

Civic Competence and Electoral Participation in Nigeria: Why Voting Matters for Democratic Governance and National Development

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ABSTRACT

Voting is a fundamental mechanism of democratic participation, yet having the formal right to vote does not necessarily guarantee informed or meaningful electoral participation. This paper examines the role of civic competence in enhancing the quality of electoral participation in Nigeria. Civic competence is understood as a multidimensional capacity that includes political knowledge, understanding of democratic institutions, awareness of civic rights and responsibilities, political efficacy, electoral awareness, the ability to critically evaluate political information, willingness to participate and respect for democratic norms. The study adopts a conceptual research design based on a qualitative review and synthesis of relevant scholarly and institutional literature. Guided by Civic Voluntarism Theory, the paper brings together evidence on civic competence, civic knowledge, voter apathy, vote buying, electoral violence, misinformation and voting behaviour in Nigeria. The analysis develops a conceptual pathway linking civic competence to informed voting, electoral accountability and improved democratic governance. The paper argues that citizens who are better informed about politics and democratic processes are more likely to evaluate candidates and policies critically, resist electoral manipulation and participate meaningfully in elections. However, civic competence alone cannot guarantee effective electoral participation, as poverty, electoral violence, misinformation, political clientelism and distrust in electoral institutions may constrain citizens' choices. The paper therefore concludes that strengthening Nigerian democracy requires both credible electoral institutions and citizens equipped with the knowledge, skills, political efficacy and critical capacity needed to exercise their voting rights responsibly and effectively.

Keywords: Civic competence; informed voting; electoral participation; voter behaviour; electoral accountability; democratic governance; Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Democracy depends not only on the existence of electoral institutions but also on citizens' capacity and willingness to participate meaningfully in the political process. Voting is one of the principal mechanisms through which citizens choose their representatives, influence public policy and hold elected officials accountable. However, effective electoral participation requires more than possessing the legal right to vote. Citizens need adequate political knowledge, understanding of electoral rights and responsibilities, ability to evaluate political information, and confidence in their capacity to influence public affairs (Chanda et al., 2024). These attributes constitute important dimensions of civic competence. Civic competence has become increasingly important in contemporary democracies because citizens are exposed to large volumes of political information from traditional and digital media. Although social media has expanded opportunities for political engagement, it has also facilitated the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Consequently, citizens who lack the capacity to assess political information critically may make electoral choices based on inaccurate or misleading claims. Civic competence therefore influences not only whether citizens participate in elections but also the quality of the decisions they make when participating (Otache, Alfa, and Ali, 2023).

The issue is particularly important in Nigeria, where democratic governance has operated under the Fourth Republic since 1999. Despite regular elections, the Nigerian electoral process continues to face challenges

including voter apathy, vote buying, electoral violence, identity-based political mobilisation, misinformation and declining confidence in political institutions (Araba and Edokpa, 2026). These challenges can weaken the capacity of elections to serve as effective mechanisms of representation and accountability. Voter apathy, for instance, reduces citizens' ability to reward effective leadership or reject poor performance through the ballot. Similarly, vote buying may encourage short-term considerations at the expense of candidates' competence, integrity, policy positions and records of performance.

The consequences of electoral choices extend beyond the political sphere. Elected officials make decisions concerning public expenditure, taxation, education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment, security and economic policy. The quality of electoral participation can therefore influence the quality of governance and, indirectly, national development. In this context, informed voting becomes an important component of democratic accountability. Citizens who understand political institutions and evaluate candidates and policies critically are potentially better positioned to make choices that reflect their long-term interests and demand accountability from elected officials. The rapid growth of digital political communication has added another dimension to the Nigerian electoral environment. Citizens increasingly obtain political information through platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X and TikTok. While these platforms can enhance political awareness and mobilisation, they can also facilitate the rapid dissemination of false or misleading information. The ability to distinguish credible information from misinformation has therefore become an increasingly important element of civic competence.

Although existing Nigerian studies have examined political participation, voter apathy, vote buying and electoral behaviour (Adetoro & Omiyefa, 2017; Bratton, 2008), relatively limited attention has been given to civic competence as a multidimensional construct encompassing political knowledge, electoral awareness, knowledge of civic rights and responsibilities, political efficacy, and the ability to critically evaluate political information. Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017) examined civic competence and political participation, while Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) examined the mediating role of civic knowledge in voter apathy during the 2019 presidential election. However, the present study extends the literature by examining civic competence more broadly in relation to informed electoral participation in Nigeria. Addressing this gap is important because the formal right to vote does not necessarily guarantee informed or meaningful participation.

Against this background, this study examines the relationship between civic competence and electoral participation in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on the importance of informed voting for democratic governance and national development. Specifically, the study investigates whether political knowledge, electoral awareness, critical evaluation of political information, knowledge of civic rights and responsibilities, and political efficacy influence citizens' electoral participation and voting behaviour.

The study contributes to the literature by placing civic competence at the centre of the relationship between citizens and the electoral process. Its findings may provide useful evidence for electoral management institutions, educational institutions, civil society organisations and policymakers in designing more effective and continuous civic and voter education programmes. Strengthening civic competence may ultimately promote more informed electoral choices, greater accountability and more responsive democratic governance in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concept of Civic Competence

Civic competence refers to the knowledge, skills, attitudes and dispositions that enable individuals to participate effectively and responsibly in civic and democratic life. It goes beyond the possession of political information to include an understanding of democratic institutions, citizens' rights and responsibilities, critical evaluation of information, political efficacy and willingness to participate in public affairs (Hoskins et al., 2008). The European Union (2006) conceptualises civic competence as the ability to participate fully in civic life based on knowledge of social and political concepts and structures and a commitment to active and democratic participation. The framework further associates civic competence with knowledge of democracy, justice, equality, citizenship and civil rights, as well as the ability to engage effectively in the public domain and participate in decision-making, including through voting. Similarly, the Council of Europe (2018)

conceptualises competences for democratic culture as a combination of values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding. These competences enable citizens to assess information, make informed choices in elections, engage in civic action, and resist propaganda and manipulation.

A fundamental dimension of civic competence is political knowledge. Political knowledge enables citizens to understand government structures, political processes, public policies and the roles of elected officials. Such knowledge can help voters assess candidates, understand policy alternatives and evaluate the performance of political leaders. Political knowledge is also associated with political participation through its relationship with citizens' sense of political efficacy (Aichholzer & Kritzing, 2017). Research has shown that political knowledge can strengthen internal political efficacy and, through this mechanism, increase the likelihood of political participation, including voting.

Civic competence also requires an understanding of democratic institutions. Citizens need to understand the functions and responsibilities of institutions such as the executive, legislature, judiciary and electoral management bodies. This understanding enables individuals to recognise the powers and limitations of public officials and to identify appropriate channels for political participation and accountability. Knowledge of democratic institutions is therefore essential for citizens to evaluate political performance and make informed electoral choices.

Another important dimension is knowledge of civic rights and responsibilities. Democratic citizenship involves both rights and obligations. Citizens have rights to participate in political processes, express opinions and vote, but they also have responsibilities to respect the rights of others, obey legitimate democratic rules and participate peacefully. The Council of Europe similarly emphasises that democratic citizenship involves the exercise of rights and responsibilities and active participation in democratic life.

Political efficacy is another essential component of civic competence. It refers broadly to citizens' belief that they can understand political affairs and influence political outcomes. Individuals who believe that their participation can make a difference are more likely to engage in political activities, whereas low political efficacy may encourage apathy and disengagement. Evidence from political participation research indicates that political knowledge can enhance internal political efficacy and subsequently increase the likelihood of voting and other forms of participation.

In contemporary electoral environments, critical thinking and the ability to evaluate political information have become increasingly important. Citizens encounter political information through television, newspapers, social media and interpersonal networks, but such information may be incomplete, misleading or deliberately manipulated. Civic competence therefore involves the ability to access information, assess its credibility, identify bias and distinguish evidence from political claims. The Council of Europe's democratic competence framework explicitly includes critical understanding and the ability to assess information and resist propaganda and manipulation.

Civic competence also encompasses willingness to participate in democratic processes. Knowledge alone does not guarantee participation. Citizens may understand political institutions and electoral procedures but nevertheless remain unwilling to vote or engage in other civic activities. Civic competence therefore involves translating knowledge and skills into responsible participation in public affairs. In Nigeria, Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017) found relatively low levels of both political participation and civic competence among their respondents in Abeokuta and argued for greater emphasis on formal and informal civic and political learning. More recently, Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) found that civic knowledge reduced voter apathy among respondents in Lagos State during the 2019 presidential election, providing further evidence of the relevance of civic knowledge to electoral participation in Nigeria.

Finally, civic competence involves respect for democratic norms, including tolerance of political differences, respect for the rule of law, peaceful participation, rejection of political violence and recognition of the political rights of others. Democratic participation is therefore not simply about voting but also about accepting legitimate political competition and respecting the institutions and norms through which political differences are managed.

Taken together, these dimensions demonstrate that civic competence is broader than voter education or political knowledge alone. It encompasses what citizens know, how they understand democratic institutions, how they evaluate political information, what they believe about their capacity to influence political outcomes, and how they participate in democratic processes.

Consequently, being legally eligible to vote does not necessarily mean that a citizen is civically competent or capable of making informed electoral choices. Strengthening civic competence is therefore important for promoting meaningful electoral participation, electoral accountability and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Voting and Electoral Participation

Voting is a fundamental mechanism of democratic participation through which citizens select political representatives and influence public affairs. Electoral participation extends beyond casting a ballot to include voter registration, access to electoral information and engagement with the electoral process. Its effectiveness depends not only on citizens' opportunity to vote but also on their willingness and capacity to participate meaningfully.

Voting is first a democratic right. In Nigeria, citizens who have attained the age of 18 and meet the relevant legal requirements are eligible to register and vote. The Constitution provides for the election of representatives to the National Assembly and State Houses of Assembly, while the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is responsible for voter registration and the conduct of elections (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999, as amended).

Furthermore, voting serves as a means of political representation. In representative democracy, citizens elect individuals to make decisions on their behalf. Electoral choices therefore determine who represents citizens and influences public policies and the allocation of public resources. Voting provides citizens with an important channel through which their preferences enter the political decision-making process.

Voting is equally an instrument of accountability. Elections enable citizens to evaluate the performance of elected officials and either retain or replace them. When voters consider candidates' competence, integrity, policies and performance, elections can create incentives for political leaders to respond to citizens' interests. Conversely, electoral choices influenced by vote buying, misinformation or intimidation may weaken the accountability function of elections (Bratton, 2008).

Finally, voting provides a mechanism for peaceful political change. Periodic elections allow citizens to change political leadership through constitutional and institutional procedures rather than violence or unconstitutional means. Electoral participation is therefore important not only for political representation but also for the stability and legitimacy of democratic governance.

In Nigeria, these functions of voting are particularly important because elected officials make decisions concerning public expenditure, education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment and economic policy. Consequently, the quality of electoral participation can have implications for governance and development. However, the formal right to vote does not automatically ensure informed participation. Citizens may register but fail to vote, or participate without adequate knowledge of candidates, policies and electoral procedures. This reinforces the importance of civic competence in ensuring that electoral participation is informed, responsible and capable of strengthening democratic accountability.

Civic Competence and Voting Behaviour

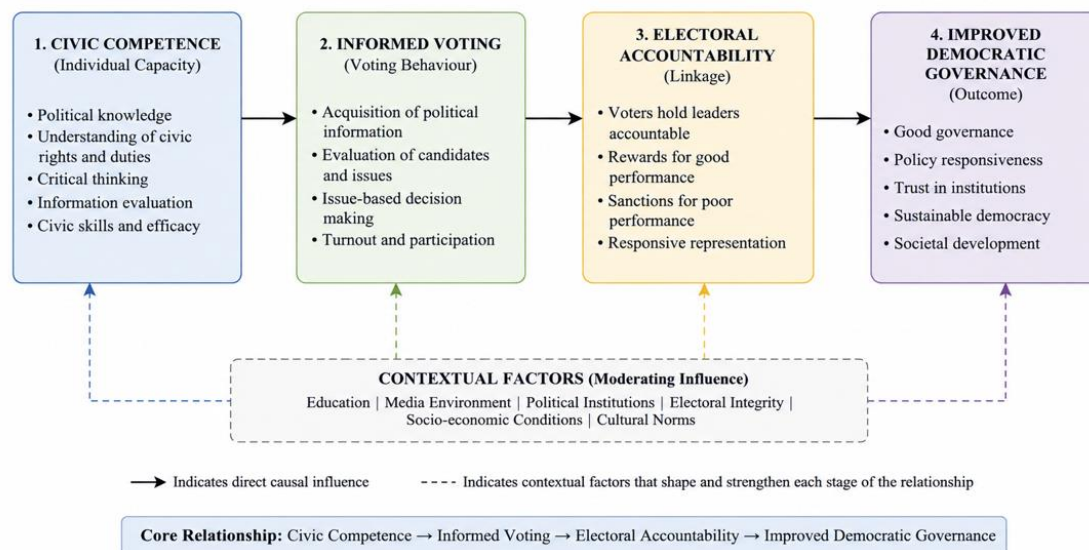
Civic competence is an important foundation of voting behaviour because it enables citizens to acquire, understand and evaluate political information. As illustrated in Figure 2.1, civic competence is conceptualised as influencing informed voting, which can strengthen electoral accountability and ultimately contribute to improved democratic governance. Civic competence encompasses political knowledge, political efficacy, electoral awareness and the ability to critically evaluate political information.

Political knowledge is an important pathway through which civic competence may influence voting behaviour. Citizens who understand government institutions, the responsibilities of political office holders and relevant public policies are better positioned to assess candidates and distinguish between competing policy alternatives. Political knowledge may therefore reduce reliance on purely personal, ethnic or partisan considerations and encourage greater attention to competence and performance. Aichholzer and Kritzing (2017) argue that political knowledge can contribute to political participation through its relationship with political efficacy, suggesting that knowledgeable citizens may be more confident in engaging with political processes.

Electoral awareness is also relevant to voting behaviour. Citizens who understand voter registration requirements, electoral procedures, voting rights and responsibilities are better positioned to participate effectively in elections. Electoral awareness can reduce uncertainty about the voting process and enable citizens to exercise their rights appropriately. In Nigeria, this is particularly important given challenges associated with electoral procedures, voter registration, vote buying and other electoral practices that may influence participation. The ability to critically evaluate political information constitutes another important dimension of civic competence. Voters are exposed to political information through traditional media, social media, political parties and informal networks, some of which may be inaccurate, biased or deliberately misleading. Citizens who can assess the credibility of political claims are better positioned to distinguish relevant information from misinformation and make independent electoral choices. Critical evaluation may therefore reduce the influence of misleading political narratives and encourage more issue-based voting.

Empirical evidence from Nigeria further supports the relevance of civic competence to electoral participation. Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017) found an association between civic competence and political participation among citizens in Abeokuta. Similarly, Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) found that civic knowledge reduced voter apathy during the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria. These findings suggest that citizens' knowledge and civic capacity can influence their willingness to participate in electoral processes. Thus, civic competence extends beyond civic knowledge alone to encompass political efficacy, electoral awareness, critical evaluation of information and democratic dispositions.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework Linking Civic Competence and Voting Behaviour



Source: Author's conceptualisation based on the reviewed literature.

Overall, the literature suggests that civic competence provides an important foundation for meaningful electoral participation. Citizens with political knowledge, electoral awareness, political efficacy and the ability to critically evaluate political information are better positioned to make informed voting decisions. As represented in Figure 2.1, informed participation can strengthen electoral accountability and contribute to more responsive democratic governance. Accordingly, the study proposes that higher levels of civic competence are associated with more informed electoral participation in Nigeria.

Voting and Good Governance in Nigeria

Voting is not only a mechanism for choosing political leaders but also an important channel through which citizens can influence the quality of governance. Governance encompasses the processes through which governments are selected, monitored and replaced, as well as their capacity to formulate and implement policies and provide public services. The World Bank's governance framework includes voice and accountability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, political stability and control of corruption, all of which are relevant to the quality of democratic governance (World Bank, 2025).

The connection between voting and governance operates primarily through accountability. Elections provide citizens with an opportunity to assess the performance of political leaders and reward or sanction them through their electoral choices. When voters consider competence, integrity, policies and performance, elected officials have stronger incentives to respond to citizens' preferences. Thus, informed electoral participation can strengthen the accountability relationship between citizens and government.

Voting can also contribute to transparency and responsiveness. Politicians seeking electoral support have incentives to communicate their programmes and respond to public concerns. Similarly, citizens who are politically informed are better positioned to demand explanations concerning public decisions and the use of public resources. Citizen participation, transparency and accountability are recognised as important elements of effective governance and development (Haase Formánková, 2026).

Electoral participation also influences political representation and policy choices. Through elections, citizens determine who represents them and, indirectly, which policy priorities receive political attention. Where electoral choices are informed by candidates' programmes and records, elections can encourage greater alignment between public preferences and government policies. This may influence areas such as education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment and social protection.

The implications extend to public service delivery and development outcomes. Effective and accountable institutions are associated with better public services and stronger development outcomes (Boussouak and Youcef, 2024). Therefore, the quality of electoral participation matters because elections can shape the incentives, composition and responsiveness of government.

In the Nigerian context, however, the relationship between voting and governance should not be understood as automatic. Elections can contribute to accountability only when citizens are able and willing to make meaningful choices and when electoral processes permit those choices to be expressed. The central argument is therefore that the quality of electoral participation can affect the quality of governance: informed and responsible participation can strengthen representation and accountability, whereas poorly informed or manipulated participation may weaken them.

Challenges to Effective Voting in Nigeria

Although voting provides an important avenue for democratic participation, several factors can undermine citizens' ability to participate effectively and make informed electoral choices. Voter apathy reduces the extent to which citizens use elections to influence political outcomes. Low participation weakens the representativeness of electoral mandates and may reduce the capacity of citizens to hold political leaders accountable. Recent evidence shows a long-term decline in voter turnout in Nigeria, with insecurity, electoral violence, voter suppression, distrust in electoral institutions and poor governance identified among the factors associated with this trend (Owonikoko and Ashindorbe, 2025).

Vote buying can distort electoral choice by shifting voters' attention from candidates' competence, policies and performance towards immediate material benefits. Its effects may be particularly significant among economically vulnerable citizens. Bratton (2008) found that vote buying and political intimidation were important features of Nigerian election campaigns, with electoral violence reducing turnout and vote buying strengthening partisan loyalty (Bratton, 2008).

Electoral violence and intimidation can directly undermine informed participation by creating fear and restricting citizens' freedom to vote. Evidence from Nigeria indicates that intimidation can reduce voter turnout, while more recent research links electoral violence with voter apathy (Collier and Vicente, 2008). Misinformation and disinformation create another challenge because voters increasingly obtain political information from digital and social media platforms. False or deliberately misleading information can distort perceptions of candidates, policies and electoral processes. This makes the ability to evaluate information critically an important component of civic competence.

Ethnic and religious considerations may influence voting decisions where identity becomes more important than policy, competence or performance. Identity-based appeals can therefore weaken issue-based electoral evaluation and encourage voters to support candidates primarily because of shared ethnic or religious affiliation. Political clientelism can similarly weaken informed electoral choice by establishing relationships in which political support is exchanged for personal or group benefits. Such arrangements may shift attention away from broader public interests and reduce the emphasis on policy performance.

Distrust in electoral institutions can reduce citizens' confidence that their votes will be accurately counted or that electoral outcomes will reflect citizens' preferences. Such distrust can weaken political efficacy and discourage participation. The decline in Nigerian voter turnout has been associated, among other factors, with declining trust in electoral institutions (Owonikoko and Ashindorbe, 2025). Youth disengagement is particularly important because young people constitute a significant component of the electorate. Disengagement may arise from political distrust, perceived ineffectiveness of participation, economic difficulties and exposure to negative political narratives. When young citizens withdraw from electoral processes, democratic representation becomes less inclusive.

Finally, poverty and economic vulnerability can increase susceptibility to material inducements and clientelist practices. Bratton's (2008) evidence indicates that campaign irregularities can have concentrated effects among poorer citizens. Economic vulnerability can therefore undermine citizens' ability to exercise electoral choices independently. These challenges demonstrate why the formal right to vote is insufficient on its own. Citizens require knowledge, critical thinking, political efficacy and awareness of electoral processes to navigate an environment in which electoral choices may be influenced by inducements, intimidation, misinformation and identity-based appeals. Civic competence consequently becomes particularly important in strengthening the quality of electoral participation in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Civic Voluntarism Theory

This study is anchored on the Civic Voluntarism Theory (CVT) developed by Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995). The theory provides a useful framework for explaining why some citizens participate in political activities while others remain inactive. Its central proposition is that political participation is influenced by three broad factors: resources, political engagement and recruitment. These dimensions are relevant to the present study because they provide a basis for understanding how citizens' capacities, motivations and social connections can influence their participation in electoral processes.

The first dimension, resources, refers to the capacities that enable citizens to participate in political activities. These include time, financial resources and civic skills. Civic skills encompass abilities such as communication, organisation and interaction with others in political and civic settings. In the context of this study, civic competence can be viewed as an important aspect of citizens' capacity to participate meaningfully. Political knowledge, understanding of civic rights and responsibilities, and the ability to evaluate political information can equip citizens to understand political issues, assess candidates and make informed electoral choices.

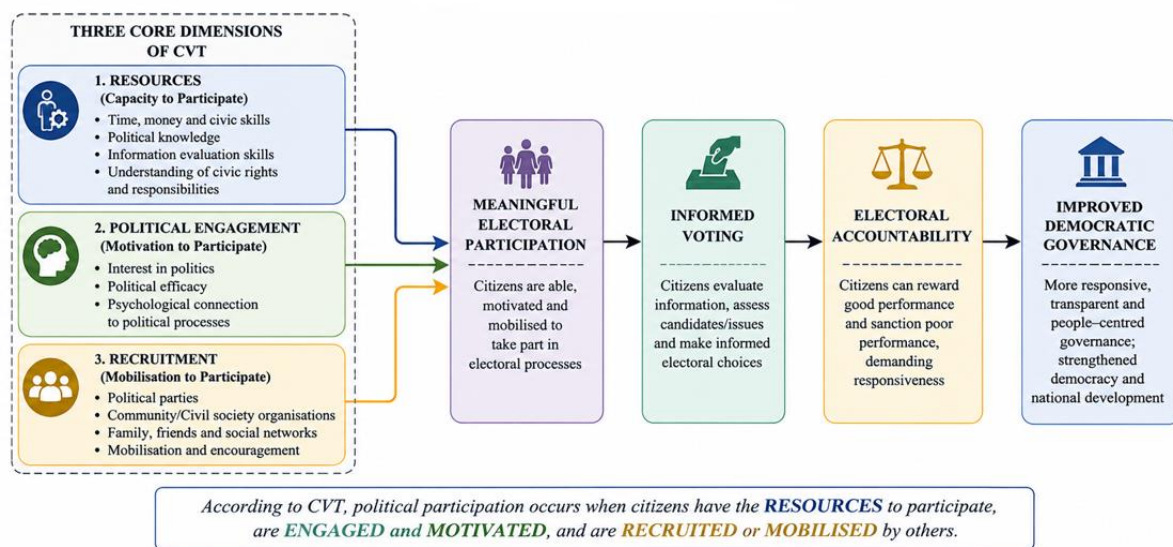
The second dimension is political engagement, which concerns citizens' interest in politics and their psychological connection to political activities. Political efficacy is particularly relevant to this dimension because citizens who believe that they can understand political affairs and influence political outcomes may be more willing to participate. Civic competence can therefore contribute to political participation not only by

providing citizens with relevant knowledge and skills but also by strengthening their confidence in their ability to engage effectively in political processes.

The third dimension, recruitment, refers to the processes through which individuals are encouraged or mobilised to participate in political activities. Political parties, community organisations, civil society organisations, family members, friends and other social networks can provide citizens with information, encouragement and opportunities to participate. In the Nigerian context, such mobilisation may influence voter registration, electoral turnout, campaign participation and engagement with civic organisations. Recruitment is therefore important because citizens who possess the necessary knowledge and motivation may nevertheless remain inactive if they lack social connections or opportunities that encourage political participation.

The three dimensions of CVT provide the theoretical basis for understanding how citizens' capacity, motivation and mobilisation may translate into meaningful electoral participation. The theoretical argument guiding this study is presented in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2: Theoretical Argument of the Study (Civic Voluntarism Theory Perspective)



Source: Author's conceptualisation based on Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995).

Application of Civic Voluntarism Theory to the Present Study

CVT provides a useful theoretical foundation for examining the relationship between civic competence and voting behaviour. The resources dimension explains how citizens' knowledge, skills and other capacities can facilitate meaningful political participation, while the engagement dimension helps explain how political interest and efficacy can motivate citizens to translate these capacities into participation. The recruitment dimension further highlights the role of social and institutional networks in encouraging citizens to participate in electoral processes.

Applied to the present study, the theory suggests that citizens who possess political knowledge, understand electoral procedures, can critically evaluate political information and have confidence in their ability to influence political outcomes are better positioned to participate meaningfully in elections. Civic competence can therefore strengthen citizens' capacity to acquire and evaluate political information and to assess candidates and policy alternatives. However, the possession of civic competence does not necessarily guarantee electoral participation, as political mobilisation and the wider electoral environment can influence whether citizens' capacities and motivations are translated into actual participation.

The theoretical argument can therefore be summarised as:

Resources + Political Engagement + Recruitment → Meaningful Electoral Participation → Informed Voting → Electoral Accountability → Improved Democratic Governance

This theoretical pathway complements the conceptual framework presented in Figure 2.1. While Figure 2.1 focuses specifically on the proposed relationship between civic competence, informed voting, electoral accountability and democratic governance, Figure 2.2 explains this relationship from the perspective of Civic Voluntarism Theory. In particular, CVT provides the theoretical explanation for how citizens' resources, political engagement and recruitment can facilitate meaningful electoral participation and informed voting.

Nevertheless, CVT does not imply that civic competence alone determines voting behaviour. Electoral participation occurs within a broader political, socioeconomic and institutional environment. Factors such as electoral integrity, poverty, misinformation, political violence, vote buying, political institutions and mobilisation may facilitate or constrain citizens' participation. Accordingly, this study uses CVT as a theoretical lens for understanding citizens' capacity, motivation and mobilisation for political participation, rather than as a statistical model to be directly tested.

Overall, Civic Voluntarism Theory provides an appropriate theoretical foundation for this study because it connects citizens' capacity to participate, willingness to participate and mobilisation into political activity with meaningful political participation. Within the context of this study, these mechanisms help explain how civic competence may contribute to informed voting, which can strengthen electoral accountability and ultimately support more responsive democratic governance in Nigeria.

Empirical Review

Existing empirical studies provide evidence that political knowledge, civic competence, electoral conditions and social identities influence political participation and voting behaviour in Nigeria. However, the literature has largely examined these factors separately, with relatively limited attention to civic competence as a multidimensional foundation of informed electoral participation.

Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017) examined the level of political participation and civic competence among citizens in Abeokuta metropolis. The study employed a descriptive survey design and collected questionnaire data from 240 participants selected through purposive sampling. The findings indicated relatively low levels of political participation and civic competence among the respondents, while gender, educational level and occupational status were associated with political participation and civic competence. The study is important to the present paper because it provides direct Nigerian evidence linking civic competence with political participation. However, its focus was on the general levels and determinants of civic competence and participation rather than on informed voting as a specific electoral outcome.

Bratton (2008) investigated vote buying and political violence in Nigerian election campaigns using survey evidence associated with the 2007 elections. The study found that exposure to electoral violence reduced voter turnout, while vote buying increased partisan loyalty. It also showed that the effects of campaign manipulation were particularly concentrated among poorer citizens. The study demonstrates how electoral conditions can distort or constrain citizens' participation and voting behaviour. However, its emphasis was on external electoral manipulation, rather than on citizens' internal knowledge, skills and capacities for making informed choices.

More recently, Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) examined psycho-demographic factors affecting voter apathy during Nigeria's 2019 presidential election and specifically investigated the mediating role of civic knowledge. The researchers used a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design involving focus group discussions, key-informant interviews and a cross-sectional survey of 2,340 participants in Lagos State. Their quantitative analysis employed descriptive statistics, multiple regression and structural equation modelling. The study found that patriotism, fear of electoral violence, perceived candidate quality, learned helplessness and age increased voter apathy, whereas civic knowledge reduced voter apathy. This finding is particularly relevant to the present study because it provides recent evidence that civic knowledge is associated with electoral participation. Nevertheless, civic knowledge represents only one dimension of the broader concept of civic competence proposed in this paper.

Studies have also examined identity-based voting behaviour in Nigeria. Egobueze and Ojirika (2017) examined the influence of ethnicity and religion on voting behaviour during the 2015 presidential election.

Using a rational-choice perspective, the authors argued that ethnic and religious considerations influenced voting behaviour and recommended greater emphasis on party ideology, candidate competence and reputation. Similarly, Daniel (2025) investigated ethno-religious sentiments and voting behaviour in Adamawa North Senatorial District during the 2019 general elections. Using primary and secondary data analysed through percentages and chi-square, the study found that ethnic and religious mobilisation influenced voting behaviour and, in some cases, pressured individuals to vote according to primordial affiliations rather than personal preferences. These studies demonstrate the importance of critical evaluation and issue-based decision-making in electoral participation, but they do not directly examine civic competence as an explanatory framework.

Recent evidence also highlights the growing importance of political communication and information quality. Aondover, Ademosu and Acheme (2026) examined the influence of hate speech during the 2023 presidential election on voter attitudes and electoral participation. Using survey research and content analysis, the study reported that ethno-religious and politically motivated hate speech contributed to misinformation, voter apathy and fear-driven electoral choices. This finding reinforces the importance of the information-evaluation dimension of civic competence, particularly in an electoral environment increasingly shaped by digital and social media.

Synthesis of the Empirical Literature

Taken together, the empirical literature establishes several important points. First, civic competence and political knowledge are relevant to political participation, as demonstrated by Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017) and Ojo et al. (2026). Second, electoral participation can be undermined by vote buying, violence and intimidation, as shown by Bratton (2008). Third, ethnic and religious identities can influence voting decisions, potentially shifting electoral choices away from policy and performance considerations (Egobueze & Ojirika, 2017; Daniel, 2025). Finally, the increasing influence of misinformation and political hate speech highlights the importance of citizens' ability to critically evaluate political information (Aondover et al., 2026).

Despite these contributions, the studies tend to examine individual components or external determinants of electoral behaviour in isolation. Civic competence has commonly been considered in terms of political participation or civic knowledge, while issues such as vote buying, violence, identity politics and misinformation have largely been treated as separate determinants of voting behaviour. The present paper brings these strands together by conceptualising civic competence as a multidimensional capacity encompassing political knowledge, understanding of democratic institutions, civic rights and responsibilities, political efficacy, electoral awareness, critical evaluation of political information, willingness to participate and respect for democratic norms.

This broader conceptualisation provides the basis for understanding why the formal right to vote may not necessarily result in informed electoral participation and provides a clearer link between citizen capacity, voting behaviour, electoral accountability and democratic governance.

Gap in Literature

Existing research provides useful insights into electoral participation and political behaviour in Nigeria, but the evidence remains dispersed across different aspects of the electoral process. Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017), for example, examined political participation and civic competence among citizens in Abeokuta and reported relatively low levels of both among their respondents. Their findings highlight the relevance of civic competence to political participation, but the study did not specifically examine informed electoral participation or how civic competence may relate to electoral accountability.

Bratton (2008), in contrast, focused on vote buying and political intimidation in Nigerian election campaigns. The study showed that electoral violence could reduce turnout, while vote buying could strengthen partisan loyalty, illustrating the influence of electoral manipulation on voter behaviour. However, its focus was primarily on external pressures and constraints on voters, rather than on the knowledge, skills, political efficacy and information-evaluation abilities that citizens bring to the electoral process.

More recently, Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) examined psycho-demographic factors associated with voter

apathy during the 2019 presidential election, including the role of civic knowledge. Their mixed-methods study of 2,340 respondents in Lagos State provides recent evidence of the relevance of civic knowledge to electoral participation. However, civic knowledge represents only one aspect of the broader concept of civic competence considered in this study.

Taken together, these studies point to a gap in how the different dimensions of electoral participation are understood. Nigerian research has examined civic competence, civic knowledge, voter apathy, vote buying, electoral violence and voting behaviour, but these issues have largely been considered separately. Less attention has been given to bringing them together within a broader framework that considers how citizens' knowledge, skills, confidence and ability to evaluate political information may shape the quality of electoral participation.

This study responds to that gap by treating civic competence as a multidimensional capacity that includes political knowledge, understanding of democratic institutions, awareness of civic rights and responsibilities, political efficacy, electoral awareness, critical evaluation of political information, willingness to participate and respect for democratic norms. It then considers how these dimensions may contribute to informed voting and how informed electoral choices may create greater potential for electoral accountability and democratic governance.

The resulting conceptual pathway is:

Civic Competence → Informed Voting → Electoral Accountability → Improved Democratic Governance

The contribution of the study is therefore not to suggest that civic competence is the only factor shaping voting behaviour. Rather, it provides an integrated way of thinking about why the formal right to vote does not necessarily translate into informed and meaningful electoral participation in Nigeria. The framework also recognises that citizens make electoral choices within a wider environment shaped by electoral integrity, institutional trust, socioeconomic circumstances, access to reliable information and freedom from intimidation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a conceptual research design based on a qualitative review and synthesis of relevant literature on civic competence, voting behaviour, electoral participation and democratic governance. The approach is appropriate because the study seeks to develop a conceptual understanding of how citizens' civic capacities may contribute to informed electoral participation and electoral accountability in Nigeria rather than statistically estimate causal relationships.

The study draws on scholarly articles, books, institutional reports, constitutional and electoral documents, and other relevant secondary sources. Particular attention is given to literature addressing political knowledge, civic skills, political efficacy, electoral awareness, information evaluation, voter behaviour, vote buying, electoral violence, misinformation and democratic governance.

Sources of Information

The study relies exclusively on secondary sources. These include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic

books, official publications and reports from relevant institutions, including the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Federal Government of Nigeria and international organisations concerned with democracy and governance.

The literature was selected based on its relevance to the study's central themes: civic competence, informed voting, electoral accountability and democratic governance. Both foundational studies and recent Nigerian

evidence were considered to provide theoretical grounding and contemporary context.

Analytical Approach

The study employs conceptual analysis and thematic synthesis to examine and integrate evidence from the reviewed literature. The literature is organised around the major dimensions of the study's conceptual framework, namely civic competence, voting and electoral participation, civic competence and voting behaviour, electoral accountability, democratic governance, and the challenges affecting effective electoral participation in Nigeria.

Rather than statistically testing hypotheses, the study systematically compares and synthesises findings from existing studies to identify recurring relationships, areas of convergence and divergence, and gaps or limitations in the existing literature. Particular attention is given to how different dimensions of civic competence, including political knowledge, political efficacy, electoral awareness and the ability to critically evaluate political information, are associated with citizens' electoral participation and voting behaviour.

The analysis is guided by the Civic Voluntarism Theory (CVT) of Verba, Scholzman and Brady (1995), which explains political participation in terms of citizens' resources, political engagement and recruitment. The theory provides the analytical lens through which the reviewed literature is interpreted, particularly in relation to citizens' capacity, motivation and mobilisation to participate in political and electoral activities.

Drawing from the reviewed literature and the theoretical framework, the study develops the following conceptual pathway:

Civic Competence → Informed Voting → Electoral Accountability → Improved Democratic Governance

The analysis also recognises that this relationship operates within a broader political and socioeconomic context. Factors such as education, socioeconomic conditions, electoral integrity, political institutions, the media environment and cultural norms may facilitate or constrain the extent to which civic competence is translated into informed electoral participation and accountability. These contextual factors are therefore considered when interpreting the evidence rather than being treated as statistically tested variables.

Overall, the analytical approach enables the study to integrate theoretical arguments and empirical evidence to examine how and under what conditions civic competence may contribute to more informed voting and, ultimately, stronger electoral accountability and democratic governance in Nigeria.

Conceptual Synthesis

The final stage of the methodology involves synthesising the reviewed literature into an integrated conceptual framework for understanding informed electoral participation in Nigeria. The framework brings together dimensions of civic competence that have often been examined separately in previous studies. It argues that political knowledge, civic awareness, political efficacy, critical evaluation of information and civic skills can enhance citizens' capacity to make informed electoral choices.

The study therefore does not seek to establish statistical causality. Instead, it develops a theoretically informed explanation of why civic competence matters for the quality of electoral participation and, ultimately, democratic governance in Nigeria.

DISCUSSION

Civic Competence and the Quality of Electoral Participation in Nigeria

Civic Competence and Informed Voting

The literature reviewed suggests that civic competence provides an important foundation for meaningful electoral participation. Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017) established a relationship between civic competence and

political participation, while Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) found that civic knowledge is relevant to voter apathy in Nigeria. Although these studies examine different aspects of civic capacity, together they highlight the importance of citizens' knowledge and capacity in shaping how they engage with political processes. In this study, civic competence is understood more broadly to include political knowledge, electoral awareness, political efficacy, the ability to critically evaluate political information and respect for democratic norms.

Political knowledge is particularly important because informed voting requires citizens to understand political institutions, the responsibilities of elected officials and the policy implications of electoral choices. Citizens with greater political knowledge are better positioned to compare candidates and political alternatives rather than relying solely on personal characteristics, party loyalty or group identity. Civic competence therefore provides an important foundation for making reasoned electoral decisions.

Political efficacy adds another important dimension to this relationship. Having political information does not necessarily mean that citizens will participate. Some may remain disengaged because they believe that their participation will have little effect on political outcomes. Civic Voluntarism Theory helps explain this distinction by emphasising political engagement alongside the resources and mobilisation necessary for participation (Verba, Scholzman and Brady, 1995). Civic competence is therefore relevant not only because citizens need to know, but also because they need to believe that their participation can make a difference.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that informed voting involves more than simply possessing the legal right to vote. Citizens need sufficient knowledge, awareness and confidence to assess political choices. This distinction is particularly important in Nigeria, where formal voting rights do not necessarily guarantee informed or meaningful electoral participation.

Civic Competence and Resistance to Electoral Manipulation

The literature also draws attention to the ways in which electoral practices can distort citizens' choices. Bratton (2008), for example, demonstrated the significance of vote buying and electoral violence in Nigerian election campaigns. Such practices can shift electoral decisions away from consideration of candidates, policies and performance towards immediate material benefits, fear or coercion.

Civic competence may help citizens recognise and critically assess these influences. A voter who understands the broader responsibilities associated with democratic citizenship may be better able to distinguish short-term inducements from longer-term public interests. Similarly, the ability to evaluate political information critically can help citizens question competing claims and recognise misleading political narratives.

However, it would be unrealistic to assume that civic competence alone can eliminate electoral manipulation. Material circumstances, political clientelism, identity-based mobilisation and distrust in electoral institutions may continue to shape citizens' choices even when they possess political knowledge. Thus, the literature points to an important interaction between citizen capacity and the conditions within which electoral participation takes place.

Strengthening civic competence is therefore important, but it needs to be accompanied by an electoral environment in which citizens are able to exercise their choices freely and without coercion.

From Informed Voting to Electoral Accountability

The literature provides a conceptual basis for linking informed voting with electoral accountability. Elections give citizens an opportunity to assess political leaders and to reward or sanction them through their electoral choices. Where voters consider competence, integrity, policies and performance when making electoral decisions, elections have greater potential to serve as an accountability mechanism.

The accountability function of elections can be weakened, however, when voting decisions are primarily influenced by vote buying, intimidation, misinformation or identity-based considerations. Under such conditions, electoral outcomes may not adequately reflect citizens' assessment of political performance.

The findings of Ojo et al. (2026) are relevant in this regard. Their finding that civic knowledge is associated with lower voter apathy suggests that strengthening citizens' civic capacity may help address disengagement and increase the likelihood that citizens will use elections to express their preferences and evaluate political leadership. The relationship can therefore be expressed conceptually as:

Civic competence → informed electoral choice → electoral accountability.

This should not be understood as an automatic causal sequence. Rather, civic competence may create conditions that enable citizens to use elections more effectively as an accountability mechanism. Whether this potential is realised also depends on electoral credibility, political competition, institutional checks and balances, and citizens' confidence in electoral institutions.

Electoral Accountability and Democratic Governance

The significance of electoral participation extends beyond the selection of political representatives. Elections can influence the incentives facing political leaders by creating the possibility of electoral reward or sanction. When citizens can evaluate government performance and communicate their preferences through elections, political leaders may have greater incentives to respond to public demands.

This creates a conceptual connection between electoral accountability and democratic governance. Effective electoral participation can contribute to representation by influencing who occupies public office, to responsiveness by communicating citizens' preferences, and to accountability by allowing citizens to assess political performance.

This relationship is particularly important in Nigeria because elected officials make decisions affecting public expenditure, education, healthcare, infrastructure, employment, security and economic policy. Electoral choices therefore have consequences that extend well beyond election day. The quality of citizens' electoral decisions can shape the political incentives surrounding these areas of public policy.

Voting should therefore not be viewed simply as an isolated act of selecting political candidates. It forms part of a continuing relationship between citizens and political leaders in which citizens can express preferences, assess performance and demand accountability. Informed participation strengthens the potential for this relationship to function effectively.

Contextual Conditions and the Nigerian Electoral Environment

The literature also makes clear that civic competence operates within a wider political, social and economic environment. Voter apathy, vote buying, electoral violence, misinformation, ethnic and religious considerations, political clientelism, distrust in electoral institutions, youth disengagement and poverty can all affect the quality of electoral participation.

These conditions are important because they show why civic competence alone cannot fully explain electoral behaviour. A citizen may possess adequate political knowledge but become unwilling to vote because of electoral violence or distrust in the electoral process. Similarly, a politically informed citizen experiencing severe economic hardship may face pressures associated with vote buying.

The findings of Bratton (2008) regarding vote buying and electoral violence, together with the findings of Ojo et al. (2026) concerning civic knowledge and voter apathy, can therefore be viewed as complementary. They suggest that both citizens' capacity and the quality of the electoral environment matter for meaningful participation.

This has an important implication for the conceptual framework. Civic competence should not be presented as a substitute for electoral reform, institutional credibility or socioeconomic improvement. Rather, effective democracy requires both competent citizens and credible institutions. Citizens need the capacity to make informed choices, while electoral institutions need to provide a credible environment in which those choices can be expressed and respected.

An Integrated Explanation of Civic Competence and Electoral Participation

Taken together, the literature points to several interconnected relationships. Political knowledge and civic competence can enhance citizens' ability to understand and evaluate political choices. Political efficacy and civic awareness can encourage citizens to participate rather than remain apathetic. Critical evaluation of political information can help citizens question misleading claims and manipulative electoral appeals. Finally, informed participation can strengthen the potential for elections to function as mechanisms of political accountability. These relationships provide the basis for the study's central conceptual pathway:

Civic Competence → Informed Voting → Electoral Accountability → Improved Democratic Governance

The pathway brings together the different strands of literature reviewed in this study. Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017) provide evidence concerning civic competence and political participation; Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) highlight the relevance of civic knowledge to voter apathy; Bratton (2008) demonstrates how vote buying and violence can influence electoral behaviour; while Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) provide the theoretical foundation for understanding the resources, engagement and mobilisation underlying political participation.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the quality of electoral participation depends not simply on whether citizens possess the legal right to vote, but also on whether they have the knowledge, skills, confidence and democratic dispositions necessary to exercise that right meaningfully. The contribution of this study lies in bringing these dimensions together under the broader concept of civic competence. Rather than treating political knowledge, voter apathy, electoral manipulation and voting behaviour as entirely separate issues, the study views citizens' capacity to understand, evaluate and participate in democratic processes as a connecting framework. In the Nigerian context, strengthening civic competence may therefore support more informed electoral participation and increase the potential for elections to contribute to accountability and democratic governance.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The discussion in this study suggests that improving the quality of electoral participation in Nigeria requires more than increasing voter turnout. Citizens need the knowledge, confidence and critical skills necessary to understand political issues, evaluate candidates and make informed electoral choices. At the same time, civic competence must be supported by credible electoral institutions and a political environment in which citizens can exercise their choices freely. Based on these considerations, the following policy implications and recommendations are proposed.

Strengthening Civic and Voter Education

Nigeria should move beyond voter education that focuses mainly on voter registration and the mechanics of casting a ballot. Civic and voter education programmes should also help citizens understand democratic institutions, their rights and responsibilities, candidate evaluation, public policies, media literacy and the identification of misinformation. This broader approach would help citizens move from simply knowing how to vote to understanding how to make informed electoral choices.

Integrating Civic Competence into Formal Education

Civic competence should be developed through schools, colleges and universities. Civic education should go beyond teaching students about government institutions and electoral procedures and should also promote critical thinking, political efficacy, democratic values, tolerance, information evaluation and responsible participation. Developing these skills at an early stage can help young citizens approach political participation with greater confidence and independence.

Strengthening Electoral Information and Media Literacy

INEC, civil society organisations, educational institutions and media organisations should work together to provide citizens with accessible, accurate and timely electoral information. Greater attention should be given to digital and media literacy, particularly as social media has become an important source of political information. Citizens should be encouraged and equipped to verify political claims, identify misleading information and consider the credibility of sources before using political information to guide their electoral decisions.

Reducing the Influence of Vote Buying and Political Clientelism

Efforts to strengthen civic competence should be accompanied by stronger measures to address vote buying and other forms of electoral inducement. Civic education can help citizens understand the longer-term consequences of exchanging their electoral choices for short-term benefits. However, education alone is unlikely to eliminate vote buying. It should therefore be complemented by effective enforcement, greater electoral transparency and policies that address the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that may make citizens more susceptible to political inducements.

Strengthening Youth Electoral Engagement

Young Nigerians should be actively engaged through universities, social media, community organisations and youth-focused civic programmes. The objective should not simply be to increase youth turnout but to encourage meaningful and informed participation. Programmes should develop political efficacy, critical thinking and the ability to assess candidates and policies independently, rather than allowing electoral choices to be driven predominantly by party, ethnic or religious identification.

Improving Trust in Electoral Institutions

Civic competence is less likely to translate into meaningful participation when citizens lack confidence in electoral institutions. Efforts to improve civic and voter education should therefore be accompanied by measures to strengthen electoral transparency, credibility and institutional accountability. INEC and other relevant institutions should communicate electoral procedures and outcomes clearly and consistently, while addressing concerns that may undermine public confidence in the electoral process. Building institutional trust is important because citizens are more likely to participate meaningfully when they believe that their participation can make a difference.

Promoting Issue-Based Electoral Decision-Making

Political parties, candidates, media organisations and civil society groups should promote electoral debate centred on policies, competence, integrity and performance rather than ethnicity, religion, personality and material inducements. Greater emphasis on substantive political issues would provide citizens with better opportunities to use their civic knowledge and critical-thinking skills when evaluating competing candidates and policy alternatives.

Strengthening Post-Election Accountability

Civic competence should not be viewed as relevant only during election periods. Citizens should also be encouraged to monitor elected representatives, seek information about government performance and participate in discussions concerning public policies and expenditure. Civil society organisations and community groups can support citizens in monitoring public officials and demanding greater transparency. In this sense, voting should be understood as the beginning of an accountability relationship rather than the end of political participation.

CONCLUSION

Voting is one of the main ways through which citizens participate in democratic governance, choose political

representatives and influence public policy. However, having the formal right to vote does not necessarily mean that electoral participation will be informed or meaningful. In Nigeria, voter apathy, vote buying, electoral violence, misinformation, identity-based politics, political clientelism and distrust in electoral institutions can all shape how citizens participate and make electoral choices.

This paper argues that civic competence provides an important foundation for improving the quality of electoral participation. In the study, civic competence is understood as a multidimensional capacity that includes political knowledge, understanding of democratic institutions, awareness of civic rights and responsibilities, political efficacy, critical evaluation of political information, willingness to participate and respect for democratic norms. Evidence from Nigeria supports the relevance of several of these dimensions. Adetoro and Omiyefa (2017), for example, identified challenges relating to civic competence and political participation among their respondents, while Ojo, Olapegba and Shenge (2026) found an association between civic knowledge and voter apathy.

The discussion also shows that civic competence cannot be considered in isolation from the conditions in which elections take place. Political knowledge and civic awareness can help citizens evaluate candidates and policies, but poverty, electoral violence, vote buying, misinformation and weak institutional trust may limit their ability to participate freely and meaningfully. Civic competence should therefore complement rather than replace electoral and institutional reform. Effective democracy requires both citizens who are prepared to participate and institutions that provide a credible environment in which their participation can have meaning. The central conceptual argument of the paper is expressed as:

Civic Competence → Informed Voting → Electoral Accountability → Improved Democratic Governance

This pathway should not be understood as an automatic causal sequence. Rather, it highlights how civic competence may create conditions that enable citizens to make more informed electoral choices. When these choices are exercised within credible electoral institutions, elections have greater potential to strengthen representation, responsiveness and political accountability.

The paper contributes to the existing literature by bringing together dimensions of civic capacity that are often examined separately. Previous Nigerian studies have considered issues such as civic competence, civic knowledge, voter apathy, vote buying, electoral violence and voting behaviour. This paper brings these strands together within a broader framework that considers how citizens' capacity to understand, evaluate and participate in democratic processes may affect the quality of electoral participation and, ultimately, democratic governance.

The broader implication is that strengthening Nigerian democracy requires more than simply encouraging citizens to vote. Attention must also be given to how citizens acquire political knowledge, evaluate electoral information, understand their civic responsibilities and develop the confidence to participate meaningfully. Civic education should therefore be viewed as an ongoing process rather than an activity that begins and ends around election periods. It should help citizens develop the knowledge, critical skills and confidence needed to make informed electoral choices and to remain engaged with political institutions beyond election day.

Ultimately, the quality of democracy depends not only on who participates, but also on how citizens participate and whether institutions respond to that participation. Strengthening civic competence alongside credible electoral institutions can therefore provide a stronger foundation for informed voting, electoral accountability and more responsive democratic governance in Nigeria.

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