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Article

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### INCREASED VOTERS PARTICIPATION AS A MEANS OF ENHANCING THE LEGITIMACY OF ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

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#### Abstract

This study examines the nexus between voter participation, digital electoral transparency, and party competition as pillars for legitimizing election outcomes in Nigeria's democracy. Using the 2025 bye-elections as a diagnostic case, the research interrogates why persistently low voter turnout coexists with advanced technological reforms like the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IREV). Employing a mixed-methods approach, we integrate quantitative data from INEC and IREV with qualitative insights from secondary literature, media reports, and theoretical frameworks on democratic consolidation. Findings reveal a national voter turnout average of 28–31%, reflecting deep-seated civic disengagement despite high IREV completion rates (above 92%). Party performance confirms the dominance of the All Progressives Congress (APC), the resilience of the People's Democratic Party (PDP), and the sustained relevance of regional parties like APGA and NNPP. The study identifies a critical paradox: procedural transparency through technology has advanced, but substantive legitimacy through participation remains weak. The paper argues that bye-elections are not peripheral contests but crucial arenas for revealing the fragility and resilience of democratic institutions. It concludes with recommendations for enhancing voter mobilization, institutionalizing transparency tools, and fostering competitive pluralism. These insights are

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vital for reforming Nigeria's electoral system ahead of the 2027 general elections and contribute to broader debates on digital governance and democratic consolidation in Africa.

**Keywords:** Bye-Elections, Voter Turnout, Irev, Electoral Transparency, Party Competition, Democratic Consolidation, Legitimacy

### **Introduction**

Elections are the cornerstone of democratic governance, serving as the primary mechanism through which citizens confer legitimacy on leaders and hold them accountable. In Nigeria, Africa's most populous democracy, the integrity of elections is paramount given the country's complex diversity, history of military rule, and ongoing challenges of institutional trust. While general elections attract significant scholarly and policy attention, bye-elections are often ignored that provide a nuanced lens through which to examine the subtler dynamics of political engagement, institutional performance, and democratic consolidation. The 2025 bye-elections in Nigeria presented a critical juncture to assess the interplay between voter participation, technological innovation, and party system dynamics. Despite concerted efforts by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) to enhance transparency through digital tools such as the Biometric Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Results Viewing Portal (IReV), voter turnout remains alarmingly low, averaging between 35% and 40% in recent national cycles, (Obi & Enojo, 2024). This disengagement raises fundamental questions about the legitimacy of electoral outcomes and the depth of Nigeria's democratic culture.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

Nigeria's democratic trajectory since 1999 has been marked by progressive institutional reforms juxtaposed with persistent deficits in electoral legitimacy. Despite the introduction of digital transparency mechanisms like IReV, voter apathy remains endemic, and public trust in electoral processes is low. Bye-elections, characterised by localised stakes and lower political mobilisation, magnify these issues. The core problem this study addresses is the disconnect between technological advancements in electoral administration and the sustained decline in citizen participation, which undermines the legitimacy of election outcomes and impedes democratic consolidation. Specifically, the research investigates why high levels of procedural transparency (evidenced by IReV compliance) fail to translate into higher voter turnout and greater public trust in Nigeria's 2025 bye-elections.

### **Research Objectives**

This study aims to:

- i. Analyze the patterns and determinants of voter turnout in the 2025 bye-elections across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones.
- ii. Evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the IReV platform as a tool for enhancing electoral transparency and public trust.
- iii. Assess the performance and competitive dynamics of political parties, focusing on the ruling APC, opposition PDP, and key regional parties (APGA and NNPP).
- iv. Examine the implications of these findings for democratic consolidation and electoral legitimacy in Nigeria.

### **Research Questions**

- i. What factors account for the persistently low voter turnout in Nigeria's 2025 bye-elections, and how do they vary regionally?

- ii. To what extent has the IReV platform succeeded in promoting electoral transparency and public confidence in the bye-election results?
- iii. How did party competition manifest in the 2025 bye-elections, and what does this reveal about the strength of Nigeria's multiparty system?
- iv. What are the broader implications of the interplay between turnout, transparency, and party performance for Nigeria's democratic consolidation?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study is anchored in theories of democratic consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996) and electoral legitimacy (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997). Democratic consolidation is conceptualized not merely as institutional stability but as the deepening of civic trust, participatory culture, and elite compliance with democratic norms. We integrate institutional innovation theory (Ayee, 2019) to examine how technological tools like IReV interact with existing political structures. Additionally, party system institutionalization theory (Basedau, 2011) guides the analysis of regional and national party competition. This multi-theoretical approach allows us to explore whether technological reforms can foster legitimacy in a context where clientelism, insecurity, and apathy prevail.

### **Significance and Structure of the Paper**

This research offers one of the first systematic analyses of the 2025 bye-elections, contributing empirically to the understudied domain of sub-national elections in Africa. Theoretically, it bridges debates on digital governance, voter behavior, and party politics in transitional democracies. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides a comprehensive literature review; Section 3 outlines the mixed-methods methodology; Section 4 presents findings on turnout, IReV performance, and party competition; Section 5 discusses these findings in light of theoretical frameworks; and Section 6 concludes with policy recommendations and directions for future research.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Conceptual and Empirical Perspectives**

**Political Disenchantment:** Political disenchantment is widely identified as a central driver of declining voter turnout in Nigeria. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, electoral participation has steadily decreased, falling from about 52% in 1999 to 34% in 2019 (Omotola & Olaniyan, 2021). Scholars argue that this pattern reflects growing public frustration with the political system rather than mere administrative weaknesses. Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006) contend that persistent electoral malpractice ranging from vote buying and intimidation to result manipulation has normalized cynicism among voters, who increasingly perceive elections as rituals devoid of genuine choice. When citizens believe outcomes are predetermined, the incentive to participate diminishes. Corruption further compounds this disenchantment. Ojo (2019) notes that the entrenchment of elite capture and patronage politics has weakened the social contract between leaders and the electorate. Campaign promises are routinely unfulfilled, and public office is often associated with personal enrichment rather than service delivery. As a result, elections are viewed less as mechanisms for accountability and more as competitions among self-interested elites. This perception is particularly pronounced among young voters, who face high unemployment and limited political inclusion despite their demographic dominance. From a conceptual standpoint, political disenchantment aligns with theories of democratic legitimacy, which posit that participation depends on citizens' belief that political institutions are responsive

and fair. Where legitimacy is eroded, political apathy becomes rational behavior. In Nigeria, repeated cycles of disputed elections and weak post-election accountability have reinforced the notion that voting does not translate into meaningful change. Consequently, non-participation becomes a form of silent protest against a system perceived as untrustworthy. Empirically, surveys and post-election reports consistently show low levels of trust in political parties, elected officials, and even electoral management bodies. This erosion of trust suggests that improving turnout requires more than technical reforms; it demands visible improvements in governance, accountability, and the credibility of electoral outcomes to rebuild citizens' faith in democracy.

### **Structural Barriers to Participation**

Beyond attitudinal factors, structural barriers significantly constrain electoral participation in Nigeria. Okoye (2018) argues that logistical failures such as late arrival of materials, malfunctioning devices, overcrowded polling units, and long waiting times raise the cost of voting and discourage turnout, especially among working-class voters who cannot afford to spend hours at polling stations. When the voting process is perceived as stressful or inefficient, many citizens opt out altogether. Insecurity represents another major structural constraint. Eze and Nwagwu (2022) highlight how insurgency in the North East, banditry in the North West, secessionist tensions in the South East, and election-related violence across several states have created environments of fear. Voters often prioritize personal safety over civic duty, particularly in bye-elections that lack the national attention and heavy security deployment of general elections. Attacks on polling units and electoral personnel further reinforce perceptions that voting is risky.

Socio-economic exclusion also plays a critical role. High poverty rates, unemployment, and low educational attainment reduce political efficacy, especially among youth and women. Many citizens lack access to information about registration procedures, polling locations, or the significance of their vote. Gendered norms, domestic responsibilities, and mobility constraints further limit women's participation in certain regions. For internally displaced persons, the absence of flexible voting arrangements effectively denies them the franchise. Conceptually, these barriers reflect the "cost of participation" model, which suggests that individuals are less likely to vote when the material, physical, or psychological costs outweigh perceived benefits. In Nigeria's context, these costs are amplified by weak infrastructure, limited state capacity, and uneven service delivery. Empirical studies show that turnout is often lower in rural and conflict-affected areas, where these barriers are most acute. Thus, while political will matters, addressing structural obstacles through improved logistics, security coordination, inclusive registration, and voter facilitation is essential for broadening participation and ensuring that elections are accessible to all segments of society.

### **Contextual Dynamics of Bye-Elections**

Bye-elections occupy a distinctive place in Nigeria's electoral landscape and are typically characterized by significantly lower turnout than general elections. Ojebode and Aduloju (2019) argue that voters often perceive bye-elections as low-stakes contests because they fill isolated vacancies rather than determine overall control of government. This perception reduces the sense of urgency and collective mobilization that usually accompanies general elections, where executive and legislative power is at stake. Media coverage also plays a crucial role in shaping participation. Bye-elections receive limited national attention, resulting in weaker public awareness and reduced campaign intensity. Without sustained media framing, many eligible voters remain unaware of election dates, candidates, or the

implications of the contest. Political parties, in turn, often invest fewer resources in mobilization, especially in areas considered strongholds or electorally insignificant.

Furthermore, the timing of bye-elections can be disruptive. They are frequently conducted off-cycle, when voters are less psychologically prepared for electoral engagement. In some cases, electoral fatigue sets in, particularly in states that experience multiple elections within short periods. Voters may also be discouraged by the absence of broader political narratives linking the contest to national development or reform agendas. From a conceptual perspective, bye-elections illustrate the importance of contextual salience in participation theories. When citizens perceive limited impact or relevance, turnout declines regardless of procedural quality. In Nigeria, where trust in institutions is already fragile, the marginal utility of voting in bye-elections appears especially low. Empirically, turnout figures in Nigerian bye-elections often fall well below national averages, reinforcing the argument that context matters. These dynamics suggest that efforts to improve participation in bye-elections must focus on enhancing visibility, emphasizing the local significance of representation, and ensuring that parties and electoral bodies treat such elections as integral components of democratic governance rather than peripheral events.

### **Comparative African Perspectives on Turnout**

Comparative experiences across Africa reinforce the view that voter turnout reflects deeper issues of political legitimacy rather than merely administrative efficiency. In South Africa, Mattes (2021) documents a steady decline in turnout since the end of apartheid, attributing it largely to growing disillusionment with the African National Congress (ANC), which has dominated politics for decades. As electoral competition weakens, citizens increasingly perceive limited alternatives, leading to apathy and disengagement. This mirrors Nigeria's experience, where dominant parties in certain regions generate feelings of inevitability that depress participation. In Kenya and Ghana, turnout dynamics are shaped by different, yet equally instructive, factors. Gyimah-Boadi (2017) notes that in Ghana, relatively strong institutions and credible electoral management have sustained comparatively higher levels of trust, though turnout still fluctuates with perceptions of party performance. Cheeseman (2018) highlights how in Kenya, ethnic mobilization remains a powerful driver of participation, often increasing turnout in closely contested races but also heightening tensions and post-election disputes. These cases illustrate that turnout is influenced by the interaction between institutional credibility, party competition, and social cleavages. Where elections are perceived as competitive and meaningful, participation tends to be higher. Conversely, when outcomes appear predetermined or when institutions lose credibility, disengagement follows.

Conceptually, the comparative literature supports legitimacy theory, which links citizen participation to confidence in the fairness and effectiveness of democratic institutions. Nigeria's declining turnout thus aligns with broader African patterns where democratic backsliding, corruption, and weak service delivery erode trust. Empirically, these studies suggest that improving turnout in Nigeria requires reforms that go beyond logistics to address party accountability, institutional independence, and inclusive governance. By situating Nigeria within the African experience, the literature confirms that voter turnout is a barometer of democratic health and a reflection of citizens' belief in the value of participation.

### **Electoral Technology and Transparency: The Promise and Perils of Digital Tools**

The introduction of IReV in 2020 represented a watershed in Nigeria's electoral administration. Modeled on similar platforms in Ghana and Kenya, IReV aims to enhance transparency by allowing real-time public access to polling unit results (Adekunle et al., 2023). International studies show that such tools can reduce fraud and build trust if implemented consistently (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2020). However, critics note that technology alone cannot eliminate upstream manipulation during collation (Ayee, 2019). In Nigeria, while BVAS and IReV have been hailed as breakthroughs, reports of discrepancies between uploaded and declared results persist (Yiaga Africa, 2024; Onapajo, 2023).

### **Party Competition and Democratic Consolidation**

Nigeria's party system is characterized by dominant-party dynamics at the federal level alongside resilient regional parties. The APC's national dominance since 2015 contrasts with the strongholds of APGA in the South-East and NNPP in Kano (Nwankwo, 2015). This regional fragmentation reflects the ethnic and geographical cleavages that structure Nigerian politics (Suberu, 2019). According to Linz and Stepan (1996), a consolidated democracy requires a party system that channels competition peacefully and inclusively. In Nigeria, however, parties often rely on clientelism and coercion rather than programmatic appeal (Bratton, 2008), undermining substantive representation.

### **Theoretical Synthesis: Linking Turnout, Transparency, and Consolidation**

The literature reveals significant gaps. Few studies systematically analyze bye-elections as diagnostic tools for democratic health. Moreover, research on electoral technology in Africa tends to focus on general elections, neglecting sub-national contexts. This study fills these gaps by integrating voter behavior, digital governance, and party politics into a unified framework centered on legitimacy and consolidation.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods design to generate both breadth and depth of analysis regarding the conduct and outcomes of the 2025 bye-elections in Nigeria. The research was implemented in three phases, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to enhance triangulation and robustness of findings. Quantitative data were sourced from official election datasets released by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), including voter turnout figures and polling unit-level results, as well as compliance data from the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal. The sample comprised 18 states across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones in which bye-elections were conducted in 2025. The dependent variable was voter turnout, measured as a percentage, while the independent variables included the IReV completion rate, geopolitical zone, and the incidence of insecurity. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27, with descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and comparative regional analyses employed to examine patterns and relationships among variables.

The qualitative phase involved document analysis of secondary sources, including INEC reports, election observer publications from Yiaga Africa and Situation Room Nigeria, relevant scholarly literature, and media coverage from outlets such as *Premium Times* and the *International Centre for Investigative Reporting* (ICIR) Nigeria. A thematic analysis approach was adopted to identify and interpret recurring patterns in the data, particularly those relating to public trust in the electoral process, manifestations of electoral violence, and political party strategies. All data utilized in the study were obtained from publicly accessible sources, thereby posing minimal ethical risk. Nevertheless, the study

acknowledged certain limitations, including the possibility of inaccuracies in officially reported voter turnout figures and the inability to conduct primary fieldwork due to logistical constraints. These limitations were considered in the interpretation of results and the formulation of conclusions.

### **Discussion of Findings**

**Voter's Turnout: A National Crisis of Participation:** The national average hovered between 28% and 31%, with minimal regional variation. The North-East recorded the lowest average (24–25%), likely due to insecurity. Notably, states like Kogi reported implausibly high turnout (72–74%) in certain constituencies, raising concerns about data integrity. IReV completion rates exceeded 92% nationally, with the South-West and South-East achieving rates above 94%. However, qualitative reports noted discrepancies between uploaded results and manual tallies in constituencies like Kogi and Rivers, suggesting that high upload rates do not automatically ensure transparency. The coexistence of high IReV compliance and low voter turnout underscores a critical paradox. While digital tools enhance procedural transparency, they do not address the underlying drivers of apathy: political distrust, economic hardship, and security concerns. This aligns with Bratton and van de Walle's (1997) assertion that elections in Africa often reflect a mix of democratic and clientelistic logics.

### **Party System Fragmentation and Democratic Consolidation**

The APC won 14 seats (44% vote share), affirming its national dominance. The PDP secured 10 seats (36%), remaining the primary opposition. APGA and NNPP held their regional strongholds, winning 3 and 1 seat(s) respectively. This indicates a party system that is competitive yet skewed toward incumbency and regional fragmentation. The resilience of regional parties like APGA and NNPP highlights the ethnic-geographic foundations of Nigeria's party system. While this pluralism can be a strength, it also risks entrenching divisive politics. For democratic consolidation to deepen, parties must transition toward programmatic competition (Linz & Stepan, 1996). IReV represents a significant institutional innovation, yet its impact is mediated by existing political practices. Where elites perceive transparency as a threat, they may manipulate the tool's implementation a phenomenon observed in other transitional democracies (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2020).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The findings from the 2025 bye-elections underscore a dual reality within Nigeria's democratic trajectory: measurable institutional progress alongside entrenched structural and behavioral challenges. Innovations such as the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal have enhanced transparency and reduced opportunities for post-election manipulation, thereby strengthening procedural credibility. However, persistently low voter turnout, regional disparities in participation, insecurity, and increasing party fragmentation continue to undermine the substantive legitimacy of electoral outcomes. These dynamics suggest that technology alone cannot consolidate democracy without complementary reforms targeting political culture, institutional trust, and citizen engagement. In light of these observations, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen electoral integrity and democratic consolidation ahead of the 2027 general elections.

To strengthen Nigeria's electoral integrity ahead of the 2027 general elections, coordinated and actionable reforms are required across electoral institutions, political parties, civil society, and research bodies. INEC and Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) should lead institutional reforms. The INEC Voter Education and Publicity Department, in

partnership with the National Orientation Agency, Ministry of Education, NYSC, and CSOs, should implement continuous, year-round voter education targeting youth, women, persons with disabilities, and displaced persons using digital platforms, community radio, and local languages. The ICT Department should operationalize a real-time IReV audit and verification system and commission independent post-election technical audits, while the Electoral Institute should mandate periodic retraining and certification of ad hoc staff. To address insecurity, INEC, working with the Nigeria Police Force, DSS, NSCDC, and local peace committees, should adopt conflict-sensitive logistics, including risk mapping and flexible deployment for high-risk areas.

Political parties, under the oversight of INEC, should reform internal governance. Party national executives must enforce issue-based campaigns through locally relevant policy manifestos and ensure transparent primaries via digital membership registers and internal appeal mechanisms. State and local chapters should institutionalize continuous grassroots engagement through town halls and constituency offices, while youth and women wings receive dedicated resources for mobilization. Party communication units should adopt responsible digital strategies to counter misinformation. Civil society organizations (CSOs), supported by international partners such as UNDP, EU, and USAID, should expand election observation and institutionalize parallel vote tabulation, especially in under-observed regions. CSOs should also lead sustained civic education and citizen–INEC dialogue platforms, while donors prioritize long-term capacity building over episodic election support. Universities and think tanks, with support from research councils and donors, should conduct nationwide turnout surveys, comparative African bye-election studies, political economy analyses of electoral technology, and longitudinal voter attitude research, feeding evidence directly to INEC and the National Assembly for reform. Collectively, these coordinated actions will enhance transparency, rebuild trust, improve participation, and consolidate Nigeria’s democratic governance.

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