



RESEARCH ARTICLE

ELECTORAL TRENDS AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION IN NIGERIA, 2015 – 2025: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This study is a critical analysis of the major elections and electoral processes in Nigeria from the inception of the fifth republic in 1999 till 2025. Many empirical studies have given credence to the fact that Nigeria election and electoral processes though sustainable have not translated to good governance which is the essence of democratic consolidation. The fundamental duty of any responsive government is to guarantee the safety and protection of life and properties of the citizens as well as provision of welfare of the citizens. Evidently, this has been elusive since the inception of the current republic in Nigeria. To establish the assertion, the study carried out an evaluation of the electoral trends in Nigeria using an analytical approach. David Easton's systems theory was adopted as theoretical framework of analysis, while relying on qualitative descriptive method of data analysis and the use of secondary sources of data collection, the study discovered among others that the fundamental challenges of democratic elections in Nigeria such as electoral violence, weak institutions, vote buying and commercialization of politics. This study therefore recommends among others that there is urgent need to strengthen the electoral institution through granting administrative and financial autonomy to INEC,

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1.0. INTRODUCTION

Elections are an essential part of democracy because they allow citizens to choose their leaders and influence governance. In Nigeria, elections have played a major role in shaping the country's democratic journey since the return of civilian rule in 1999. The period from 2015 to 2025 is particularly important because it witnessed significant political changes, including the defeat of an incumbent President, the consolidation of opposition power, and the rise of new political movements. This analysis examines the major elections in Nigeria between 2015 and 2025, focusing on their outcomes, challenges, and implications for democratic development.

Considering the broad nature of the study, focus is given to presidential elections for a detailed analysis of each phase of the elections. The study adopted descriptive design, and data were collected from secondary sources. The study is structured into three main sections in line with the three major general elections in Nigeria: 2015, 2019, and 2023 respectively. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations given.

2.0. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Conceptual Framework

Election and Electoral Systems

Jonari(2011) in Oluwojolu & Ake (2015), defines election as the process of choosing leaders in a democratic process where a legitimate change of government is constitutionally allowed. The import of this definition is that election is a fundamental element of constitutionalism, As noted in his analysis of a constitution, Aristotle (1963) asserted that every constitution deal with three major areas: the seat of government sovereignty; the relationship of the organs of government; and the methods by which government officials are recruited. The third component as stated herein is election which by this assertion is the methods by which leaders are chosen, or selected to govern. On this background, Mbah (2007) avers that election in representative democracy is the process by which the members of the community or organization choose one or more persons to exercise authority on their behalf.

The mechanism of election in a democracy is therefore intended to ensure that the government will exercise its powers with the consent of the governed. As a result, apart from the functions of recruiting politicians as personnel for the government, building governments, influencing policy, educating the voters by providing legitimacy to the authority of government, election act as the main source also for providing representation. The main reason for election therefore is to demonstrate popular support for the government. Election legitimizes the behind the scene decisions of the party machine (Mbah, 2007),

Elections are achieved through electoral systems. An electoral system according to Mbah (2007), denotes the method by which a voter is required to indicate his or her choice of a candidate or political party out of those contesting in the election, and to the votes obtained by a candidate or political party are translated into the allocation of seats or offices. Basically, there exist various electoral systems, but the major ones have been identified to include: Plurality systems and Majoritarianian systems which are classified into: Alternative Vote (AV), Second Ballot System (SBS) and Proportional Representatives (PR). Among the systems, Nigeria operates plurality system which is an electoral system in which the principle "first past the post" prevails.



Democracy and Democratic Consolidation

Democracy as a concept has been perceived from different prisms by scholars and statesmen. The concept may be regarded as a form of government, a way of life, or an attitude of the mind. (Abaneme, Mgbachi & Abaneme, 2024), In its simplistic and etymological conception, democracy connotes government by the people (Oyowe in Oyovbaile, 1987). Stretching this definition further, democracy therefore is government by the people fundamentally anchored on equal rights of the citizens. But since its difficult to determine the extent of equal rights of the citizens, Schumpeter (1943) asserts that democracy is a political method that is to say, a certain type of institutional arrangement for arriving at political, legislative, and administrative decisions. In the same vein, Olajuju(1970)defines democracy as the mechanisms for building , choosing and authorizing a government in response to the interests of the people of a country (Abaneme, Mgbachi & Abaneme,2024).

Democratic Consolidation described by Diamond (1999) as a fundamental concept is the process by which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate among its citizens that it is very unlikely to break down. It involves behavioral and institutional changes that normalize democratic politics and narrow the uncertainty about democracy's endurance. Consolidation requires elite commitment to democratic rules, effective performance by democratic institutions, and the development of civic culture that values participation, tolerance, and compromise. In agreement with Diamond, Juan J. Linz & Alfred Stepan maintain that democratic consolidation is a political situation in which democracy has become the only game in town (1996).

The Nigerian experiences of democracy had been questionable right from its inception. The ambitions of the Nigerian governments to attain substantive democracy has been marred by corruption, which was worsen by military regimes, executive lawlessness, general intolerance for due process and rule of law. In regards of the democratic situation in Nigeria, all citizens particularly the youths have been greatly disadvantaged, there has been a high poverty rate, illiteracy, unemployment, recklessness on the side of the helpless youths and so on (Ogwuche, Abaneme, & Nwaneri, 2023).

The fundamental duty of every government is to guarantee the security of life and properties of the citizens as well as ensure adequate provisions of social needs of the people. Abaneme and Ejiogu (2023) therefore aver that good governance which is the fulcrum upon which democracy revolves is the fundamental factor that incentivized massive participation of the people in government; a decisive condition for the legitimization of the government (Abaneme, Mgbachi & Abaneme, 2024). Nigeria has no doubt sustained its electoral process from 1999 to 2025 currently, but the question is, does it entail democratic consolidations? Unarguably when the process fails to produce responsive and accountable government, such process could not be properly described as consolidation of democracy, this study therefore is of the view that what has been consolidated in Nigeria is "elitocracy".

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the systems theory. David Easten (1965) was a prominent proponent of systems theory. In his study, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, he asserts that a system exists in every environment and takes inputs from the environment. The theory argues that politics operates as



an open system that seeks persistence by converting inputs from its environment – demands and supports – into outputs like laws and policies through authoritative institutions. The system manages stress using regulatory mechanisms and gatekeepers to filter inputs, and it adapts through feedback loop where outputs reshape the environment and generate new inputs. The goal is survival, with the political system distinguished from its intra-societal and extra-societal environments but constantly interacting with both to allocate values for society.

The systems theory thus asserts that everything functions in a whole. Malfunction or disequilibrium in one part of the environment affects the whole system, any problem that occurs in any component of the system affects the whole system, as all the components are interconnected and interdependent. The system theory is generally a relationship or more correctly “whole which comprises many parts” (Ogwuche, Abaneme & Nwaneri, 2023).

In application of the theory, critical discussion on the electoral system and elections in Nigeria fits into this theoretical main thesis. The problems associated with elections in Nigeria had contributed to the problem of democratic consolidation. The relationships between bad governance and questionable credible elections in Nigeria is properly captured through system theoretical analytical framework.

3.0. METHODOLOGY

The study is qualitative in nature. Therefore, descriptive historical design was employed. It anchors on David Easton systems theory as the framework of analysis. Data was generated through documentary review which involves reviewing existing documents, records, and relevant literature on the issues. The extensive use of secondary sources of data collection were quite pertinent because they are more abundant than the primary sources, more so they provide the researchers with a cross section of individual and group views on the subject matters. The study therefore applied thematic method of data presentation while qualitative contented analysis was applied

4.0. CONTENT ANALYSES AND DISCOURSES

4.1. A Critical Overview of 2015 Elections in Nigeria

The 2011 General Election that preceded the 2015 elections was quite unique in several forms; firstly, the winner of the presidential contest, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, became the first person from the Niger Delta region to emerge as the executive president of Nigeria; secondly, the voting patterns during the 2011 presidential election epitomized the influence of ethnicity and religion on Nigeria’s electoral system. The Muslim-dominated North voted massively for General Buhari of the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), while the Christian-dominated South voted en masse for Dr. Jonathan of the ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) respectively. Thirdly, the post-election violence that erupted after the announcement of Jonathan as winner claimed the lives of about 800 innocent people in Northern Nigeria (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

It is on record that between 2011 and 2015, Nigeria had gone through tough times. The escalation of Boko Haram insurgency in the North, high rate of unemployment, widespread corruption, fragmentation within the major political parties, and the misconduct of frontline politicians through hate campaigns put the most populous black nation on the spotlight locally and internationally (Ake, 2015).



There were grave concerns over the conduct and possible outcome of the elections by concerned citizens and the international communities. Efforts were made to douse the concerns such as:

- A former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi, appealed to the major contestants of the presidential election to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that will commit them to control their supporters against violence after the 2015 general election (Punch, Dec. 22, 2014).
- The National Peace Committee for the 2015 General Election led by former military ruler, General Abdulsalami Abubakar, facilitated peace accord between Gen. Buhari and President Goodluck (Punch, March 26, 2015).
- The then American Secretary of State, John Kerry, flew to Lagos and held discussion with President Jonathan and Gen. Buhari respectively (New York Times, Jan 25, 2015).

The election fever got to its peak after the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) announced the postponement of the general elections due to security challenges in the North-Eastern zone. The presidential elections were shifted from February 14 to March 28, while the Governorship and state legislative elections will hold on April 11, 2015 (Vanguard, Feb 8, 2015).

The Conduct and Outcome of 2015 Election

The 2015 general elections conducted in Nigeria is seen to be the most credible election since the inception of the democratic governance in Nigeria. During the process, the Voters Register (VR), Permanent Voters Card (PVC), and Smart Card Reader (SCR) were introduced into the system to identify, authenticate and verify individual votes, Social media platform were highly exploited by both candidates and voters to air their views on elections (Adesina, Onyemobi & Ojo, 2017)

According to INEC, 68,833,476 Nigerians were eligible to vote in the 2015 General Elections (This Day, 2015). Out of the over 68 million registered voters, about 56,431,255 people collected their Permanent Voters Cards (PVCs) as indicated by INEC (Vanguard, March 24, 2015). The Nigeria 2015 presidential election was the fifth in a row since the military left the political scene in 1999.

PDP, which has been the ruling party since 1999, faced its toughest opposition in APC, which was formed on February 6, 2013, with the merger of Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), All Nigeria Peoples Party (ANPP), and a faction of All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA) (The Nation, May 20, 2015).

Eventually, General Buhari of APC won with a total number of 15,424,926 votes against President Goodluck Jonathan with 12,853,162 votes (INEC website). The breakdown of 2015 election results shows that Buhari won in 21 states, while Dr. Jonathan won in 15 states and FCT, Abuja.

States APC won Adamawa, Kwara, Kogi, Benue, Oyo, Ondo, Ogun, Lagos, Osun, Sokoto, Kebbi, Zamfara, Niger, Kaduna, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa, Bauchi, Gombe, Yobe, and Borno.

PDP States: Edo, Delta, Bayelsa, Rivers, Imo, Abia, Enugu, Anambra, Ebonyi, Akwa-Ibom, Cross River, Plateau, Nasarawa, Taraba, Ekiti, and FCT.



The results show that the Muslim-dominated North voted massively for Buhari, while the Christian-dominated South-South, South-East, and North-Central voted for Jonathan. The South-West that voted for Jonathan in 2011 voted for Buhari in 2015 largely because of the merger that brought Yoruba-dominated ACN and the Hausa/Fulani-dominated CPC together forming APC (Olowojolu & Ake, 2015).

Another critical aspect of the 2015 general election was the marginalization of women in elective positions; few women were got elective positions during the 2015 general election (Olowojolu & Ake, 2015). And finally, another significant development in the 2015 general election was that for the first time in Nigeria's electoral process, an incumbent President was defeated and there was peaceful transition and handover to the opposition leader.

2019 General Election: An Overview

The 2019 presidential election showed a new trend in political culture. The contest remained a duel between two candidates belonging to the same ethnic, religious, and regional affiliations; Buhari of the APC and Atiku of the PDP, a replay of the 2007 election. The ruling APC stepped up its propaganda and religious manipulation (Agbu, 2016).

Religious scholars came out openly and campaigned for the APC candidates on the religious front, giving him an advantage over the PDP candidate (Sale, 2019). The 2019 presidential election also reflected entrenched voting patterns based on ethnicity, religion, and regionalism.

General elections were held in Nigeria on 23 February 2019 to elect the president, vice president, House of Representatives, and Senate. The elections had initially been scheduled for 16 February, but the Electoral Commission postponed the vote by a week citing logistical challenges in getting electoral materials to polling stations on time. Polling in some areas were subsequently delayed until 9 March, when voting was conducted alongside gubernatorial and state assembly elections (Sule & Sambo, 2026).

The outcome of the election results showed the APC candidate won the election. APC won in 19 states with a total vote of 15,191,847 while PDP won in 17 states and FCT with a total vote of 11,262,978 (INEC, 2019). States won by APC: Ekiti, Osun, Kwara, Nasarawa, Kogi, Gombe, Yobe, Niger, Jigawa, Kaduna, Katsina, Bauchi, Lagos, Ogun, Kano, Sokoto, Zamfara, Kebbi, and Borno.

2023 General Elections in Nigeria

The 2023 presidential election and National Assembly elections were fraught with controversy and questions of legitimacy due to the rejection and repudiation of the results by the main opposition, but it must be recognized as a consolidation of democratic governance and electoral system in Nigeria (Sule, 2026). The contest was between 18 political parties, but serious competition for the seat manifested between four parties: APC, LP, NNPP, and PDP (Sule & Sambo, 2026).

The presidential and National Assembly elections were held as scheduled on 25 February 2023, a feat not achieved in the past election circles which have all recorded delay and postponements. This was despite prevailing insecurity across the country, lingering fuel scarcity, and the November 2022 decision of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN) to redesign the naira, which created the currency



shortages and threatened to derail operational plans. Although the INEC confirmed that it had received the necessary resources shortly before the elections, deployment plans appear to have been affected by the uncertainty it caused in some instances (CDD, 2026).

The conduct and outcome of 2023 Election

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria represented a significant turning point in the democratization process, stability, and entrenchment of electoral democracy in emerging democracies, especially in Africa (Sule, 2026). None of the previous presidential elections has the emergence of a "Third force" in the contest, the controversy over the constitutional requirement of 25% in the Federal Capital Territory Abuja, the use and abuse of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), a machine that must be used and adhered to in the conduct of the election and uploading of results. All these never occurred in the previous elections (Sule & Sambo, 2026). Nigeria's electoral landscape underwent a fundamental shift with the 2023 presidential election. The traditional two-party dominance was changed by the sudden rise of the so-called "Third Force" supported by movements and represented by parties like the Labour Party (LP) and New Nigeria National Party (NNPP). The development reflected broader sociopolitical changes, including increased voter awareness, digital activism, youth mobilization, and growing discernment with traditional political elites (Sule, 2026; CDD, 2026).

Despite well-documented instances of insecurity in all six geopolitical zones and other challenges that threatened to derail the electoral process, Nigerians, particularly the youth, had shown a strong interest in participating in the election. Of the 9.46 million voters added to the register by the INEC before the 2023 election, over 70% were youth (ages 18-34). Meaning that they composed 39.7% of the total electorate of 93.4 million. However, the election still suggests that ethnic identity remains an important factor shaping voter preference with youths not a monolithic block (CDC, 2026).

The presidential election results as announced by INEC revealed that a total number of 24,055,878 valid votes were cast with the four leading candidates —

Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu (APC) scoring 8,794,726 votes followed by Alhaji Atiku Abubakar (PDP) who scored 6,984,520 and Peter Obi (LP) scoring 6,101,533 while Rabiu Kwankwaso (NNPP) scoring 1,496,687 (INEC website). While each of the three leading candidates won 12 states each, Rabiu Kwankwaso won only his home state Kano. With regard to geographic spread, Tinubu scored 25% of votes in 29 states, Atiku scored in 21 states while Obi in 16 states (CDC, 2026).

General Challenges to the Elections in Nigeria

The elections in Nigeria were fraught with the following challenges, Ethnicity and religion influenced the pattern of voting in all the elections in Nigeria.

- Electoral violence and insecurity, thuggery, ballot snatching, voter intimidation etc. affected all the elections in Nigeria.
- Vote buying and commercialization of politics were widespread affecting the credibility of the elections.
- Weak institutions and logistical failure on the side of INEC and Adhoc staff were sometimes untrained or compromised.



- Electoral malpractices and rigging.
- Judiciary interference and delayed justice.
- Low voter turnout, money politics and misinformation/hate speech.

5.0. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.0. Conclusion

The period of 2015 to 2025 represents an important phase in Nigeria's democratic development. The 2015 election brought historic political change, 2019 strengthened the ruling party and 2023 introduced stronger opposition competition. Although progress has been made, challenges such as violence, vote buying and low voter turnout remain.

5.2. Recommendations

The following recommendations are offered:

1. There is need to strengthen Electoral institutions and independence. INEC should be given real autonomy particularly financial autonomy.
2. Transparency tech: Expand and secure BVAS and their use.
3. Curb money in politics and vote buying by enforcing campaign finance laws, ban and sanction vote-buying.
4. Reduce ethnic and religious polarization through civic and voter education, regulation of hate speech and promotion of inclusive party platforms.
5. Socio-economic interventions through youth engagement, employment and poverty reduction programmes.

Conflict of Interest

The author declare that no conflict of interest exist in this manuscript.

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