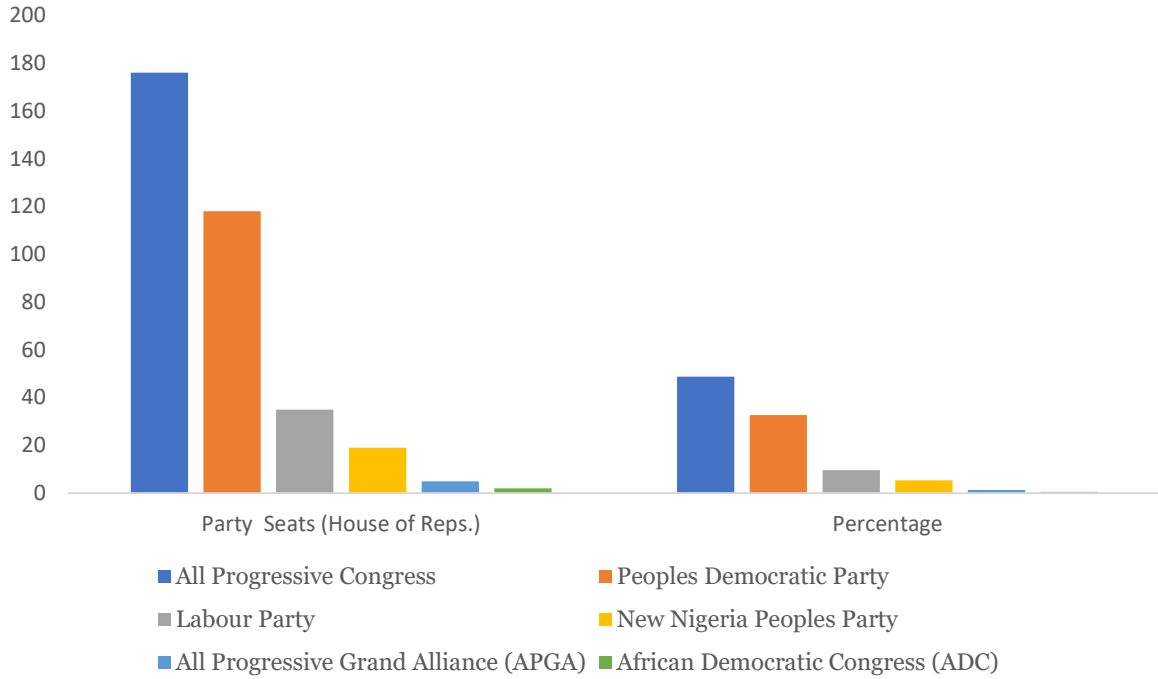


Figure 3: House of Representatives

The 2023 Nigerian gubernatorial elections were conducted to elect state governors in 28 of the 36 states in Nigeria. Due to legal challenges and court orders, the gubernatorial elections in Nigeria are held at different times than the regular cycle in eight states, namely Anambra, Bayelsa, Edo, Ekiti, Imo, Kogi, Ondo, and Osun. The scheduled dates for the elections in Kogi, Bayelsa, and Imo were in November 2023. Each state enforced a two-term limit for governors, which means that 18

incumbent governors are ineligible to run for re-election. A total of 18 political parties participated in the governor election throughout all 28 states, with a total of 416 people competing for the position. Among the 74 million individuals who were registered to vote and the 69 million that obtained Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) in 28 states, only 19.3 million voters actually took part in the gubernatorial elections across 23 states (Figure 4).

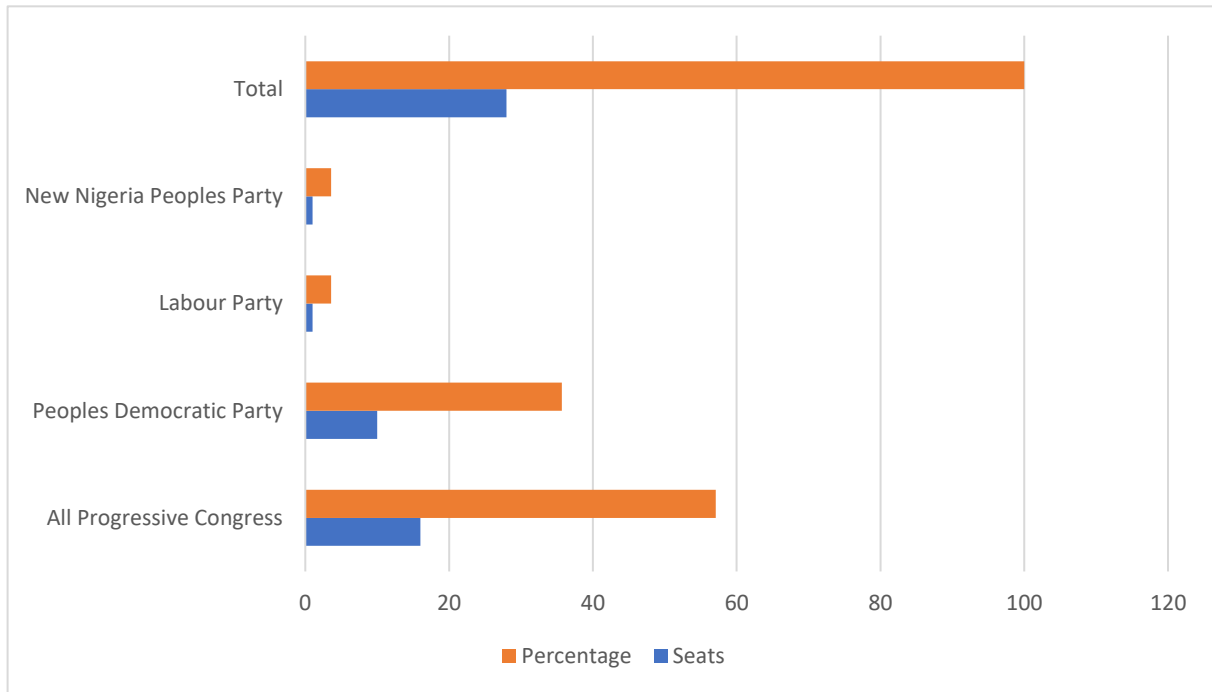


Figure 4: Result of 2023 Governorship Election (as announced by INEC).

Source: INEC, 2023 (Computation into percentage was made by the Researchers).

The March election results were marked by few alterations, as the ruling parties of the state predominantly retained their hold on governorships. The performance of the Independent National Electoral Commission in the federal elections triggered post-election disputes, with several candidates claiming that irregularities had impacted their elections. The March gubernatorial elections saw a greater prevalence of violence and vote-buying in comparison to the federal elections, namely in Lagos and Kano states.

Nigerians were content that the presidential election timetable was maintained without any last-minute postponement as in previous instances; nonetheless, some individuals voiced discontentment as voting stations commenced operations behind schedule across the entire country due to the delayed deployment of personnel and resources. The challenges were disproportionately dispersed across the country and had a more pronounced impact on voters in the southeastern and south-southern geographic

regions. In the 2023 elections, the discrepancies in delays between different regions were more prominent than in prior elections. The lack of transparency and information by INEC regarding the reasons and degree of these difficulties has undermined trust in the process, especially among regions and political parties who consider those areas as their strongholds. As a result of the delayed openings, numerous voters experienced prolonged delays in crowded conditions prior to casting their votes. The absence of a consistent and well-coordinated endeavour to extend the duration of voting hours resulted in heightened tensions caused by excessively long waiting times at polling sites.

The Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) simplified the process of verifying voters' identities. Nevertheless, observers noted sporadic issues with the devices' ability to accurately recognise fingerprints. According to polling officials, there were multiple occasions where the BVAS system encountered network issues and failed to transmit the results of all three electoral

contests to the polling unit. During the subsequent gubernatorial and state elections, citizen observers witnessed significant enhancements in the functioning of BVAS. Incidents of targeted violence also impacted the voting process, potentially infringing upon individuals' right to vote. The entire election was characterized by vote buying, violence and widespread intimidation in many parts of the country. These incidents included an attack on a collation facility in Lagos, as verified by civil society violence monitors, press accounts, and statements from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and security forces. The 2023 elections were significantly influenced by electoral violence and instability, particularly in the pre-election period. The prelude to the 2023 election witnessed a higher degree of violence compared to the corresponding timeframe in 2019. In the 2023 election cycle, there was a significant increase in the number of fatalities and instances of electoral violence throughout a greater number of local government areas (LGAs) than in the 2019 election cycle. The reported incidents included homicides and attempted murders of political candidates and party officials, physical attacks on supporters and gatherings of opposing parties, as well as assaults against INEC buildings, operations (such as voter registration events), and individuals.

On February 25, violent disruptions occurred during election proceedings in 22 states and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). Similarly, during the gubernatorial and state elections on March 18, violent interruptions were reported in 21 states. These incidents were significantly more severe than the disruptions observed during the 2019 elections. Several occurrences of violence appeared to be politically motivated and coordinated by politicians or party leaders. During multiple primary elections, election violence escalated as a result of internal conflicts among political parties, shifting political alliances, the proliferation of armed organizations, the emergence of new unofficial security forces, and a persistent failure to hold accountable those responsible for these actions. Although peace agreements and other peace-building initiatives have shown limited efficacy, the absence of consequences for perpetrators of violent actions continues to impede progress. Many Nigerians are worried that in the absence of significant reforms and more transparency, political actors may view

political violence as a viable and cost-effective strategy during other upcoming elections.

Female involvement in Nigerian politics has been steadily declining since 2011, and the 2023 elections in Africa's largest economy confirmed the expected adverse outcomes for women. Women in Nigeria's current national parliament hold a mere 3% of the seats in the Senate and 4% in the House of Representatives. This represents a significant 19% decline compared to the previous parliament (Elor, 2023). The 2022 primary elections revealed the challenges and hardships faced by female Nigerian candidates, which led to their lack of success in earlier elections. The primary election outcomes of several political parties in Nigeria highlight the persistent obstacles in attaining gender equality in fiercely contested political arenas. As per the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023), the country is in the bottom ten globally regarding women's representation in national parliaments. Although men and women have had nearly equal voter registration rates in past election cycles, the problem of representation persists. Out of the 15,000 candidates who took part in the 2023 elections for president, the National Assembly, governorships, and state legislatures at all levels of government, women accounted for just over 10%. In addition, most female candidates, specifically 90%, ran their campaigns representing tiny political parties. Except for rare instances where a minor party, like the Labour Party, brings about an unforeseen result, candidates from smaller parties have historically had limited chances of winning elections.

INEC is legally obligated to divulge elected candidates' identities and scores, with no specific schedule specified. INEC has not yet disclosed the methodology employed to determine the victors of the presidential and National Assembly elections, the voter turnout per state, the number of accredited voters, total votes cast, rejected ballots, votes garnered by each political party, and the polling units where elections were annulled, delayed, or not carried out. The lack of this information impedes the capacity to autonomously corroborate the outcome (IRI/NDI report, 2023). Leading up to the 2023 elections, there was a significant surge in the enrollment of young individuals in Nigeria, who also actively engaged in all aspects of the Nigerian electoral system. According to INEC, the age group of 18 to 34 accounted for 76.6% of the newly registered

voters for the 2023 general elections and 39.7% of the total registered voters in 2023. Reports from Yiaga Africa and IRI/NDI in 2023 indicate that young individuals actively participated in community organising, voter mobilisation, and educational initiatives targeting their peers and communities. The INEC Youth Ambassadors actively took part in the National Youth Summit and sent messages advocating for young individuals to abstain from trading their votes or participating in electoral violence prior to the elections. Additionally, almost 200,000 individuals from the National Youth Service Corps, who are young people, served as polling officials. As a result of several logistical challenges and voting delays, the polling officials, particularly the National Youth Service Corps, had to manage the vocal dissatisfaction and occasionally angry behaviour of voters. Despite their active participation, young individuals faced significant barriers while attempting to register for voting. INEC's decision not to extend the registration deadline beyond June 31, 2022, may have led to the exclusion of numerous young individuals who were unable to register at their current places due to the ASUU strike and student dislocation. Prior to the elections, academic sessions at universities and polytechnic institutions were temporarily halted in order to enable students to easily commute to their assigned voting venues. According to the IRI/NDI research, students constituted 27.8% of the registered voters in the 2023 elections. Despite their substantial participation, young individuals have been insufficiently represented as candidates for elected positions. Despite the reduction in the age requirement for political candidature as a result of the 'No Too Young to Run' campaign, the number of young candidates remains disproportionately low relative to the considerable number of young individuals who are registered to vote. In the most recent national and state elections, the proportion of young candidates declined to 28.6%, a reduction from 34% in 2019. A survey conducted by IRI/NDI in 2023 found that young women were greatly underrepresented, making up only 11 percent of young candidates (ages 25 to 35) for national and state elections.

Only 3.7 percent of candidates in the federal elections were under the age of 36. By contrast, a greater proportion of young individuals participated as candidates in state elections, with 12.2% competing for the roles of governor and

deputy governor, and 35.6% seeking for seats in state houses of assembly. According to the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room, there were a combined 51 young individuals who ran as candidates for either the role of governor or deputy governor in the state elections. The gubernatorial elections in Adamawa, Jigawa, and Ogun lacked young candidates, resulting in the underrepresentation of young people (Ugwu, 2022; Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023). Young individuals faced societal and structural barriers that impeded their nomination and candidature for elected offices, hence restricting their ability to participate as candidates. The primary constraints were negative assessments of their political leadership capabilities and misguided perceptions of their involvement in election-related aggression. Young individuals, owing to their limited economic resources, faced challenges in meeting the costs of campaign-related expenses, such as the exorbitant fees involved with acquiring nomination forms. A number of youthful candidates who were granted permission to participate were substituted in order to conform with the objectives of the political parties (Akhaine et al., 2023).

Despite facing problems, the youth in Nigeria exhibit a strong desire and motivation to engage in politics actively. According to Yiaga Africa (2023), there was a decline in the total count of young candidates, specifically those aged 18 to 35, in 2023. However, there was an increase in the number of Nigerians under 30 who participated in political campaigns. Ibrahim Mohamed, who achieved victory in the Bunza/Birnin Kebbi/Kaigo constituency in Kebbi State at the tender age of 27, is on track to become the youngest elected member of Nigeria's congress.

THE PROBLEM OF VOTE-BUYING IN THE 2023 ELECTION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY

Vote buying refers to the practice of political players utilizing money resources, tangible goods, or promises to influence voters into backing a particular candidate during an election. Politicians seeking re-election primarily target low-income citizens for vote-buying. Vote buying is the act of attempting to influence a voter's decision in an election by providing them with money, goods, or incentives just before voting commences. The prevalence of vote-buying in Nigeria is mostly ascribed to the increasing levels of poverty and hunger, which are widely seen as the primary

catalysts for this phenomenon. The Nigerian Tribune puts it poignantly thus; “there have been instances of political party representatives and agents bribing electorates with money to vote for their candidates in prior elections, which has raised concerns for both participants and election observers.” (The Nigerian Tribune, 2023). One scholar see the act as; “an illegitimate practice, caused by the poor economic condition of Nigerians, voters’ intimidation, and any attempt to persuade voters to support a particular candidate or party against the guidelines of Electoral Act 2022.” (Olorok, 2023) This process of buying and selling of votes is consistent with the continued malpractices of political parties. Lower-income earning individuals fall victim to vote-buying by political party, though the rich are equally not left out of the malpractices. (Daily Trust, 2023).

Perceptions of vote-buying vary based on historical and cultural contexts. Vote-buying is increasingly being recognized as more than a mere transaction between politicians who view it as an investment to maintain political authority. Voters perceive elections as limited opportunities for equality and justice, during which political leaders fulfil their fiscal obligations to sustain them. Vote-buying is perceived as a fusion of business transactions and social customs rather than a mere exchange of money. According to the Nigerian culture, guests are expected to demonstrate respect by offering a small gift. Giving gifts is a way to show respect to someone, indicating that the donor recognizes the recipient's worth. It is widely agreed upon that offering public benefits does not necessarily mean buying votes. There is an ongoing discussion about whether revenues must be limited to a certain group or if the group engaged must be substantial for an activity to be considered an attempt at vote-buying. Entman's theory posits that the media views vote-buying as having a broad impact on the community, as it influences the supply of public facilities such as roads and boreholes. The media depicts the notion of vote-buying:

“a voter is guilty where, before, or during an election, directly or indirectly, by his or herself, or by any other person, on his or her behalf, receives, agrees, or contracts for any money, gift, loan, or valuable consideration, office, place of employment, for his or herself, or any other person, for voting or agreeing to vote, or for

retaining or agreeing to refrain from voting at any such election.” (TheGuardian, 2023).

“while cash crunch arising from the redesigned naira notes may have reduced the use of cash by desperate politicians and their agents to buy votes, it can be seen from the aforementioned that other ingenious means of vote buying had been devised to induce voters.” (Ojo, 2023)

“but is vote buying the menace it has been made out to be? If we consider critically the evidence before us and the historical lessons from other countries in their democratic evolution, we may have to conclude, counterintuitively, that vote buying is a good thing and the evidence that our democratic process is maturing and that our elections are becoming freer and fairer.” (Akande, 2023)

“From the historical examples I have given as per presidential elections, it is logically impossible to argue that anyone has been elected president in the last 24 years solely through retail vote-buying.” (Kolawole, 2023).

“There are several factors in the mix when voters make their choices at the ballot. To hold money solely responsible is to ignore a body of evidence from our history.” (Kolawole, 2023).

“True, you can win the presidential ticket of your party by bribing delegates. The numbers are manageable. But I insist that during presidential elections, the role of retail vote-buying is exaggerated. I admit you can induce the INEC and security officials to manipulate things for you — but you don't need the new naira for that.” (Kolawole, 2023).

This Day (2023) suggests that recognizing the commonly held belief that money often influences voting, President Goodluck Jonathan would not have experienced defeat in the 2015 presidential election (Kolawole, 2023). The aforementioned study examined the practice of vote-buying and concluded that it does not possess the capacity to influence election outcomes or guarantee the triumph of a political leader. This technique elucidates the rationale behind the practice of vote-buying, as expounded upon in the literature review. Vote buying is a determinant that stimulates or impacts the decisions made by voters. The importance of "vote-buying" in presidential elections is significantly exaggerated. I cannot refute the fact that vote-buying plays a role, as doing so would be disingenuous. Certain voters base their selection on election day purely on money and material motives. However, what is

the exact quantity of them? (Kolawole, 2023). The analytical framework aims to elucidate vote-buying as an issue. Vote-buying is a prevalent issue linked to political clientelism, wherein politicians offer monetary incentives to voters before elections. Clientelist transactions can be utilised to limit the distribution of goods and social services to supporters of a certain political party or to influence indecisive voters to support them. Vote buying obstructs the government's endeavours to disperse resources through systematic planning and initiatives. Vote-buying and pro-poor government policies are inversely related. Political players may utilise clientelism as a means to obtain economic benefits. Political actors engaging in vote-buying diminish the accessibility of governmental initiatives aimed at assisting impoverished individuals. Vote-buying is prevalent in situations when political actors lack organisation and struggle to make long-term commitments to redistributive policies. The erosion of voters' confidence in campaign promises may prompt political leaders to escalate the practice of vote buying, thereby negatively impacting the allocation of resources after elections. Patronage, which involves trading jobs for votes, exemplifies clientelist distribution and obstructs the efficient provision of public goods. Clientelism emphasises that political leaders may prioritise clientelist distribution instead of implementing comprehensive government policies, and voters' evaluation of candidate performance is also influenced by clientelist distribution. Vote-buying diminishes the likelihood of the public holding political leaders accountable for acts of corruption. Moreover, the act of dispensing favours reduces the ability of the people to hold corrupt public authorities responsible. The media portrayed vote-buying as a significant issue in Nigeria, where political parties provide minor rewards to citizens in return for their votes, a practice that is illegal but prevalent in various forms throughout the country (Dapel, 2023).

It said the vote-trading was made possible due to increasing rates of poverty amid the current CBN monetary policies, limiting cash circulation. The prevailing economic hardship in the country – 133 million Nigerians were estimated to be multidimensionally poor.” (Raji, 2023) These two factors may not be a significant contributing factor in other countries. In a typical Nigerian home experiencing financial difficulties, the principle of

exigency results in compromised voting practices such as vote-buying. PUNCH (2023) stated with confidence that:

“The increasing rates of poverty and hunger that research has shown as malignant tumors that affect the credibility of Nigeria’s elections are violence and vote buying which I choose to call vote trading as it involves both buyers and sellers.” (Ojo, 2023)

Punch (2023) documented that several states in Nigeria have gained notoriety for their consistent neglect in fulfilling their obligations to remunerate employees, including salaries, gratuity, retirement funds, and allowances. This issue results in a strong inclination among government employees to trade votes for money. A significant number of employees and retirees face difficulties in carrying out their domestic responsibilities. A family consisting of four eligible voters, who possess a strong belief in their likelihood of receiving monetary compensation for casting their votes, would readily exchange their votes for financial gain without any hesitation. This Day (2023) also claimed that the inability of political figures to meet their campaign promises resulted in eligible voters demanding financial compensation prior to casting their votes in their favour. A significant number of people are ignorant and hold the false belief that they can solely derive advantages from government resources that are supplied by politicians solely during election periods when the politicians display humility and request votes. Excluding rural areas from infrastructure development compels communities to consider exchanging their votes in order to prevent what they perceive as 'double calamities' in the event that a new government disregards them. Leaders leverage their personal interests to get advantages from public resources, enabling them to exert influence over the political process in their own favour, whether as candidates or sponsors. Political actors embezzle public resources allocated for national development out of avarice and divert the resources for personal enrichment (Kolawole, 2023). Average voters are driven by greed to accept money, food, and material objects in return for their vote. The utilisation of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), an electronic apparatus for verifying the authenticity of Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), impeded any attempts to manipulate the election results. Therefore, politicians are involved in the act of purchasing votes. According to the study's

theoretical framework, the media depicted the causes of vote-buying as: The notion that voters decide their presidential election selections only on financial incentives, is not only erroneous but also subject to intense debate. Multiple factors influence voters. Many individuals cast their votes based on their loyalty to a political party, an individual, or an alliance, which I refer to as "political affinity." Others vote due to their ethnic, regional, or religious sentiments, which can be described as "primordial." Some individuals vote based on their ideological leanings, taking into account manifestos, personal character, and track record. Lastly, some vote solely for material gain, prioritising financial benefits and material resources. Undoubtedly, other factors might also be influential in a given situation." (Kolawole, 2023)

The statement above aims to demonstrate that the justification of vote-buying in the 2023 election is a subject of debate due to various factors that influence voters' choices, including as party allegiance, ethnoreligious feelings, pecuniary incentives, and candidates' track records. Several individuals require the funds and desire immediate returns from potential political millionaires. Its main driving force is predominantly influenced by the material context and present conditions, such as economic distress (Kolawole, 2023).

"The act of buying and selling votes is a matter of morality and attitude in Nigeria. This issue is fueled by insufficient education of voters and a lack of patriotism." "In one region of the country, a political party instructed voters to vote for themselves (naka sai naka or yours is yours), while another party urged them to vote for the ticket with two Muslim candidates." Renowned clerics vigorously promoted another candidate as the Church's preferred choice. As previously mentioned, several factors influenced the voting patterns, such as partisan and generational identities, and the contentious nature of urban politics. However, it is impossible to overlook the ethnic and religious basis of the votes for the top three candidates, provided one takes the time to look beyond the superficial aspects. While we should appreciate the heightened competition in our politics, we should also be concerned about the return to divisive fault lines based on ethnicity and religion. The slide is perilous. (Adio, 2023)

After examining the reasons behind the problem, Entman (1993) proposed that it is crucial to identify the individuals involved to determine the problem's main source. The participants can be categorised into two distinct groups: the political players, who are the providers, and the voters or electorates, who are the receivers. Vote-buying is a deliberate tactic employed by politicians to deceive the most vulnerable and impoverished voters. These voters are left with little alternative but to exchange their votes for money or favours from the candidate who offers the greatest bid, either before or during an election. As stated by Ojo (2023): "The most susceptible and destitute individuals were targeted by certain political parties that engaged in vote buying, offering as little as N500 or packs of noodles in certain locations. In Udenu, political parties vied for the support of our constituents by offering N2,000, a serving of jollof rice, Okpa, and a bottle of Coke."

Vote-buying has become increasingly prevalent due to the government's impoverishment of society, forcing people to resort to any means necessary to obtain resources for survival, even if it means compromising their integrity.

Vote-buying has formed a partnership due to political actors' confidence that there will consistently be voters willing to exchange their votes with money or other incentives. However, political actors are aware that there will consistently be individuals willing to purchase votes during elections, as it is the sole opportunity for them to exploit the desperation of these vote purchasers. It is imperative to educate the seller and buyer on the detrimental effects of the practice.

In a conventional marketplace, political players, party agents, and political parties operate as the purchasers of votes, while potential voters serve as the sellers. The asset being offered for sale is a vote, and the transaction can involve either money or non-financial items. In his statement, Ojo (2023) confirmed the accuracy of this claim.

In addition to receiving monetary or cash gifts, many individuals were swayed by presents such as food items, clothing materials, and unexpected acts of philanthropy from the political elite. "Governorship races showed a clear display of high spending on publicity and utilization of state resources. However, in some campaigns, spending was less apparent due to the low-profile and less conspicuous nature of the campaigns." Persistent cash scarcity was seen as limiting the

opportunity for vote purchasing, however other incentives for voters were noted. (PUNCH, 2023) The price or value of a vote is determined by the market forces of political players' eagerness to win in a community. Ndujihe (2023) provided support for this statement by stating that: "In previous times, politicians would purchase votes with varying amounts of money, such as ₦5,000, ₦10,000, or even ₦20,000, particularly when faced with strong opposition. Presently, circumstances have undergone a transformation. Due to the limited availability of Naira and the increasing levels of poverty, it is possible that votes may be purchased for ₦1000. You have witnessed the hardships people endure in order to sustain themselves and the challenges they face in obtaining financial resources. Some individuals may even exchange their votes for ₦200. According to the survey carried out by BusinessDay 30 per cent of individuals who have enrolled to vote in the election admitted that they would be willing to receive presents or special treatment from politicians and their associates. The report disclosed that 45 per cent of respondents are willing to accept monetary gifts, 21 per cent are open to receiving physical gifts, ten per cent are willing to accept promised employment or contracts, nine per cent are open to receiving food items, and two per cent are willing to accept clothing (BusinessDay, 2023). Similarly, Ani (2023) formulated the monetary policy, articulating that: "How could a government possibly prevent people from accessing their rightful incomes and still expect them to be immune to vote-trading during elections? When individuals experience economic deprivation, they become susceptible to many sorts of abuse. The CBN's disorganised approach to implementing its monetary policies will lead to an unprecedented level of vote-trading in the upcoming General Election." (Ani, 2023). Following the implementation of the monetary policy, numerous casualties occurred, and various public facilities, such as Commercial Banks, were extensively damaged. Anxious Nigerians organized themselves and initiated widespread civil unrest. The government, which claims to be preparing for calm and trustworthy elections, seems to be oblivious to the impending chaos. Although money and other valuable goods might have been employed to facilitate vote buying, political actors typically employed two primary methods for engaging in this practice. The initial

method was the cash ballot. It involved providing or pledging a specified sum of money to potential voters before they cast their votes at the polling station. The payment was made before the voting period and could be either close to the polling unit or at a considerable distance. These inducements were disbursed clandestinely or overtly. Occasionally, political players needed proof of possession of a voter's card and a guarantee that the person would support a particular party or candidate before providing incentives. This strategy relied on trust, commonly known as the pre-paid practice of vote buying. The cash vote the second method. It involves providing the voter with a predetermined sum of money or objects as a reward once the voter presents proof of voting for a particular party or candidate. There were techniques that voters employed to provide evidence of their support for a specific political party or candidate. Firstly, the voter showed their ballot paper to the party agents, providing evidence that they had voted for the specified party or candidate. Ojo (2023) examined the significant importance of party agents in the 2023 election, asserting that:

"In the North-West region, all seven states had observers who reported a rise in vote trading, mainly involving political party agents. Currency was utilized in conjunction with other commodities such as food products, wrappers, and a 'credit voucher,' which would then be exchanged for goods or services. In the Northeast region, political party operatives in Taraba engaged in queue infiltration, assuming the role of voters and exploiting the opportunity to provide monetary incentives in exchange for votes. There were reports in the Southeast region of Anambra State that agents from the APGA and LP parties were utilizing materials, phones, and other mementos to attract and persuade voters. In the South-South region, some states expressed the need for voters to provide evidence of their vote before receiving payment. It was claimed that party representatives were creating a list of their voters in Esan Central LGA, Edo State."

In certain areas of Edo and Benue states, votes were being exchanged for amounts ranging from ₦1,000 to ₦2,000. In many instances, products of equivalent value were used instead of cash due to the ongoing scarcity of currency. The region experienced many forms of vote buying, such as the distribution of fabric, toiletries, 'I-owe-you-

vouchers', and food products (Vanguard, 2023). The media depicted the participants as the fundamental source of the problem, stating that no politician had the ability to bribe 50 percent of Nigeria's 93 million registered voters. Vote buying tactics are effective when there is a smaller number of individuals to compensate and when politicians can verify, or persuade voters that they can verify, the candidate they voted for. The root cause of vote-buying is linked to an intense desire to secure victory in elections regardless of the ethical or legal implications. Politicians engage in vote-buying because they anticipate acquiring substantial riches and influence once they take office. Many politicians are equally concerned that if they refrain from engaging in vote-buying, their opponents would still do so and gain an advantage over them. As a result, this misunderstanding has turned vote-buying into a rivalry, especially among the prominent political factions. The print media stated the cause of vote-buying. According to the Daily Trust (2023), certain opportunistic politicians may attempt to create divisions among residents based on tribal and religious affiliations to benefit themselves without having contributed anything.

"Due to the close competition and lack of funds to secure support, politicians and their representatives are becoming increasingly desperate nationwide." (Business Day, 2023)

Several electoral polls conducted thus far suggest a closely contested race, and the urgent need for banknotes is intensifying desperation in the last days of campaigning..." (Source: Business Day, August 15).

The prevalence of poverty in Nigeria has been examined to investigate the underlying factors contributing to the practice of vote-buying. Nigeria is classified as one of the nations with impoverished populations. Rural areas and female-headed households are particularly affected by poverty, which increases the vulnerability of many individuals to engage in vote-selling in exchange for immediate necessities.

As reported by Daily Trust (2023):

"Poverty has had a detrimental effect on electoral behaviour in Nigeria, since it promotes the exchange of votes for money by the voters, along with other forms of misconduct."

Additionally, Business Day (2023) presented a statistical analysis of Nigeria's poverty rate and its influence on the election:

"According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), 84 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty, with an income of less than \$1.9 a day. Additionally, 133 million Nigerians, which is 63 percent of the country's population, are considered multidimensionally poor. Nigeria's young population is disproportionately affected by high unemployment rates, with 33.3 percent of the labour force unable to secure employment at the current salary level. The 2023 elections' credibility may be jeopardised by the poverty, hunger, and economic misery experienced by several Nigerians. Poverty is inherent in Nigeria. It lacks any association with gender, religion, or ethnicity." (Business Day, 2023)

Political actors often compromise law enforcement in order to secure their protection and loyalty. Vote-buying is occasionally carried out in the absence of law enforcement agents who are unprepared, unwilling, or too corrupted to prevent it.

Ndujihe (2023) asserted:

"In previous times, a supervisor overseeing certain polling stations within a Ward would have been allocated a sum of ₦500,000 or one million naira. He will use the funds to provide for agents representing other parties, security agents, and INEC officials, while we will oversee the entire process. Despite the extensive deployment of security personnel, including police, navy, and army, thugs were freely roaming around the local government, intimidating voters who were suspected of not supporting their preferred candidate. At the same time, party agents were actively seeking votes by offering cash incentives."

Hence, it is imperative for the government and pertinent agencies to conduct a thorough investigation and legal proceedings against all security officers involved in electoral misconduct, as well as apprehend and initiate legal action against those participating in electoral malfeasance. This will function as a deterrent not only to security agents but also to electoral officers.

Vote-buying is linked to the concept of security votes. Security votes are monthly appropriations provided to all 36 states in Nigeria with the purpose of ensuring the safety and protection of the state. However, the absence of legislative control, regulation, or independent audit for the funding enabled presidents and state governors to regard it as a reserved fund and personal

entitlement, potentially using it for purposes like vote-buying. The lack of openness and a comprehensive auditing system contributes to the issue of vote-buying.

According to The Cable (2023), due to the secretive nature of the budgeting process and operational mechanisms of security votes, which is a result of Nigeria's rentier state and weak democracy, there is less accountability to the public for justifying these expenses and subsequent increases. The confidentiality surrounding matters of national security and the purpose of security funds serve as a justification for state governors to avoid accusations of corruption and conceal their embezzlement of public funds.

The Nigerian states should thoroughly analyse the methods employed by comparable entities in established democracies when it comes to budgeting for emergency expenditures that are both transparent and lawful. The legislative body, which has been constitutionally authorised to supervise the executive branch, should reassess the allocation of funds known as the security vote. They should either eliminate it completely or allocate a reasonable portion (about 1% of the budget) for urgent security matters.

The previous analysis has shown that the absence of accountability for security votes leads to the practice of vote buying and the misuse of political authority. The allocation of security votes in Nigeria lacks any constitutional or statutory foundation. Security votes typically serve as a contingency fund within the Nigerian constitutional framework. This framework grants federal and state legislators the power to allocate a separate fund for anticipated or unforeseen expenses that are not specified in the annual budget. Security votes facilitate various sorts of corruption, such as vote-buying.

The framing approach highlights the underlying justification for engaging in vote-buying. After clearly defining the problem of vote-buying and identifying its fundamental causes, it is essential to provide a strong explanation that supports a theory until both the issue and its underlying reasons are well comprehended. According to Entman's (1993) approach, this component involves evaluating causal elements and their consequences. Since the reestablishment of civilian rule in Nigeria in 1999, the electoral arena has been marked by the significant impact of financial resources in politics, a fact that became

even more evident during the 2023 general election. Nigeria has struggled with the task of developing capable leadership. Politicians in a democratic context are required to exhibit reverence towards all individuals, irrespective of their social standing. Kolawole (2023) confirmed this point of view:

"Vote-buying poses a significant danger to our democracy," This situation is not recent, since it has been present for more than six decades. However, in order to cleanse our democratic system, we must address it with determination. The outcome of elections should never be determined by the individual who offers the largest sum of money, as this would undermine the fundamental principle of "free choice." Nevertheless, there is a prevalent misconception in Nigeria that just a single political party or candidate engages in the practice of purchasing votes. Opposition parties have been promoting this line of thinking since 1999. In the event of their victory in any election, they will assert that it was conducted in a manner that was both "free," meaning without any undue constraints or interference, "fair," implying impartiality and equal opportunities for all participants, and "credible," indicating that it was trustworthy and reliable. If the ruling party loses, they will accuse them of vote-buying or outright rigging.

Vote-buying refers to the process of commodifying the partisan interactions between political entities or a politician and the electorate. ThisDay (2023) attempts to rationalise the act of vote-buying in the context of the 2023 election.

stated:

"Voters are influenced by multiple factors. Many individuals cast their votes based on political sentiment, which includes loyalty to a party, an individual, or an alliance. Others vote based on primordial sentiments, such as ethnicity, region, or religion. Some voters are influenced by a politician's manifestos, personal character, and track record. Additionally, there are those who are motivated solely by material resources, specifically cash and food. Undoubtedly, several factors can also be influencing the situation."

The aforementioned assertions suggest that voters consider multiple variables before voting for particular politicians or political parties, and this decision is often influenced by their emotions. Analysis of voters' opinions revealed that the Nigeria's 2023 general election was affected by more than only the corrupt practice of vote-buying.

According to a report by ThisDay in 2023, Nigeria's elections since the restoration of democracy have been marked by personal biases, which have hindered the progress of Nigeria's democratic system. Akande (2023) asserted: "As a pragmatic Nigerian politician, how do you respond when you are no longer able to manipulate election outcomes? Do you initiate effective governance with the expectation that your performance will enhance your personal appeal and that of your political party? Given that it is not possible to manipulate the vote, you resort to purchasing the vote instead. The game has been won, the set has been won, and the match has been won."

Vote buying is a familiar occurrence in Nigeria's political process and is not exclusive to Nigeria. Vote-buying is a prevalent issue in many nations, which undermines the credibility of elections and has a detrimental impact on democratic governance. As stated by PUNCH (2023), vote trading, which involves influencing votes through payments or allurements, is not only a problem in Nigeria but also in many other developing world democracies. At least 165 countries have laws against this practice. Those engaged in vote-buying, including political actors and voters, defend their actions by claiming it is a widespread phenomenon globally, thus attempting to justify it morally. TheCable (2023) argued against the claim by stating:

"If the research indicated that vote buying was widespread in the United Kingdom and the United States during the previous century, why are these narratives no longer prevalent in contemporary times? By what means did these civilizations succeed in eliminating the practice? Susan Stokes provides the answer to the question: "What factors led to the decline of vote buying in Britain and the United States?" The explanation provided in this section centres on the transformations in the electorate, which were the consequences of industrialization and economic expansion. Multiple ethical assessments exist on the act of vote-buying in Nigeria's upcoming 2023 elections. At the forefront are new technology advancements and monetary measures, such as the Central Bank of Nigeria's (CBN) redesign of the ₦200, ₦500, and ₦1000 notes, which aimed to restrict the circulation of these currencies. Furthermore, there is a monetary restriction regulation of ₦500,000 and ₦5,000,000 each week for individuals and corporate entities. This has

caused many politicians to be vigilant and cautious. Additionally, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) has been implemented to verify Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and authenticate voters. This electronic device scans the fingerprints and photos of voters to ensure their eligibility to vote at a particular polling station. BIVAS was developed with the aim of minimising instances of manual manipulation of voting outcomes. These advances and policies have led politicians to recognise that attempting to manipulate elections by manual means is ineffective. The politicians have now employed a new strategy, which Vanguard (2023) has described as outrageous in Nigeria's democratic practice. The phenomenon of vote-buying in Nigeria is not of supernatural origin, but rather a socioeconomic issue that needs attention. The Daily Post (2023) discussed moral judgement in a reflective manner:

Merely relying on prayer would not resolve the issues faced by Nigeria. We rank among the most devout nations globally. If one engages in prayer without taking any corresponding action, the desired outcomes will not materialise as anticipated. According to Babajide (2023), God has provided us with everything necessary for our survival and self-governance. Each day, individuals are announcing the call to prayer and the muezzin signalling the start of each morning. However, the primary inquiry remains: what is the reason behind Nigeria's profound religiosity, fervent prayerfulness, and yet persistent poverty?" (Abati, 2023)

The implementation of CBN's monetary policies had the ability to decrease the occurrence of vote-buying throughout the electoral process in 2023. Vote-buying is a prevalent societal problem in Nigeria's electoral system, as politicians and political figures utilise money to influence voters' decisions. The act of purchasing votes has eroded the honesty and trustworthiness of Nigeria's electoral process, casting doubt on the validity of election outcomes. According to PUNCH (2023), on July 22nd, when individuals acquire desired results through purchasing, it undermines the legitimacy of the entire democratic process, and it is crucial for politicians to comprehend this. Purchasing votes undermines your legitimacy as it compromises the people's decision. Therefore, individuals are not exercising their autonomy when making that decision.

An analysis is conducted on the ethical assessment of vote-buying and its potential implications for good governance. Vote-buying impedes the public's ability to experience efficient governance, which is dependent on democratic values. A political system that earns the trust and support of the majority of citizens should be regarded as genuine. Legitimacy cultivates citizen endorsement and confidence in government actions and programmes. Ojo (2023) defines vote-buying as a harmful influence that damages the credibility of Nigeria's elections, comparable to violence. He also labels it as "vote trading" because it involves both buyers and sellers.

OBSTACLES IN GUARANTEEING THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF NIGERIA'S 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

Nigeria is in a precarious state. Indices that are accessible show the characteristics of a condition that did not succeed. There are pervasive conflicts, sentiments of marginalisation, political and criminal violence, lack of border control, escalating ethnic, religious, and cultural hostilities, feeble institutions, scarcity of food, inflation, unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and diminishing human development indicators such as infant and maternal mortality rates and literacy rates. The arduous conditions rendered the 2023 general election a pivotal event for the nation.

The independence of the Nigerian electoral organisation, INEC, and the revised Electoral Act have been the focus of ongoing discussions. Instances such as the incineration or pilfering of the commission's documents, deceptive personas on the electoral roll, and registrations of individuals below the legal age in certain areas have raised suspicions of cooperation. The 2022 Electoral Act incorporated novel elements, including the implementation of electronic result transmission from polling locations and the adoption of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System. These were specifically developed to deter cheating. Nevertheless, several political factions were believed to oppose its utilisation.

The political landscape in Nigeria was predominantly dominated by the People's Democratic Party until 2015, when possible third-party choices started to emerge. The party was the sole entity with enough power to ensure success in presidential elections. In 2015, the All Progressives Congress, a coalition of opposition parties, emerged victorious in the election, defeating the incumbent president, Goodluck

Jonathan. This signalled the commencement of an era in which two political parties wielded substantial sway in the state. The emergence of the Labour Party and the New Nigeria People's Party appears to have transformed the political terrain. Obi's campaign centred around anti-establishment rhetoric, enabling him to attract a substantial following of disenfranchised youth. Obi, the only Christian among the four primary candidates, garnered electoral backing from Christians who opposed the ruling APC's Muslim-Muslim ticket. Three polls have shown that he was leading in the campaign, however the accuracy of those surveys has been called into question. Kwankwaso, the founder of the Kwankwasiya movement, is widely regarded as a grassroots mobilizer. He enjoyed popularity among the general populace in the North, but was perceived to have minimal backing in the South.

Insecurity in Nigeria is multifaceted and defies simple categorization due to its diverse characteristics. The 2023 elections took place amidst substantial insecurity. By 2022, Nigeria experienced an unprecedented rise in insecurity arising from escalating banditry, Boko Haram, ISWAP expansion into the north-central, pastoralist-farmer conflicts, and the IPOB insurgency in the southern and eastern parts of Nigeria.

According to the 2023 IRI/NDI analysis, stakeholders recognised that in past Nigerian elections, insecurity was primarily limited to specific regions. Nigeria's national security has been undermined by pervasive corruption, Boko-Haram terrorism, killings perpetrated by Fulani herders, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, feeble institutions, and a detached governance elite. The issues were brought to light by the EndSARS protests in early October 2020. The pervasive sense of insecurity and fear is continuously impacting the whole population of Nigeria as they realise that the government is incapable of effectively guaranteeing their safety. The state security agents, including the police, state security agencies, military, immigration, and prison service, have exhibited inadequate performance in protecting life and property. The widespread insecurity in Nigeria impedes the feasibility of conducting lawful elections in certain areas.

According to John Campbell, corruption obstructs a nation's endeavours to create and enhance democracy and good governance (Punch Newspaper, July 7th, 2005).

This illustrates that democracy is unable to flourish in an unstable and unpredictable political climate. Corruption has greatly eroded the fundamental principles and essential pillars of democracy. Corruption is commonly perceived as the improper utilisation of public positions, resources, and authority for personal or self-serving gain. Dobel (1978) conceptualised corruption as the act of betraying public trust in order to acquire personal or collective benefits. Obayelu (2007) characterised it as the pursuit of wealth or influence through illicit means for personal gain, to the detriment of the public, or the misapplication of official authority for personal gains. Ogundiya (2010) asserted that the events in Nigeria following 1999 have demonstrated a conflict between antagonistic forces that have impacted Nigeria's progress towards democracy. Consequently, democracy is exceedingly delicate as a result of pervasive bureaucratic and political corruption, which contributes to a bleak future perspective. The pervasiveness of corruption in Nigeria has reached such a level that the average citizen now associates it with democracy. Political corruption results in recurring legitimacy crises, unstable party systems, institutional decay, persistent economic problems, elevated unemployment rates, and general democratic instability. Corruption in this nation includes the embezzlement of cash and assets through the illicit transfer of capital, the misallocation of public finances, the laundering of money, the trafficking of drugs and children, the illegal trade of weapons, bribery, the misuse of official power, and favouritism based on family connections. The corruption scandal in the oil business, totaling N1.7 trillion from 1999 to 2011, the N18 billion Police Pension Fund fraud, and the N450 billion money laundering case involving James Ibori in London represent only a small portion of the corruption problems in Nigeria. Finances play a crucial role in elections, particularly in Nigeria, where the poverty levels require financial support for citizens to engage in campaign activities. Vote-trading has emerged as a prominent feature of electoral processes.

In Nigeria, the excessive expenditure on election campaigns leads to an imbalanced competition that favours individuals who hold authority over the government and public assets. The waning influence of money in Nigerian politics has reduced the incentive for political parties to earn the trust of voters through issue-based campaigns

and party agendas that address the concerns of citizens. The act of buying votes is frequently observed before election day, even though there is a robust legal framework in place (IRI/NDI, 2023). Despite attempts to increase transparency in the voting system, it is likely that money still had a substantial impact on the next 2023 general elections.

The presence of diverse ethnic and religious groups in the country has significantly contributed to social and political instability. Recent sectarian conflicts and competing ethnic claims for the presidency highlight societal fragmentation along tribal and religious lines (Victor, 2002). Each ethnic group holds unique religious beliefs, customs, and ambitions, influencing their economic outcomes (Ojukwu, Mbah, and Maduekwe, 2019), complicating the formation of a collective national identity and hindering authentic democracy. Among the 18 presidential candidates, the four prominent were former vice president, Atiku Abubakar of the People's Democratic Party. Rabi'u Musa Kwankwaso, former governor of Kano State who ran under the platform of the New Nigeria People's Party. Bola Ahmed Tinubu, from the Yoruba ethnic group, stands for the All Progressive Congress. Peter Obi, an Igbo from the South-East, vies for the Labour Party. Since 1999, there's been an understanding of power rotation between North and South every eight years. Many from both regions advocate for a Southern successor to President Muhammadu Buhari. Some from the South-East argue for their turn in 2023, while certain North-Easterners support Atiku due to a perceived regional deficit in national leadership since the 1960s.

Religion, in conjunction with ethnicity and regionalism, has consistently played a crucial role in the mobilisation and instigation of war in Nigeria. Since 1999, there has been a conscious endeavour to avoid the president and vice president sharing the same religious affiliation. The Northern region is predominantly populated by Muslims, whereas the Southern region is predominantly populated by Christians. Bola Tinubu, a Yoruba Muslim, upset the balance by choosing Kashim Shettima, a Kanuri Muslim and former governor of Borno State, as his vice-presidential candidate. The ticket received strong criticism from various Nigerians and institutions, including the Christian Association of Nigeria.

Obi's campaign has received endorsement from Ohanaeze Ndigbo, a pan-Igbo socio-political movement, as well as prominent non-Igbo organisations and individuals, including former president Olusegun Obasanjo. There is a prevalent belief in the southeastern region that there exists a deliberate plot to hinder the Igbo community from obtaining significant political positions in the country, primarily because of their participation in the Civil War (1967–1971). This perspective has played a role in fostering the emergence of separatist groups. Although the political establishment in the area shows disinterest or lack of enthusiasm, the common people in the region idolise Obi for his courageous candidature.

Recently, numerous organisations have arranged presidential debates for prominent political candidates in the nation. Tinubu, lauded as a skillful tactician by his supporters, has effectively evaded these deliberations. After delivering a speech to a British audience in December 2022, he assigned the responsibility of answering most of the questions he got to his subordinates. Presidential debates exert minimal influence on the outcomes of presidential elections. Indeed, notable candidates frequently choose not to engage in certain or all of these debates. The absence of Tinubu gives rise to questions regarding his well-being and the several scandals associated with him. Since 1999, there has been a consistent decrease in the adoption of technology with each election cycle in an environment that lacks adequate infrastructure, resulting in visible degradation. The results were announced as people were waiting in queue. Theft and destruction of ballot boxes, as well as organised violence, became widespread under the authority of prominent individuals. Thus, INEC made the decision to employ technology in order to minimise deliberate and undesirable human interference in the system. This resulted in the development of BVAS, a programme specifically developed to guarantee a seamless and dependable procedure encompassing accreditation, voting, result gathering, and announcement. Billions of foreign dollars, including the Naira, were utilised for the development and procurement of the software, as well as the required hardware. INEC assured that the IReV and BVAS systems would effectively tackle all instances of election misconduct and associated shortcomings, as well as uncovering

corrupt politicians. Implementing BVAS (Ballot Verification and Authentication System) and IReV (Integrity of Results Verification) will effectively deter vote box theft, deliberate mis recording, manipulation of results, absence of result sheets, and falsification of election outcomes. The acclaimed pioneers were unable to exert influence as a result of the inflexible Nigerian system and political culture. The innovators have the discretion to selectively alter the trajectory of the game, either positively, negatively, or not at all, based on the favourable NASS findings. This is the reason why certain influential individuals experienced a sudden loss of their authority and impact. Unfortunately, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), supported by former President Muhammad Buhari, made lofty commitments but ultimately fell short of fulfilling them. They elevated and subsequently quashed individuals' ambitions and failed to comply with the election regulations. Chatham House stated that the presidential election did not conform to INEC's standards, namely on the immediate uploading of results. The NLC condemned the deliberate subversion of the people's decision by individuals, political parties, INEC, and security services. INEC might enhance transparency and enhance public confidence in the use of these technologies by permitting observation of all procedural elements and by openly disclosing comprehensive information regarding identified concerns and remedies prior to upcoming elections.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides a thorough analysis of the difficulties and deficiencies faced during the 2023 general elections in Nigeria, specifically highlighting the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the utilisation of technological advancements like IREV and BVAS. Although technological advancements have been implemented, public trust in INEC has decreased due to factors such as irregularities identified by the election petition tribunal and reported issues with the administration of the Permanent Voters Card (PVC) collection process. Despite the prevailing instability and logistical difficulties, INEC made laudable endeavours to tackle concerns including overcrowding at polling stations and ensuring transparency in the release of election results throughout the 2023 elections. Nevertheless, there were discrepancies in the transmission of election updates and the

dissemination of vital information, resulting in perplexity among those involved. The Yiaga Africa's Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT) uncovered cases of electoral fraud and discrepancies in the standard of elections in various regions of Nigeria. The IReV portal provided voters with access to polling station results, however, it did not comply with open election data standards and encountered technological difficulties such as login limitations and incomplete data uploads. Furthermore, the delay in INEC's distribution of detailed election results and disclosure of crucial information many months after the election has sparked issues regarding transparency and accountability.

Based on these discoveries, the study presents many suggestions for election reform in Nigeria. The measures encompassed in this list involve strengthening the responsibility and openness of INEC, enhancing security protocols to deter electoral violence, tackling the spread of false information on social media platforms, prosecuting individuals involved in election-related crimes, clarifying the constitutional standards for determining election victors, and offering extensive training and equitable remuneration to all those involved in the electoral process. In summary, this paper emphasises the significance of tackling the identified obstacles to enhance the trustworthiness and honesty of future electoral procedure in Nigeria.

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