Reforming Local Government Elections in Nigeria: Institutional Independence, Electoral Credibility and Grassroots Democracy

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between the institutional independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), electoral credibility and grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines how financial autonomy, independence in appointments and freedom from political interference relate to the credibility of local government elections, and assesses how electoral reform relates to voter participation, political competition and citizens' involvement in local governance. The study adopts a qualitative documentary research design supported by a comparative case-study approach. Secondary data are drawn from constitutional provisions, electoral records, academic publications, credible newspaper reports and other relevant institutional documents relating to local government elections in Lagos, Enugu and Kano States. The data are analysed thematically and comparatively to identify common patterns, institutional challenges and implications for electoral reform. The documentary analysis identifies recurring concerns about voter participation, electoral logistics and the concentration of electoral victories in governing parties across the selected cases. It also highlights the importance of transparent appointment procedures, predictable funding, impartial electoral administration, accessible complaint mechanisms and independent post-election reviews. However, the evidence does not establish that institutional dependence directly caused the reported electoral outcomes, nor does it conclusively determine the extent of financial autonomy in the three states. The study concludes that conducting local government elections is insufficient to guarantee meaningful grassroots democracy without credible electoral administration, fair political competition and effective accountability mechanisms. It recommends strengthening SIEC institutional safeguards and implementing practical reforms to improve electoral transparency, citizen participation and public confidence in local government elections. The study contributes to discussions on electoral governance by highlighting the importance of examining both formal institutional arrangements and documented electoral practices.

Keywords: Electoral credibility, grassroots democracy, institutional independence, local government elections, Nigeria, State Independent Electoral Commissions.

INTRODUCTION

Electoral credibility and grassroots democratic participation remain central concerns in contemporary democratic governance, particularly in countries where political institutions are expected to translate citizens' preferences into accountable leadership and responsive public administration. Globally, the independence, professional capacity and impartiality of electoral management bodies are recognised as important conditions for credible elections, although their effectiveness also depends on institutional design, political competition and the broader democratic environment. Campion and Jega (2023), in their comparative examination of electoral management bodies in Africa, demonstrate that electoral institutions face diverse challenges associated with political interference, institutional capacity and democratic

backsliding, making sustained efforts to strengthen their autonomy and public trust essential. This concern is particularly relevant to local government elections because the credibility of electoral processes at the grassroots influences citizens' opportunities to choose their representatives, participate in local decision-making and hold elected officials accountable.

In Nigeria, local government is constitutionally recognised as a tier of government intended to facilitate democratic representation and development at the community level. However, the administration of local government elections has generated persistent concerns regarding the independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), political influence over electoral administration and the credibility of election outcomes. Under the existing constitutional framework, SIECs are responsible for organising, undertaking and supervising local government council elections within their respective states, while the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducts elections to the offices and institutions assigned to it by the Constitution. This distinction is important because reforming local government elections requires careful consideration of the institutional relationship between INEC, SIECs and state governments. Campion and Jega (2023) argue that the autonomy and capacity of electoral management bodies are important to electoral integrity, while Madueke and Enyiazu (2025), examining Nigeria's 2023 general election, identify political interference, organisational weaknesses and failures to comply with electoral rules as continuing challenges to credible electoral administration. Although the latter study focuses on general elections, its institutional insights provide a useful basis for investigating the challenges facing state-level electoral management.

Recent developments have further strengthened the relevance of this debate. The 2023 general election generated renewed discussion about the effectiveness of electoral reforms and the ability of electoral institutions to translate legal and technological provisions into credible outcomes. Tsokwa and Nwanegbo (2024) found that logistical difficulties, technological failures, voter suppression and concerns about electoral administration undermined confidence in the 2023 electoral process. More directly relevant to grassroots governance, the Supreme Court's judgment of 11 July 2024 in Attorney-General of the Federation v. Attorney-General of Abia State and 35 Others reaffirmed the constitutional status of local governments and challenged practices inconsistent with democratically elected local government leadership. Nevertheless, Worugji and Worugji (2026) argue that the judgment's practical impact on local government autonomy and grassroots participation remains uncertain, indicating that legal recognition alone may not resolve the institutional and political challenges affecting democratic local governance.

Against this background, institutional independence becomes a critical consideration in assessing the credibility of local government elections. Where electoral commissions depend heavily on state governments for funding, appointments and operational decisions, concerns may arise about their ability to administer elections impartially and resist political pressure. Such concerns can affect public confidence, opposition participation and acceptance of election outcomes. Equally, electoral reform should not be assessed solely in terms of changes to laws or administrative procedures; its significance must also be considered in relation to voter participation, political competition and citizens' meaningful involvement in local governance. Despite growing scholarly attention to electoral integrity and local government autonomy, there remains a need to examine more directly how the institutional independence of SIECs relates to the credibility of local government elections and how electoral reform may influence grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria.

Thus, the general objective of this study is to examine the relationship between institutional independence in the administration of local government elections and democratic outcomes in Nigeria, with particular reference to electoral credibility and grassroots democracy. Specifically, the study aims to:

i. examine the influence of the institutional independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) on the credibility of local government elections in Nigeria, particularly in relation to financial autonomy, independence in appointments and freedom from political interference.

ii. assess the effect of local government electoral reform on grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria,

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particularly in relation to voter participation, political competition and citizens' involvement in local governance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Local Government

Local government constitutes an important institution of decentralised governance through which public authority is exercised at the grassroots level. It is designed to bring government closer to the people, facilitate the administration of local affairs, promote community development and provide opportunities for citizens to participate in decisions affecting their immediate environment. In a decentralised political system, local government performs a connecting role between higher levels of government and local communities by identifying community needs, implementing assigned public policies and providing services within its jurisdiction. Ogunnubi (2022) explains that local government in Nigeria is associated with grassroots development, local democracy and service delivery, although its practical effectiveness has been constrained by institutional weaknesses and limitations on its autonomy. This understanding establishes local government as both an administrative institution and a potential mechanism for democratic representation and public accountability.

Conceptually, local government can be understood as a legally established subnational authority responsible for administering a defined geographical area, performing public functions assigned by law and representing the interests of the people within its jurisdiction. Its distinguishing characteristics include a recognised territorial boundary, an institutional structure, legally assigned responsibilities and arrangements for making and implementing decisions on local public affairs. Unlike informal community associations, traditional institutions or voluntary organisations, local government exercises public authority through legally recognised structures and procedures. Nevertheless, local government should not be understood merely as an administrative extension of the state government. Its democratic purpose includes providing opportunities for local representation, responding to community priorities and ensuring that public decisions reflect the needs of residents. The extent to which it performs these functions effectively depends on its legal powers, financial resources, administrative capacity and relationship with other levels of government.

In Nigeria, local government occupies a constitutionally recognised position within the country's federal system. Section 7(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) guarantees a system of democratically elected local government councils and requires state governments to ensure their existence under laws providing for their establishment, structure, composition, finance and functions. The Fourth Schedule to the Constitution specifies functions assigned to local government councils, including matters relating to local markets, roads, public conveniences, refuse disposal, specified rates and licences, and participation in areas such as primary healthcare, agricultural development and primary education, subject to the relevant legal provisions. Suberu (2024) explains that constitutional reforms established local government as the third tier of Nigeria's federal system and provided for local government boundaries, assigned functions, intergovernmental revenue transfers and democratically elected councils. However, the formal recognition of local government within the federal structure does not necessarily guarantee that councils possess sufficient authority or resources to perform their responsibilities independently.

From the perspective of decentralisation, local government is intended to distribute governmental responsibilities closer to the communities affected by public decisions. This arrangement may improve administrative responsiveness because local officials are potentially better placed to identify specific community needs and determine appropriate priorities. It can also facilitate participatory development by creating channels through which residents communicate their concerns to public authorities. Ogunnubi (2022), however, observes that the Nigerian local government system has faced persistent challenges, including inadequate funding, political instability, corruption, constitutional ambiguities and excessive state-level control. These difficulties demonstrate that the effectiveness of local government depends not simply on its constitutional existence but also on the institutional conditions under which it operates. Similarly, Arum and Likinyo (2024) discuss local government autonomy as an important consideration in the pursuit

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of grassroots development in Nigeria. Their contribution reinforces the need to distinguish between the formal establishment of local councils and their practical ability to exercise their assigned responsibilities.

Local government is also closely connected with representative democracy and citizens' participation in public affairs. Democratically elected councils are expected to provide a platform through which residents choose their representatives, express political preferences and hold elected officials accountable for their decisions. Olaniyan (2023), in examining informal community governance in Ibadan, highlights the importance of participation, openness and accountability in local governance. Although informal community governance is distinct from statutory local government, the study offers a useful perspective on the democratic practices that can strengthen the management of local affairs. For statutory local government, credible elections are important because they provide the formal process through which citizens select representatives and confer democratic legitimacy on local councils. Where elections lack transparency, genuine political competition or public confidence, the representative function of local government may be weakened, limiting citizens' ability to influence grassroots governance.

The relationship between local government and electoral reform is particularly significant in Nigeria because local government elections are administered by State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), established under Section 197 of the 1999 Constitution, with their functions specified in Part II of the Third Schedule. Consequently, the quality of local government democracy depends partly on the independence, administrative capacity and impartiality of the institutions responsible for conducting these elections. Institutional arrangements governing electoral administration can influence the transparency of voting and result collation, the fairness of political competition and citizens' confidence in elected councils. Electoral reform should therefore be considered not only as a technical adjustment to election procedures but also as an institutional measure intended to strengthen democratic representation, public accountability and citizen participation at the grassroots level.

Institutional Independence

Institutional independence is a fundamental concept in democratic governance, public administration and electoral management. It concerns the extent to which a public institution can perform its legally assigned responsibilities and make decisions impartially without undue interference from political authorities, private interests or other external actors. In electoral administration, institutional independence is particularly important because the credibility of elections depends partly on whether the body responsible for organising and supervising the process can discharge its duties without favouring the government, ruling party or any particular candidate. Recent studies of electoral management bodies emphasise that institutional independence, organisational capacity and accountability are important considerations in assessing the quality of election administration and electoral integrity (Campion & Jega, 2023; Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025).

Conceptually, institutional independence refers to the legal, administrative, financial and operational capacity of an organisation to exercise its responsibilities according to its mandate rather than the preferences of external power holders. It does not mean that an institution operates without laws, oversight or accountability. Rather, it means that its decisions are guided by established rules, professional standards and the public interest, while mechanisms of oversight prevent abuse of authority without allowing political actors to dictate its routine decisions. In this sense, independence must be distinguished from institutional effectiveness: an organisation may possess formal autonomy but lack the personnel, funding, technical resources or administrative competence required to perform its functions effectively. Similarly, an institution may have adequate resources but remain vulnerable to political interference. Institutional independence is therefore best understood as a combination of formal protections and practical freedom to act impartially.

Within electoral governance, institutional independence concerns the extent to which an electoral management body is protected from inappropriate political influence in its leadership, finances, decision-making and administration of elections. Campion and Jega (2023), in their examination of electoral management bodies in Africa amid democratic backsliding, highlight the significance of independent electoral institutions to democratic governance and the continuing variation in their autonomy and

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performance across countries. Their analysis indicates that the formal existence of an independent electoral body should not be treated as conclusive evidence of genuine independence in practice. The relevant question is whether the institution can make and implement electoral decisions impartially, even when those decisions conflict with the interests of powerful political actors.

Dimensions of Institutional Independence

For this study, institutional independence can be examined through four interrelated dimensions.

Financial independence refers to the extent to which an electoral commission can obtain, manage and utilise its approved funds without undue financial pressure from political authorities. Predictable and timely funding enables SIECs to prepare electoral materials, train personnel, arrange logistics and conduct elections according to established schedules. Where funding is delayed or made conditional on political preferences, the commission's ability to operate independently may be weakened.

Appointment and tenure independence concerns the procedures for appointing electoral commissioners, the security of their tenure and the conditions under which they may be removed. Transparent, merit-based and impartial appointment arrangements can strengthen public confidence in the neutrality of electoral institutions. Conversely, appointments perceived as politically motivated may create doubts about whether commissioners can make decisions without favouring those responsible for their appointment.

Operational independence refers to the practical freedom of an electoral commission to plan and conduct elections, issue administrative instructions, deploy electoral personnel, manage polling and collation arrangements, and implement electoral rules without inappropriate interference. Operational independence is particularly important where electoral decisions may affect the political interests of incumbent officeholders.

Decision-making independence concerns the ability of electoral officials to apply electoral laws and procedures consistently, impartially and without pressure from political parties, candidates or government officials. It includes the capacity to address electoral complaints within the commission's legal mandate and to make administrative decisions based on evidence and established rules rather than partisan considerations.

These dimensions are consistent with the broader literature on electoral management bodies. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025), for example, identify limited independence and political interference as significant constraints on electoral integrity in Nigeria. Their findings concern INEC and the 2023 general election, so their application to SIECs should be treated as a relevant analytical comparison rather than direct evidence about every state electoral commission.

Institutional independence in the Nigerian local government electoral system

In Nigeria, institutional independence has particular relevance to State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), which are constitutionally established to organise, undertake and supervise elections to local government councils within their respective states. Section 197 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) provides for State Independent Electoral Commissions, while Part II of the Third Schedule outlines their functions.

Although SIECs have a formal constitutional basis, their practical independence must be assessed by examining how they are appointed, funded and managed, and whether they can discharge their electoral responsibilities without undue political interference. A commission may be formally designated as independent but still face practical constraints arising from its relationship with the state executive, its financial arrangements or its administrative capacity. The distinction between formal independence and independence in practice is important: legal provisions may establish autonomy, but actual conduct determines whether that autonomy is exercised effectively.

Research on electoral management in Africa similarly indicates that electoral bodies' autonomy and performance vary across national contexts and that institutional independence should be considered

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alongside organisational capacity and the wider political environment (Campion & Jega, 2023). Independence, therefore, should not be interpreted as freedom from legitimate oversight. Rather, SIECs should be subject to lawful accountability while retaining the ability to administer elections impartially.

Electoral Credibility

Electoral credibility is a fundamental element of democratic governance because it concerns the extent to which an election is conducted in a manner that is transparent, impartial, competitive and consistent with established electoral laws and procedures. A credible election provides citizens and political contestants with reasonable assurance that the electoral process offers a genuine opportunity to compete for public office and that votes are accurately counted and reflected in the declared results. Electoral credibility therefore extends beyond the mere organisation of an election; it also encompasses the fairness of the procedures, the impartiality of electoral officials, the integrity of voting and result collation, and the degree of public confidence in the outcome.

In the Nigerian context, electoral credibility remains an important concern because the conduct of elections does not always translate into public confidence in the legitimacy of elected representatives. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025), in their study of electoral integrity and election management during Nigeria's 2023 general election, examine how organisational arrangements, institutional independence and administrative capacity influence the integrity of the electoral process. Although their study focuses on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and general elections rather than State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), its findings provide a useful basis for understanding why electoral credibility depends partly on the independence and effectiveness of electoral management institutions.

Recent evidence concerning local government elections in Nigeria illustrates the importance of these dimensions. A 2025 report by the Human and Environmental Development Agenda (HEDA Resource Centre), as reported by Premium Times, found that only 41 per cent of respondents expressed trust in SIECs to conduct free and fair local government elections, while 45 per cent believed that these commissions operated independently of state governors. The report also found that 69 per cent of respondents had never voted in a local government election. These findings indicate a potential connection between institutional trust and grassroots electoral participation, although they do not, on their own, establish that low trust directly causes non-participation.

Electoral credibility is particularly relevant to the present study because SIECs are constitutionally responsible for organising, undertaking and supervising elections to local government councils within their respective states. Where these commissions are financially dependent, vulnerable to political interference or unable to administer electoral procedures impartially, citizens may question whether local elections provide a genuine choice of representatives. Olaleye (2023), in examining local government election management in Lagos State, argues that political control over electoral administration can undermine the perception that local elections are open and competitive. Similarly, Aiyede (2025) highlights concerns about the credibility of local government elections following the Supreme Court's July 2024 judgment on local government autonomy, particularly the continuing influence of state-level political interests over local electoral institutions.

Grassroots Democracy

Grassroots democracy refers to a form of democratic governance in which citizens participate actively in political decision-making and public affairs at the community and local levels. It emphasises the involvement of ordinary people in choosing their representatives, expressing their needs, influencing public policies and holding elected officials accountable. Unlike a narrow understanding of democracy that concentrates mainly on national elections and the selection of political leaders, grassroots democracy places particular importance on participation within the communities where citizens experience the direct effects of public decisions. It recognises that democracy becomes more meaningful when people have opportunities to influence decisions concerning local infrastructure, education, healthcare, sanitation, security and community development.

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Conceptually, grassroots democracy is founded on the principles of political participation, representation, accountability, inclusiveness and responsiveness. Political participation allows citizens to contribute to public affairs through voting, political discussion, engagement with political parties and involvement in community initiatives. Representation requires elected officials to reflect the interests and preferences of their constituents. Accountability ensures that local officeholders explain their decisions and can be challenged when they fail to fulfil their responsibilities. Inclusiveness requires that different groups within the community have meaningful opportunities to participate, while responsiveness concerns the ability of local institutions to address citizens' needs. These principles indicate that grassroots democracy involves more than the physical existence of local government councils; it requires institutions and processes through which citizens can exercise influence over local governance.

In Nigeria, grassroots democracy is closely associated with the constitutional establishment of local government councils and the provision for democratically elected representatives. Section 7(1) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) guarantees a system of democratically elected local government councils. This constitutional provision establishes an important basis for representative government at the local level. However, the actual quality of grassroots democracy depends on whether local elections provide genuine political competition, whether citizens can participate freely and whether elected councils are sufficiently responsive and accountable to their communities.

Aiyede (2025), in his analysis of credible elections and local democracy in Nigeria, argues that the credibility of local government elections is central to the revival of democratic governance at the grassroots. His discussion highlights concerns that the conduct of local government elections does not necessarily guarantee meaningful democratic choice where electoral institutions are vulnerable to political influence and ruling parties dominate electoral outcomes. This suggests that grassroots democracy requires not only regular elections but also credible electoral administration, genuine competition and opportunities for citizens to influence the selection of their local representatives.

Grassroots democracy can be assessed through several indicators. Voter participation concerns the extent to which eligible citizens engage in local government elections. Political competition refers to the availability of genuine alternatives and the ability of opposition parties and candidates to contest elections on a reasonably fair basis. Citizen involvement in local governance concerns the extent to which residents participate in community consultations, communicate their needs to elected representatives and engage in local accountability processes. Other relevant considerations include the inclusion of women and young people, access to political information and the responsiveness of elected officials to community concerns. These indicators should be considered collectively because voter turnout alone cannot establish that grassroots democracy is functioning effectively.

Recent Nigerian evidence reinforces the importance of these concerns. The HEDA Resource Centre's 2025 report, From Apathy to Action: A Reform Blueprint for SIECs and Community-Level Democracy, documented substantial public distrust of SIECs and limited participation in local government elections. As reported by Premium Times (Agbo, 2025), the survey found that many respondents had never voted in a local government election and that fewer than half expressed confidence in the independence of their state electoral commissions. Although these findings are not sufficient to establish a causal relationship between electoral credibility and participation, they illustrate why electoral administration and public trust deserve attention in research on grassroots democracy.

Relationship Between Electoral Credibility and Grassroots Democracy

Electoral credibility and grassroots democracy are closely related but conceptually distinct. Electoral credibility concerns the quality, fairness and trustworthiness of the electoral process, whereas grassroots democracy concerns the opportunities citizens have to participate in and influence local political affairs. Credible elections can provide an important foundation for grassroots democracy by enabling citizens to select representatives through a process they consider fair. In turn, active citizen participation can strengthen accountability by encouraging elected officials to respond to community needs and justify their decisions.

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In the Nigerian local government system, this relationship is particularly important because SIECs are responsible for conducting local government elections. If these commissions operate independently and apply electoral procedures consistently, they may be better positioned to conduct credible elections and strengthen public confidence. Such confidence may encourage citizens to vote, support competing candidates and participate in local governance. However, this relationship should be treated as an empirical proposition to be examined rather than an automatic outcome. Electoral credibility alone cannot eliminate all barriers to grassroots participation, and citizens may remain disengaged even where electoral procedures improve.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Madueke and Enyiazu (2025), in their study entitled Electoral Integrity and Election Management in Nigeria: The Case of the 2023 General Election, examined how the organisational characteristics of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) influenced the integrity and credibility of Nigeria's 2023 general election. The study sought to establish how institutional structure, independence, organisational capacity, relations with external actors and the use of technology affected electoral administration. Although the research concentrated on INEC rather than SIECs, its findings are relevant to the present study because both institutions perform electoral management functions within their respective jurisdictions.

The authors adopted an institutional perspective, drawing on the argument that institutional development and organisational structure can protect public organisations against manipulation by powerful individuals and external interests. The study used a qualitative research approach involving interviews, internet-based information and documentary sources. This approach was appropriate because the researchers sought to understand the internal operations of INEC, the experiences of electoral stakeholders and the influence of institutional arrangements on electoral integrity. The study examined information gathered between September 2022 and January 2023. The article does not provide a clearly verifiable overall population and statistically representative sample size in the information available; therefore, a numerical population or sample should not be assigned to it without consulting the full methodology. The findings indicated that corruption, failure to adhere consistently to established rules, political interference and limitations in institutional independence undermined INEC's capacity to conduct credible elections. The researchers also identified concerns about leadership appointments, staff training, organisational coordination and the delivery of electoral materials. They concluded that legal provisions intended to strengthen electoral independence are insufficient when the institution remains vulnerable to external influence or lacks adequate organisational capacity. The authors' analysis supports stronger institutional safeguards, improved adherence to electoral rules and greater protection of electoral administration from political interference.

The relevance of this study to the present research lies in its demonstration that electoral credibility depends partly on institutional independence and administrative capacity. However, the distinction between INEC and SIECs must be maintained. The present study extends the institutional question to state electoral commissions, with specific attention to the influence of their funding arrangements, appointment procedures and operational freedom on local government electoral credibility. A further limitation is that the study examined national elections and did not provide a direct empirical comparison of SIEC performance across states.

Obiagu et al. (2025), in their study Political Interference in Election Administration and Electoral Irregularities in Nigeria, investigated how political interference in the composition, financing and operation of electoral management institutions contributes to electoral irregularities. The study was concerned with explaining how political actors influence election administration and how such influence undermines the capacity of electoral institutions to guarantee credible elections. Its relevance to the present research is direct at the level of institutional mechanisms, particularly appointment independence, financial autonomy and freedom from political interference, although its principal institutional focus was INEC rather than SIECs.

The researchers adopted a qualitative research approach involving documentary sources, key informant interviews and personal observation. They used descriptive statistics and content analysis to examine the

evidence collected. This approach was suitable for exploring the political and institutional processes through which electoral commissions may be influenced by those who control their leadership appointments and financial resources. The study did not report a clearly verifiable overall population or aggregate interview sample size in the accessible publication summary. Consequently, these figures cannot responsibly be supplied without consulting the full methodology. The findings indicated that political interference in the appointment of electoral commissioners and the financing of electoral administration contributed to recurring electoral irregularities. The authors argued that those who control an electoral body's human and financial resources may gain substantial influence over its operations and the electoral outcomes it produces. They recommended reforms that would make the electoral system more responsive to citizens and reduce opportunities for political actors to manipulate electoral administration.

This study is particularly relevant because it identifies appointment procedures and financial control as institutional channels through which political interference can weaken electoral credibility. It provides a useful basis for investigating whether SIECs in Nigeria have adequate safeguards against similar forms of influence. However, because the research focuses on INEC and national electoral administration, it does not independently establish the extent to which individual SIECs experience these problems or whether their effects differ across states.

Onah et al. (2024), in their study Local Government Election and Democracy: Evidence from Enugu State, Nigeria, examined the extent to which democratic principles were upheld in the 2022 local government elections in Enugu State. Their objective was to assess the fairness, credibility and transparency of local government elections and to establish how political influence affected citizens' opportunities to choose their preferred representatives. Unlike studies of national elections, this research directly addresses local government electoral administration and therefore has particular relevance to the present study.

The researchers adopted Elite Theory, which was appropriate for examining how politically powerful groups may dominate public institutions and influence electoral outcomes in ways that protect their interests. Their methodology relied on participant observation and the review of secondary documentary sources. This approach enabled them to examine the electoral process and evaluate it against democratic principles without presenting the research as a large-scale household survey. The study did not report a clearly defined statistical population or numerical sample size in the accessible article; its evidence was derived from observations and documentary materials rather than a stated representative sample of voters. The findings indicated that the 2022 local government elections in Enugu State were affected by political influence and were judged by the authors to have fallen short of the requirements of fairness, credibility and transparency. They argued that political manipulation limited eligible voters' ability to elect their preferred candidates. The authors recommended constitutional reforms to strengthen local government autonomy and proposed transferring responsibility for local government elections from SIECs to INEC. The study contributes directly to the present research by showing how political influence can undermine the credibility of local government elections and weaken democratic representation. It also supports the need to examine whether institutional reforms can reduce the influence of incumbent political interests over local electoral administration. However, its focus on one state and one election cycle limits the extent to which its findings can be generalised to all SIECs in Nigeria. Furthermore, its recommendation to transfer local elections to INEC is one proposed reform option rather than an established finding that such a transfer would necessarily improve credibility.

Itodo (2024), in his analysis entitled Constitutional Disempowerment of State Electoral Commissions and Its Impact on Local Government Elections in Nigeria, examined the constitutional and institutional arrangements governing SIECs and how these arrangements affect the credibility of local government elections. The analysis focused particularly on the absence of constitutionally guaranteed financial and operational independence, the appointment of commissioners by state governors, and the absence of clear constitutional provisions governing the timing of local government elections. Itodo argued that these institutional weaknesses create opportunities for state-level political authorities to influence election administration. The publication is a policy analysis rather than a conventional field survey. It uses constitutional provisions, institutional analysis and documented experience of local government elections to

explain the relationship between SIEC autonomy and electoral credibility. Its analytical approach is appropriate for evaluating how constitutional design may constrain electoral independence and for identifying possible institutional reforms. As it is not a population-based empirical survey, a statistical population and sample size are not applicable. The analysis found that the lack of guaranteed financial and operational independence can leave SIECs vulnerable to political interference, including delays in funding and the manipulation of electoral timetables. It also highlighted weaknesses in the constitutional requirements governing the qualifications and appointment of SIEC members. Itodo proposed strengthening SIEC independence, transferring responsibility for local elections to INEC, or establishing a separate national electoral body for local government elections. The relevance of this analysis to the present study is that it identifies specific institutional dimensions that can be examined empirically: financial autonomy, appointment independence and operational freedom. It provides a constitutional explanation for why formally independent commissions may remain vulnerable to political pressure in practice. Nevertheless, its conclusions are based primarily on policy and constitutional analysis, rather than statistical testing of the relationship between SIEC independence and electoral credibility across multiple states. The present study can address this gap by examining the relationship through defined indicators and evidence from respondents.

Adebogun et al. (2025), in their study Precipitant Factors of Voter Turnout: A Study of the 2025 Local Government Election in Lagos State, Nigeria, investigated factors contributing to declining voter turnout, with particular attention to the 2025 local government election in Lagos State. The study aimed to explain why citizens may abstain from voting and to examine the relationship between political competitiveness, public confidence and voter participation. Its focus corresponds closely with the present study's second objective, particularly the indicators of voter participation and political competition. The authors adopted Elite Theory, which provides a framework for understanding how political elites may dominate political institutions and limit citizens' meaningful influence over electoral outcomes. They used an analytical research design based entirely on secondary data. This approach was appropriate for examining documented electoral outcomes and interpreting the relationship between political dominance and voter turnout without conducting a new survey. Because the research relied on secondary sources, it did not establish a new field-survey population or respondent sample size. The findings revealed a significant relationship between the perceived lack of electoral competitiveness and the dominance of the All Progressives Congress (APC) in Lagos politics, on the one hand, and low voter turnout in the 2025 local government election, on the other. The authors argued that limited competition and declining confidence in elections may discourage participation. Their findings suggest the need to improve electoral credibility and create conditions in which citizens perceive voting as meaningful. The study is relevant because it links political competition with participation in local government elections, showing why electoral reform should address more than administrative procedures. Reforms must also help ensure that candidates and political parties can compete meaningfully and that citizens believe their votes can influence outcomes. However, the study used secondary data and focused on Lagos State; its findings should not be interpreted as proof that political dominance is the only cause of low turnout or that the same relationship applies identically in every state.

Etebom (2024), in Local Government Elections in Nigeria: History, Dynamics and Challenges (1999–2023), examined the development of local government elections since the beginning of Nigeria's Fourth Republic, focusing on their historical patterns, institutional challenges and implications for grassroots governance. The study sought to explain why local government elections have not been conducted with the same regularity and consistency as elections at federal and state levels, and to identify measures for strengthening the local government electoral system.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach. Qualitative data were generated through questionnaires and in-depth interviews with purposively selected respondents in South-west Nigeria, while quantitative information was obtained from relevant documentary materials. The analysis used percentages, a t-test, a relative impact index and contextual analysis. The mixed-methods approach was appropriate because the research combined the experiences and views of selected stakeholders with documentary evidence about local government elections. The accessible article summary does not provide a verifiable numerical population and final sample size; these details should be checked in the full paper before being included in a

formal dissertation or journal manuscript. The study found substantial inconsistency in the conduct of local government elections between 1999 and 2023. It highlighted challenges affecting the regularity and administration of elections and recommended reforms to reposition local government as an effective and more autonomous tier of government. This study contributes to the present research by establishing the institutional and historical context in which electoral reform is needed. Irregular elections can weaken opportunities for citizens to choose representatives and hold them accountable, while institutional weaknesses may undermine sustained grassroots participation. Nevertheless, Etebom's research covers a broad historical period and does not isolate the causal effect of specific electoral reforms on voter turnout, political competition or community involvement. The present study can build on this work by examining these participation indicators more explicitly.

The Human and Environmental Development Agenda (HEDA) Resource Centre (2025), in its report From Apathy to Action: A Reform Blueprint for SIECs and Community-Level Democracy, examined public attitudes towards State Independent Electoral Commissions, the credibility of local government elections and citizens' participation in grassroots democracy. The report sought to identify citizens' concerns about SIEC independence, electoral transparency, voter education and the conduct of local government elections, while gathering suggestions for reform. Its focus is particularly relevant to the present study because it addresses both institutional independence and democratic participation. The report was based on a survey conducted in June 2025 involving 1,428 respondents across Nigeria's 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. The survey approach was appropriate for gathering public assessments of electoral institutions and local government elections across a broad geographical area. The accessible report summary does not identify a particular formal theoretical framework, so one should not be attributed to the study without checking the full report. The survey's reported sample was 1,428; however, the accessible summary does not provide enough information to independently assess all aspects of its sampling frame and representativeness. The findings revealed that only 41 per cent of respondents trusted SIECs to conduct free and fair local government elections, while 45 per cent believed the commissions operated independently of state governors. The report also indicated that 69 per cent of respondents had never voted in a local government election. In addition, 48.5 per cent identified lack of independence as the major challenge facing SIECs. These findings indicate a substantial gap between public awareness of electoral institutions and confidence in their independence and performance. The report recommended greater SIEC autonomy, stronger penalties for electoral misconduct, digital result-management systems and increased investment in voter education. The report is highly relevant to the present study because it provides recent nationwide evidence connecting public confidence in SIECs with low participation in local government elections. It also identifies reform priorities that correspond with the study's variables, including institutional independence, transparency and voter education. However, the findings are descriptive and do not establish that distrust in SIECs directly causes electoral abstention. The present research can contribute by examining how electoral reform relates to specific dimensions of grassroots democratic participation, including voter participation, political competition and citizens' involvement in local governance.

Omoyeni (2023), in the study The Effects of Currency Redesign on Vote Buying and the Quality of the Electoral Process in Ikere Local Government of Ekiti State, examined how the introduction of redesigned naira notes affected vote buying and the quality of the electoral process in Ikere Local Government Area. Although the study did not directly examine SIEC institutional independence or the full range of electoral reforms, it investigated how a policy intervention affected electoral conduct and the integrity of political participation at local level. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining a survey, analysis of official election data and non-participant observation. The population comprised 65,651 registered voters across the 11 wards of Ikere Local Government Area. The researcher selected three polling units from each ward through simple random sampling and then purposively selected ten respondents from each of the 33 polling units, producing a sample of 330 respondents. Data were collected using a Likert-style questionnaire, with a reported Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .690. Simple percentages and Pearson's correlation were used to analyse the survey data through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The mixed-methods approach enabled the researcher to combine respondents' views with election-related records and observations. The findings indicated that the currency redesign reduced the open buying and selling of votes, although politicians continued to find alternative ways of inducing voters. The study

recommended that government and security agencies strengthen intelligence gathering and enforcement against vote buying to improve electoral transparency, fairness and integrity. The study is relevant to the present research because it demonstrates that electoral interventions can influence the conditions under which citizens participate in elections. It also highlights the importance of enforcement and the prevention of practices that undermine the freedom of voters. Nevertheless, currency redesign is not equivalent to institutional reform of SIECs, and the study did not directly measure citizens' involvement in local governance or the effects of appointment and funding arrangements on electoral credibility. Its contribution is therefore contextual: it shows why electoral reforms must be assessed in terms of their actual effects on the electoral process rather than simply their formal introduction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory is a broad theoretical perspective developed through the contributions of several scholars. Its modern sociological formulation is particularly associated with John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan (1977), while W. Richard Scott (1995) made a major contribution to its systematic development. For the present study, the institutional perspective is useful for understanding how formal rules, organisational arrangements, political pressures and accepted practices shape the conduct of public institutions.

Institutional Theory explains how organisations operate within established legal, political, administrative and social environments. It holds that organisational performance is influenced not only by the resources available to an organisation but also by the rules, procedures, values, expectations and external pressures that shape its decisions and activities. Public institutions are expected to follow formal rules and accepted standards to demonstrate legitimacy and gain public confidence. However, an institution may possess formal independence under the law without enjoying genuine operational independence in practice.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) explain that formal organisational structures can help institutions demonstrate legitimacy, although the structures adopted on paper do not always correspond to their actual operations. Scott (1995) similarly presents institutions as involving regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive elements. The regulative element concerns laws and formal rules; the normative element relates to professional standards and expectations; and the cultural-cognitive element concerns shared understandings and established practices. Applied to local government elections in Nigeria, these dimensions suggest that constitutional recognition of SIECs does not, by itself, guarantee impartial or credible elections. Their performance may also depend on how appointments are made, how funds are released, whether election officials can resist political pressure, and whether established electoral procedures are consistently followed.

Institutional Theory is relevant to this study because the first objective examines the influence of SIEC institutional independence on the credibility of local government elections in Nigeria. The theory provides a basis for investigating how financial autonomy, appointment procedures and freedom from political interference may affect electoral administration. For example, if an electoral commission depends heavily on the state executive for the timely release of funds, its ability to plan and conduct elections independently may be constrained. Similarly, appointment arrangements that are perceived to favour the ruling party may weaken public confidence in the neutrality of the commission. These are institutional conditions that may influence electoral transparency, perceived fairness and acceptance of results.

The theory is also useful for examining the second objective, which assesses how electoral reform affects grassroots democratic participation. Institutional arrangements determine whether election procedures are transparent, whether political parties can compete on fair terms, whether citizens receive adequate information and whether complaints are addressed through credible mechanisms. Reforms that strengthen the institutional independence and accountability of SIECs may therefore create more favourable conditions for meaningful political participation. Nevertheless, such improvements should not be assumed automatically; their effects must be examined alongside political competition, administrative capacity, public awareness and the willingness of citizens to participate.

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The contemporary literature on electoral management supports the importance of examining institutional design rather than relying solely on the formal designation of an electoral body as independent. Van Ham and Garnett (2019), for example, demonstrate that different dimensions of electoral management body independence, including appointment procedures, budgetary control and formal powers, are important to understanding institutional independence and electoral integrity. Although their study predates the preferred five-year period for recent literature, it remains a foundational scholarly contribution directly relevant to this theoretical discussion. More recent research on Nigeria's 2023 general election also examines the relationship between electoral management bodies' organisational characteristics and their capacity to deliver credible elections (Madueke & Enyiazu, 2025).

Despite its usefulness, Institutional Theory has some limitations. First, it may place excessive emphasis on formal structures, rules and organisational arrangements while giving insufficient attention to the personal interests, strategies and decisions of political actors. In the Nigerian context, electoral outcomes may be influenced not only by the design of SIECs but also by the conduct of incumbent politicians, political parties, candidates and other stakeholders.

Second, the theory does not always explain why institutions with similar legal frameworks and organisational arrangements perform differently. Two SIECs may operate under comparable constitutional provisions but demonstrate different levels of transparency and administrative effectiveness because of differences in leadership, funding, personnel, political competition and enforcement of electoral rules. Third, institutional reform on paper may not produce corresponding changes in practice. A commission may be declared independent by law while remaining vulnerable to financial pressure or informal political influence. Finally, Institutional Theory does not, by itself, adequately explain why citizens choose to participate in elections, abstain from voting or engage in other forms of grassroots political activity. These limitations suggest that the theory is especially strong in explaining institutional conditions but may require complementary perspectives to account fully for citizen participation.

Participatory Democracy Theory

Participatory Democracy Theory is associated with the wider development of democratic thought, particularly the contributions of Carole Pateman (1970) and C. B. Macpherson (1977). Pateman's Participation and Democratic Theory is a foundational work that examines the role of participation in democratic life, while Macpherson's The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy provides a related critique of conventional representative democracy and explores more participatory forms of democratic practice.

Participatory Democracy Theory argues that democracy should extend beyond citizens periodically choosing political representatives through elections. It emphasises the active involvement of citizens in political decision-making, public affairs and the institutions that govern their lives. From this perspective, meaningful democracy requires opportunities for people to express their preferences, participate in political competition, hold public officials accountable and influence decisions affecting their communities.

Pateman (1970) argues that participation can have an educative function: by participating in political and other decision-making processes, citizens may develop political competence, confidence and a stronger sense of responsibility. Macpherson (1977) similarly considers the limitations of systems in which citizens' political involvement is largely restricted to choosing representatives. Participatory Democracy Theory therefore treats participation as both a means of influencing political outcomes and a process through which democratic capacities can develop.

In the context of local government elections in Nigeria, the theory suggests that elections should provide citizens with genuine opportunities to select representatives, support competing political alternatives and influence the direction of grassroots governance. Local government is particularly relevant because its decisions concern matters that directly affect communities, including primary healthcare, local roads, sanitation, markets and other public services. Where elections are credible and competition is meaningful, citizens may have stronger incentives to participate and demand accountability from elected officials.

Conversely, where electoral outcomes are widely perceived as predetermined, citizens may question the value of voting or withdraw from formal political processes.

Participatory Democracy Theory is particularly relevant to the study's second objective, which examines the effect of local government electoral reform on grassroots democratic participation. It provides a conceptual basis for assessing whether reforms create meaningful opportunities for citizens to vote, support competing candidates, engage with political parties and participate in local governance. The theory suggests that electoral reform should be evaluated not merely by the introduction of new laws or procedures but also by whether these changes improve the quality and inclusiveness of citizens' participation.

For example, reforms that improve the transparency of candidate nomination, voter information, polling arrangements, result collation and complaint-resolution procedures may help create a more credible environment for political participation. If citizens believe that their votes can influence electoral outcomes, they may be more willing to participate in elections and engage with elected local officials. Likewise, credible political competition can provide communities with a greater opportunity to choose between alternative candidates and programmes. These outcomes are relevant to the study's indicators of voter participation, political competition and citizen involvement in local governance.

The theory also draws attention to the relationship between electoral credibility and grassroots democracy. An election may be conducted according to established procedures, but its democratic value remains limited if citizens lack genuine choices or cannot influence who governs them. Participatory Democracy Theory therefore encourages the researcher to examine whether reforms improve the practical opportunities available to citizens rather than treating the mere conduct of local government elections as sufficient evidence of democratic development.

Participatory Democracy Theory also has limitations. First, it may overestimate citizens' willingness and capacity to participate actively in political affairs. In practice, participation may be constrained by limited political information, poverty, time pressures, insecurity, geographical barriers or a lack of confidence in electoral institutions. These constraints can affect participation even when formal opportunities exist.

Second, greater participation does not necessarily guarantee credible or fair democratic outcomes. Political participation may be influenced by misinformation, patronage, intimidation or unequal access to political resources. Consequently, high voter turnout alone cannot establish that an election is credible or that citizens have participated freely. Third, the theory can be difficult to operationalise because participation encompasses several activities, including voting, political discussion, party membership, community engagement and direct involvement in public decision-making. A study must therefore define its indicators carefully to avoid treating all forms of participation as equivalent. Finally, the theory provides less direct explanation of the institutional arrangements that protect electoral commissions from political interference. Although it explains why meaningful participation matters, it does not independently offer a sufficiently detailed account of how institutional independence can be secured.

Institutional Theory is recommended as the principal theoretical framework for this study, while Participatory Democracy Theory can serve as a complementary perspective.

The main justification is that the study begins with the institutional independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions and examines how that independence may influence electoral credibility and grassroots democratic participation. Institutional Theory provides a direct explanation of how formal rules, appointment arrangements, financial autonomy, operational independence and political pressures can shape the performance of electoral institutions. These issues correspond closely with the study's first independent variable, institutional independence of SIECs, and its dependent variable, electoral credibility.

The theory is also suitable for explaining the second objective because electoral reforms involve changes to the institutional arrangements through which local government elections are organised and administered. Reforms that strengthen transparency, impartiality, accountability and operational independence may improve the conditions for citizens to participate meaningfully in elections. However, the study should

recognise that institutional reform does not automatically produce greater participation; citizens' decisions may also depend on political competition, confidence in the electoral process, security and access to voting.

The relevance of this institutional perspective to Nigeria is illustrated by Madueke and Enyiazu's (2025) study of the 2023 general election, which identified political interference, weaknesses in institutional independence and failures to adhere to established rules as challenges to electoral credibility. Although their research focused primarily on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), rather than SIECs, it provides a useful Nigerian context for investigating similar institutional questions at the local government level.

Participatory Democracy Theory remains valuable because it explains the democratic outcomes the study seeks to understand, particularly voter participation, political competition and citizens' involvement in grassroots governance. Nevertheless, it is less directly suited to explaining the institutional mechanisms through which SIECs may become more independent and elections more credible.

Consequently, Institutional Theory should be adopted as the main theory, with Participatory Democracy Theory providing supplementary insight into the participation dimension. This combination allows the study to examine both the institutional conditions necessary for credible local government elections and the extent to which electoral reforms can support grassroots democracy.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative documentary research design supported by a comparative case-study approach to examine institutional independence, electoral credibility and grassroots democracy in Nigerian local government elections. The design is considered appropriate because the study seeks to understand how the institutional arrangements governing State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) influence the administration and credibility of local government elections, as well as how electoral reforms relate to voter participation, political competition and citizens' involvement in local governance. Rather than relying on questionnaire responses, the study analyses existing legal, institutional, electoral and scholarly records to identify patterns, compare experiences and develop evidence-based interpretations. The use of multiple documentary sources and comparative cases is consistent with methodological discussions emphasising triangulation and contextual analysis in case-study research (Schlunegger et al., 2024).

The population of the study comprises relevant documentary materials concerning SIEC institutional independence, local government electoral administration, electoral reform and grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria. These materials include constitutional provisions, state electoral laws, official SIEC publications, election timetables and results, court judgments, election-observation reports, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports and credible news reports. The study employs purposive sampling to select documents and cases that are directly relevant to the research objectives, verifiable and sufficiently detailed to support comparative analysis. The documentary period is 2022–2026, while earlier legal instruments are included where necessary to establish the constitutional and statutory framework governing local government elections.

Documentary Analysis of State Independent Electoral Commissions, Electoral Credibility and Grassroots Democracy in Nigeria

This analysis follows the two objectives of the study, namely, to examine how the institutional independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) influences the credibility of local government elections in Nigeria, and to assess how local government electoral reform relates to grassroots democratic participation, particularly voter participation, political competition and citizens' involvement in local governance.

The study adopts a qualitative documentary approach with a comparative case-study design. Lagos State and Enugu State are the initial cases because their local government elections provide different periods and bodies of documentary evidence for examination. The analysis will consider a third state only where reliable

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records add a meaningful comparison. The aim is not simply to recount election events, but to examine what the documentary evidence reveals about institutional arrangements, electoral administration and grassroots democracy.

Documentary analysis for Objective One

Objective One: To examine the extent to which the institutional independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions influences the credibility of local government elections in Nigeria, particularly in relation to financial autonomy, independence in appointments and freedom from political interference.

Constitutional and institutional framework of SIECs in Nigeria

The first stage of the analysis considers the legal framework within which SIECs operate. Sections 7 and 197–198 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 (as amended), provide an important starting point. Section 7 addresses the system of democratically elected local government councils, while Section 197 establishes a State Independent Electoral Commission in each state. Section 198 provides for the appointment of the chairperson and members of the commission by the state governor, subject to confirmation by the State House of Assembly. These provisions establish the formal institutional basis for local government elections but also raise a significant question for the study: whether a commission can exercise sufficient operational independence when its leadership appointment process involves the executive and legislature of the state in which it conducts elections.

The constitutional designation of a commission as "independent" should therefore be treated as a formal guarantee whose practical effectiveness must be investigated, rather than as proof that the commission is free from political influence. The appointment process does not automatically establish that a particular chairperson or commissioner is politically compromised. However, it creates a legitimate institutional question about the extent to which appointment criteria, tenure security, removal procedures and transparent selection processes protect the commission from partisan pressure. For the purposes of this study, independence should be assessed through documented arrangements and actions, not inferred solely from the commission's official title.

Financial autonomy is a second dimension. An electoral commission may possess statutory authority to organise elections yet experience practical constraints if the release of funds, approval of expenditure or access to logistical resources depends heavily on the state executive. The documentary analysis should therefore examine the relevant state electoral laws, annual budgets, budget implementation records and available commission reports. Unless these documents demonstrate the actual pattern of funding and releases, the study should not conclude that either Lagos or Enugu SIEC was financially dependent or autonomous in practice. This distinction is essential because a budgetary allocation on paper does not necessarily prove that funds were released promptly or that the commission had discretion over their use.

The third dimension is freedom from political interference. Evidence of interference may include documented changes to electoral timetables, restrictions on opposition participation, credible complaints about unequal treatment, court findings, or independently corroborated irregularities. Political allegations should not automatically be classified as established facts. They should be evaluated alongside official records, judicial decisions and independent assessments. This approach makes the analysis more balanced and reduces the risk of treating the claims of either a governing party or an opposition party as conclusive evidence.

Case Study One: Lagos State local government elections, 2025

Lagos State provides a recent case for examining the relationship between electoral administration, political competition and public participation. The local government and Local Council Development Area (LCDA) elections were held on 12 July 2025. LASIEC subsequently published results for the local government and LCDA contests on its official website. These records are important primary sources because they document

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the commission's declared outcomes and provide a basis for examining the distribution of seats among political parties.

Institutional independence and electoral administration

The available evidence establishes that LASIEC administered the election and published the results. However, the publication of official results demonstrates the commission's performance of a statutory responsibility; it does not, on its own, establish the degree of independence with which the responsibility was discharged. A complete assessment would require additional documents concerning the commission's appointments, funding arrangements, election planning, procedures for handling complaints, and any independent observation of its conduct.

The available reporting also indicates that LASIEC undertook a post-election audit in January 2026. According to The Guardian, the commission's leadership described the exercise as an opportunity to evaluate the 2025 polls, identify systemic gaps and incorporate lessons into future electoral administration. The report also noted that the commission acknowledged administrative difficulties and politically motivated criticism surrounding the election.

This post-election audit is relevant to institutional accountability. It suggests that the commission recognised the value of reviewing its own processes after the election. Nevertheless, the existence of an audit or retreat is not sufficient evidence that the identified weaknesses were corrected. For this study, the actual audit report, its findings and any published implementation plan would be more useful than a news account of the event alone. Such records could help establish whether the exercise resulted in specific administrative improvements, stronger transparency measures or changes to procedures for subsequent elections.

Electoral Credibility and Political Competition

The distribution of electoral outcomes provides a second line of analysis. Nigerian Democratic Report reported that the All Progressives Congress (APC) won all 57 chairmanship positions and 375 of the 376 councillorship seats, with the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) securing the remaining councillorship seat in Yaba. The report also raised concerns about low voter turnout, delayed distribution of electoral materials and alleged instances of vote-buying. These observations offer evidence relevant to the study, but the reported concerns should be treated as claims requiring corroboration rather than as final legal findings.

The concentration of victories in one party raises a legitimate question about the competitiveness of the election. Nevertheless, a dominant-party victory is not, by itself, proof that an election was manipulated or lacked credibility. The result could reflect genuine voter preferences, differences in party organisation, opposition strategy, the number and strength of candidates, or weaknesses in the electoral process. To distinguish among these explanations, the analysis should examine candidate nomination records, party participation, campaign conditions, observer assessments, complaints and the availability of remedies for electoral disputes.

The reported concerns about late arrival of election materials and vote-buying are also relevant because they may affect voters' practical ability to participate freely and equally. If corroborated by independent monitoring reports or formal complaints, such evidence would point to administrative and enforcement challenges that could undermine electoral confidence. However, the documentary record should distinguish between a reported allegation, an observer's direct finding and a judicially established fact.

Grassroots Participation and Public Confidence

The Lagos case also raises questions about the relationship between electoral participation and the legitimacy of local government institutions. Nigerian Democratic Report described turnout as low and reported that some polling units were sparsely attended. In January 2026, The Guardian reported that LASIEC's post-election review cited a turnout figure of 24%, compared with approximately 10–11% in earlier local government polls, according to the commission's reported figures.

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These reports require careful interpretation. The 24% figure suggests an increase relative to the earlier figures cited in the report, but it should not be described as evidence of high participation without further context. Before using it as a definitive measure, the study should verify the denominator used, whether the figure applies consistently across all relevant contests, and whether official registered-voter and vote-cast totals support it. Comparisons across election cycles should also account for differences in electoral boundaries, voter registers and reporting methods.

The case consequently illustrates two potentially simultaneous findings. First, turnout may have improved relative to previous local elections, according to the figures reported by LASIEC. Secondly, concerns about participation, logistics and the overwhelming concentration of seats in one party remain relevant to the broader assessment of grassroots democratic competition. These observations do not establish a direct causal relationship between institutional independence and voter participation, but they identify issues that a more transparent and competitive electoral system would need to address.

Interim finding for Lagos State: The documentary evidence establishes that LASIEC conducted the July 2025 local government elections, published results and initiated a post-election audit. Secondary reporting also identifies concerns about turnout, logistics and alleged vote-buying, alongside a highly concentrated distribution of electoral victories. The available records therefore provide a basis for examining electoral credibility and participation, but they are insufficient, on their own, to reach a definitive conclusion about the commission's financial autonomy or the extent of political interference. Those questions require closer examination of appointment records, state electoral legislation, budget execution documents, complaints and independent election assessments.

Case Study Two: Enugu State local government elections, 2022

Enugu State provides a useful contrast because both contemporary reporting and a peer-reviewed academic study are available concerning its 2022 local government elections. The election took place on 23 February 2022, covering the state's 17 local government areas and 260 councillorship wards. A report published by The Punch on 25 February 2022 stated that the Enugu State Independent Electoral Commission (ENSIEC) declared candidates of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) winners of the chairmanship elections and all 260 councillorship wards. The commission's chairperson described the poll as free, fair and credible, while the same report referred to earlier reporting of voter apathy and violent attacks in some areas.

The case is particularly relevant because the electoral commission's own assessment and the reported concerns about the election provide different perspectives that need to be examined together. The commission's declaration is an important record of its official position, but its description of the election cannot alone settle questions about competitiveness, public participation or the fairness of the process. Similarly, reports of violence and apathy raise concerns but require corroboration before they can support definitive conclusions about the overall credibility of the poll.

Institutional Independence and Political Influence

A study by Onah, Ugwuibe and Ngwu (2024), titled Local government election and democracy: Evidence from Enugu State, Nigeria, examined the 2022 election using participant observation and secondary documentary sources. The authors concluded that political influence affected the electoral process and argued that the election lacked fairness, credibility and transparency. They also recommended institutional reforms, including reconsideration of the role of SIECs in local government elections.

This study provides direct academic evidence for the present research because it focuses specifically on the relationship between local government elections and democratic practice in Enugu State. Its findings support the need to examine whether the formal independence of an electoral commission is matched by practical safeguards against political influence. Nevertheless, the authors' conclusions should be treated as the findings of a particular study, not as a substitute for independent verification of every allegation or event. The strength of the present documentary analysis will depend on whether the article's claims can be

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compared with official election records, relevant legal materials, court documents and additional independent reporting.

The Enugu case also illustrates why institutional independence must be assessed across several dimensions. Appointment procedures may create potential vulnerabilities, but evidence of actual interference requires examination of how decisions were made and whether the commission operated impartially. Likewise, the fact that the governing party won every reported chairmanship and councillorship contest is a reason to investigate the degree of competition, but it does not automatically prove that the outcome was predetermined. The analysis should consider whether opposition parties fielded candidates across the state, whether candidates had reasonable opportunities to campaign, whether voting and counting procedures were observed, and whether complaints were recorded and addressed.

Electoral Credibility and Grassroots Participation

The reported outcome in Enugu raises questions about political competition and voter choice. If one party wins all chairmanship and councillorship contests, the central research question is not simply whether the governing party was victorious, but whether the electoral environment provided meaningful opportunities for alternative parties and candidates to compete. The available reporting also refers to voter apathy and violent attacks in some areas, while the academic study identifies political influence as a challenge to electoral credibility.

Taken together, these sources suggest that electoral credibility should be assessed in terms of both procedure and democratic substance. Procedural credibility concerns such matters as compliance with electoral rules, transparent administration, the handling of complaints and the accurate publication of results. Democratic substance concerns whether citizens had a meaningful opportunity to choose among competing candidates and whether the process enabled local government leadership to emerge through genuine electoral contestation. The documentary evidence raises questions in both areas, although the precise extent of the problems would require further corroboration.

Voter apathy is also relevant to grassroots democracy. Where citizens do not participate in substantial numbers, the electoral process may produce elected councils without strong evidence of broad public engagement. However, the causes of low participation cannot be established from turnout reports alone. Voter apathy may reflect distrust in electoral institutions, weak competition, logistical problems, insecurity or other factors. The study should therefore avoid attributing low participation solely to the conduct of ENSIEC unless the documentary evidence directly supports that explanation.

Interim finding for Enugu State: The 2022 election provides documentary evidence of a highly concentrated distribution of electoral victories, concerns about voter apathy and reported violence, and an academic assessment identifying political influence as a challenge to electoral credibility. The case strengthens the argument that SIEC independence must be evaluated through the relationship between formal institutional arrangements and actual electoral practice. However, the available sources do not independently establish the details of ENSIEC's financial autonomy or prove that a particular appointment arrangement caused the reported electoral outcomes.

A Supplementary Case: Kano State Local Government Elections, 2024

Kano State provides an important comparative case for examining the relationship between electoral administration, opposition-party participation, institutional independence and grassroots democracy. The local government elections were conducted on 26 October 2024 across 44 local government areas and 484 councillorship wards. The Kano State Independent Electoral Commission (KANSIEC) declared candidates of the New Nigeria Peoples Party (NNPP) winners of all 44 chairmanship positions and 484 councillorship seats.

The significance of this outcome extends beyond the distribution of seats. The election provides an opportunity to investigate the relationship between the legal status of the electoral commission, the

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participation of opposition parties, the resolution of pre-election disputes and the conditions under which voters exercised their franchise.

Institutional Independence and Pre-Election Litigation

The Kano election was preceded by significant litigation concerning the constitution and leadership of KANSIEC. On 22 October 2024, the Federal High Court in Kano reportedly restrained the commission from conducting the scheduled election, following a challenge brought by the All Progressives Congress (APC) and another plaintiff. The challenge concerned the eligibility and alleged political affiliations of the commission's leadership. Subsequent proceedings at the Kano State High Court permitted the election to proceed.

These developments are relevant to the institutional independence of SIECs because they raise questions about appointment safeguards, compliance with constitutional requirements and the resolution of disputes concerning electoral administrators. However, the existence of conflicting court decisions should not be interpreted as proof that the commission lacked independence or that the election was necessarily invalid. A definitive legal assessment would require examination of the actual judgments, the issues determined by each court, the applicable jurisdictional rules and any subsequent appellate proceedings.

The case demonstrates that institutional independence requires more than the formal establishment of an electoral commission. It also depends on transparent appointment procedures, compliance with applicable eligibility requirements, clear legal mandates and timely resolution of disputes. These safeguards should be examined across the three states without assuming that the circumstances in Kano necessarily apply to Lagos or Enugu.

Opposition-Party Participation and Electoral Competition

The Kano case offers more specific evidence of opposition participation than the original manuscript presented. Contemporary reporting identified six participating political parties out of 19 registered parties in the state. The participating parties included the NNPP, Action Alliance (AA), African Action Congress (AAC), Accord Party, African Democratic Congress (ADC) and Allied Peoples Movement (APM). The APC, a major opposition party in the state, did not participate.

On the basis of the reported figures, the party participation rate was approximately 31.6% of the 19 parties identified in the reports. This is a party-level participation measure, not a candidate-level contestation rate. It should not be interpreted as meaning that 31.6% of eligible candidates participated, nor does it establish why the remaining parties did not contest.

The APC's non-participation is especially relevant because it followed a dispute concerning the commission and the conduct of the election. Nevertheless, the evidence does not establish that the party's withdrawal was caused exclusively by KANSIEC or that the commission deliberately prevented opposition participation. Establishing such a conclusion would require a closer examination of party statements, nomination records, electoral guidelines, court documents and other contemporaneous evidence.

The declared results nevertheless raise an important question about the competitiveness of the election. The NNPP's victory in every chairmanship and councillorship contest, combined with the absence of some major opposition parties, warrants examination of the practical opportunities available to alternative parties and candidates. It does not, by itself, prove manipulation. The analysis should also consider the number of candidates nominated by each participating party, the distribution of votes, access to campaigning opportunities, the treatment of complaints and the availability of effective legal remedies.

Electoral Administration, Voter Participation and Credibility

KANSIEC described the election as peaceful and successful, while contemporary reports highlighted the pre-election litigation and the absence of major opposition parties. These different perspectives should be

considered together rather than treating either the commission's self-assessment or the concerns raised by political opponents as conclusive.

A more complete evaluation would require official turnout figures, registered-voter totals, votes cast, polling-unit results, records of complaints and independent assessments of the administration of the election. The study should also distinguish between reports of logistical problems and verified findings concerning their scale or consequences. Voter participation cannot be explained solely by the institutional independence of the commission. In Kano, the political environment and non-participation of some parties are relevant contextual factors, but their precise effects on turnout cannot be established without additional evidence. Security conditions, accessibility of polling locations, transportation, voter awareness, economic circumstances and public expectations concerning local government performance may also influence participation.

Financial autonomy and documentary evidence

The available reporting does not independently establish whether KANSIEC received its appropriated funds promptly, exercised operational discretion over its expenditure or experienced political interference through funding decisions. The analysis must therefore avoid drawing conclusions about the commission's financial autonomy from the electoral outcome alone.

To strengthen the Kano case, the researcher should examine the applicable Kano State Appropriation Law, KANSIEC's budget estimates and expenditure records, available audit reports and any documents identifying the timing and purpose of fund releases. These records would help establish whether the commission had adequate resources for election preparation and whether financial procedures provided sufficient protection against arbitrary interference.

The distinction between the financing of local government councils and the financing of KANSIEC is particularly important. The Supreme Court's July 2024 judgment on local government autonomy addressed the financial autonomy of local government councils and the constitutional requirement for democratically elected councils. It should not be presented as having automatically established a direct-flow funding mechanism for state electoral commissions.

The Kano case establishes that the NNPP won all declared chairmanship and councillorship contests in 2024, while six of the 19 parties identified in contemporary reporting participated. It also documents significant pre-election litigation concerning the leadership of KANSIEC. These findings provide a stronger basis for assessing political competition, appointment safeguards and electoral administration.

Documentary Analysis For Objective Two

Objective Two: To assess the effect of local government electoral reform on grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria, particularly voter participation, political competition and citizens' involvement in local governance.

Voter Participation

The evidence from Lagos, Enugu and Kano indicates that voter participation should be treated as a central measure of grassroots democracy, but it should not be interpreted in isolation. In Lagos, reporting cited a 24% turnout figure for the 2025 polls, alongside concerns about sparse attendance at some polling units. In Enugu, contemporary reporting referred to voter apathy during the 2022 election. In Kano, reports of low turnout and delays in the arrival of electoral materials also raise questions about the conditions under which citizens were able to vote.

These cases suggest that holding local government elections does not automatically guarantee substantial citizen participation. The electoral calendar, accessibility of polling stations, timely deployment of materials, public confidence, perceived competitiveness and voters' expectations of local government performance

may all influence participation. The documentary evidence available here does not establish the relative importance of each factor, but it provides a basis for identifying them as issues that electoral reforms should address.

Political Competition

Political competition concerns whether voters have a meaningful choice among parties and candidates, whether opposition candidates can participate effectively, and whether election administration provides fair opportunities for contestants. The Lagos and Enugu cases show highly concentrated results: the APC won almost all reported positions in Lagos in 2025, while the PDP was declared winner of all reported chairmanship and councillorship contests in Enugu in 2022. Kano's 2024 election similarly resulted in the NNPP winning all reported chairmanship and councillorship seats.

The repetition of this pattern across three states is an important observation for the comparative study. It does not prove that all three elections were manipulated, nor does it establish that SIEC arrangements caused the results. Rather, it identifies a recurring empirical question: whether local government elections in which the governing party secures nearly all or all available positions provide sufficient evidence of meaningful political competition.

A convincing assessment would require information about party participation, candidate nominations, campaign opportunities, reported intimidation or vote-buying, access to the media, voting and counting procedures, and the treatment of complaints. Where such information is absent, the study should identify the gap rather than assume that the absence of documented complaints means the election was free from problems.

Electoral reform should consequently aim to protect the practical conditions for competition, not merely the formal right of parties to contest. This includes transparent and consistently applied nomination rules, impartial administration, credible publication of results, accessible dispute-resolution mechanisms and safeguards against the misuse of state resources. Such measures could strengthen confidence that local government leadership is determined by voters rather than by administrative or partisan advantage.

Citizens' Involvement In Local Governance

Grassroots democracy extends beyond the act of voting. It also involves citizens' ability to engage with elected representatives, scrutinise local decisions, express community priorities and hold councils accountable. Electoral credibility is therefore important because it can influence whether residents regard local councils as institutions that derive authority from their choices.

The Lagos post-election audit is relevant to this aspect of the analysis because it represents an official attempt to review the electoral process and identify improvements. If the audit results and follow-up measures are made publicly available, they could help demonstrate whether the commission is responsive to institutional weaknesses and public concerns. However, the announcement of an audit does not establish that citizens were consulted or that the resulting reforms improved public involvement. Evidence of public consultations, stakeholder submissions, accessible complaint channels and published implementation plans would be needed to make that assessment. The Enugu study's concern about political influence also has implications for grassroots accountability. Where citizens have limited confidence that electoral outcomes reflect their preferences, they may have less confidence in the responsiveness of local councils. This is a plausible institutional relationship, but the available documents do not directly measure the subsequent behaviour or attitudes of residents. It should therefore be presented as an interpretation that requires further evidence, not as a proven consequence of the 2022 election.

Comparative analysis of the three states

To improve comparative uniformity, the study examines Lagos, Enugu and Kano using the same analytical indicators. These include the number of participating parties, candidate participation, the legal framework

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governing campaign activities, nomination requirements, available campaign-finance information and evidence of enforcement.

The evidence currently available supports a more detailed comparison of opposition participation in Lagos and Kano than in Enugu. For Lagos, contemporary reporting identified 10 parties fielding chairmanship candidates and 14 fielding councillorship candidates in 2025. It reported 139 chairmanship candidates competing for 57 positions and 842 councillorship candidates competing for 376 seats. Fifteen of the 19 parties that initially expressed interest submitted candidate lists.

For Enugu, the available academic evidence identifies five parties that contested the 2022 election: the PDP, APC, All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Young Progressives Party (YPP). The PDP was declared winner of all 17 chairmanship contests and 260 councillorship contests. However, the available information does not establish the number of candidates fielded by each opposition party or provide a complete party-by-party nomination dataset.

For Kano, six of the 19 parties identified in contemporary reporting participated in the 2024 election, while the NNPP won all 44 chairmanship positions and 484 councillorship seats. The non-participation of the APC and other parties is relevant to the assessment of political competition, but the available reports do not provide complete candidate-level data for all contests.

Table 1. Comparative assessment

Analytical dimension	Lagos State (2025)	Enugu State (2022)	Kano State (2024)
Electoral administration	LASIEC conducted the election and published results; a post-election audit was subsequently reported.	ENSIEC conducted the election across 17 LGAs and 260 wards	KANSIEC conducted the election across 44 local government areas.
Reported electoral outcome	APC won all 57 chairmanship positions and 375 of 376 councillorship seats, according to independent reporting.	PDP was declared winner of all chairmanship contests and 260 councillorship wards.	NNPP was declared winner of all 44 chairmanship and 484 councillorship seats.
Participation concerns	Reports of low turnout, delays and alleged vote-buying; a later report cited a 24% turnout figure.	Contemporary reporting referred to voter apathy and violent attacks in some areas.	Contemporary reporting referred to low turnout and delays in the arrival of election materials at some locations.
Institutional accountability	A post-election audit was reported in January 2026; the published audit findings and follow-up actions need to be examined.	An academic study identified political influence as a challenge to electoral credibility.	Reporting identified a pre-election legal challenge concerning the KANSIEC chairperson; the court record requires verification.

Sources: LASIEC (n.d.); Adunola (2026); Nigerian Democratic Report (2025); Onah et al. (2024); Ede (2022); Arise News (2024); TheCable (2024).

The comparison reveals three important patterns. First, all three cases demonstrate that the existence of a state electoral commission and the conduct of an election do not, by themselves, establish the quality of electoral competition or the level of public participation. Secondly, reports of low participation or logistical problems appear in each case, although the evidence is not sufficiently standardised to conclude that the same causes operated in all three states. Thirdly, the highly concentrated distribution of electoral victories across the cases raises a common question about the practical competitiveness of local government elections. It does not, however, prove that the results were manipulated or that the commissions lacked independence.

However, the Lagos guidelines provide a concrete starting point for analysing the regulatory environment. LASIEC's published 2025 guidelines specified administrative charges for nomination forms, including ₦150,000 for chairmanship candidates, ₦75,000 for vice-chairmanship candidates and ₦50,000 for

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councillorship candidates, with exemptions for female candidates and persons with disabilities. They also addressed nomination requirements and campaign conduct. These administrative charges should not be confused with campaign expenditure or evidence of the total cost of contesting an election.

The evidence from Lagos, Enugu and Kano identifies voter participation as an important dimension of grassroots democracy, but the available information does not support attributing low turnout exclusively to SIEC institutional weaknesses. In Lagos, contemporary reporting cited a 24% turnout figure for the 2025 election. In Enugu, reports referred to voter apathy and violence in some areas during the 2022 election. In Kano, reporting identified low participation concerns alongside disputes concerning the electoral commission and the non-participation of some opposition parties. The most defensible comparative conclusion is therefore that the credibility of local government elections should be assessed through the combined examination of institutional safeguards, actual administrative conduct, opportunities for political competition, voter participation and mechanisms for accountability. Formal independence is relevant, but its contribution to electoral credibility must be demonstrated through evidence of how the commission operates.

Comparative financial report

The following table consolidates the main findings across the three states.

Financial measure	**Lagos, 2025**	**Enugu, 2022**	**Kano, 2024**
Published SIEC budget or allocation	₦9.726 billion agency-wide approved budget.	₦201.824 million original approved allocation	₦390.542 million approved allocation.
Actual expenditure evidence	LASIEC reported access to over 80% of allocated funds before the election; exact election expenditure not established	A later state budget document reports approximately ₦290.892 million in 2022 full-year actual expenditure.	ICPC reported investigating election-related financial transactions; a complete, comparable actual-expenditure figure is not established here.
Candidate nomination costs	₦150,000 for chairmanship, ₦75,000 for vice-chairmanship and ₦50,000 for councillorship candidates, subject to exemptions.	A directly comparable set of nomination fees was not established from the sources reviewed	₦10 million and ₦5 million initially, reduced to ₦9 million and ₦4 million, respectively.
Technology and operational planning	Requires detailed election expenditure records.	ENSIEC cited budgetary and logistical constraints for not deploying BVAS.	Screening budget and payments to electoral personnel featured in ICPC's reported investigation.
Post-election accountability	A post-election audit and review was initiated in January 2026.	Election-specific audit and expenditure reconciliation remain necessary.	ICPC reported a criminal investigation and intended arraignment over alleged financial transactions

Source: Enugu State Government. (2023), (2024), Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission. (2025), Kano State Ministry of Finance and Economic Development. (n.d.). Budget and Lagos State Independent Electoral Commission. (2025).

The comparative evidence shows that the financial implications of local government elections extend beyond the amount allocated to an electoral commission. They include the adequacy and timing of public funding, the cost of election technology and logistics, the charges imposed on candidates, payments to electoral personnel, and the transparency of post-election financial reporting.

In Lagos, the available evidence establishes a substantial agency-wide budget and published nomination charges, but the election-specific cost remains unverified. In Enugu, the original budget and later reported actual expenditure provide a useful starting point for examining financial planning, while the commission's public explanation for not deploying BVAS illustrates the operational consequences of budgetary decisions.

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In Kano, nomination charges and the ICPC's reported investigation provide evidence for examining the relationship between financial barriers, expenditure documentation and institutional accountability.

These findings do not establish that the same financial problems occurred in all three states or that financial dependence alone determined electoral credibility. Rather, they demonstrate why the study should assess financial autonomy through verifiable indicators: the size and composition of approved allocations, the timing of fund releases, actual election expenditure, the publication of audited accounts, and the reconciliation of budgeted activities with activities performed.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between the institutional independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), the credibility of local government elections and grassroots democratic participation in Nigeria, using documentary evidence from Lagos, Enugu and Kano States. The analysis demonstrates that the credibility of local government elections cannot be assessed solely by the existence of electoral laws, the formal establishment of electoral commissions or the official declaration of results. Rather, credible elections depend on the extent to which electoral institutions operate impartially, possess adequate administrative and financial capacity, provide fair opportunities for political competition and maintain transparent procedures for publishing results and resolving complaints.

The comparative financial evidence further demonstrates the importance of examining the resources available to SIECs, the planning of election-related expenditure and the transparency of financial administration. In Lagos State, the published agency-wide budget and reported access to allocated funds provide a basis for assessing the commission's financial capacity, although the total expenditure specifically attributable to the 2025 elections remains unverified. In Enugu State, the difference between the original approved allocation and subsequently reported annual expenditure, together with ENSIEC's explanation for not deploying the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) in 2022, highlights the importance of budget planning and the financial requirements of electoral technology. In Kano State, the controversy surrounding candidate nomination fees and the financial transactions reported by the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission raises important questions about the affordability of electoral participation, expenditure documentation and institutional accountability. The reported allegations concerning Kano should, however, be distinguished from any final judicial determination, while the available financial figures should not be interpreted as directly comparable measures of the total cost of conducting elections.

These findings suggest that financial autonomy should be understood not merely in terms of the size of an electoral commission's budget, but also in terms of the predictability of funding releases, the adequacy of approved resources, the commission's lawful discretion in administering those resources and the transparency of its expenditure. The publication of election-specific budgets, actual expenditure statements, audited accounts and post-election financial reviews would make it easier to assess whether electoral resources are used for their intended purposes. Nevertheless, the evidence does not establish that financial dependence alone caused particular electoral outcomes in the three states. Financial arrangements should instead be examined alongside appointment procedures, administrative independence, political competition, electoral logistics and other contextual factors.

Regarding electoral credibility, the reported concentration of victories among governing parties and concerns about participation and electoral administration raise questions about the competitiveness and public legitimacy of local government elections. However, these patterns do not independently prove electoral manipulation or establish that institutional dependence caused the outcomes. Similarly, voter participation may be influenced by socioeconomic circumstances, security conditions, political mobilisation, candidate appeal and other factors in addition to public confidence in electoral institutions. These considerations reinforce the need for transparent appointment arrangements, predictable funding, independent scrutiny and verifiable electoral records.

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The study further concludes that conducting local government elections is necessary but insufficient for meaningful grassroots democracy. Electoral reform must create conditions in which citizens can participate meaningfully, eligible opposition parties can compete fairly, and elected local councils remain accountable to their communities. Overall, strengthening SIEC institutional and financial independence, improving electoral transparency, ensuring responsible management of public resources and institutionalising effective accountability mechanisms are important steps towards enhancing electoral credibility and grassroots democracy in Nigeria. The success of these reforms will depend on their practical implementation, sustained political commitment, effective legislative and audit oversight, and the willingness of electoral institutions to subject their administrative and financial activities to public scrutiny.

RECOMMENDATIONS

i. The Federal Government and State Governments, in collaboration with the National Assembly, State Houses of Assembly and relevant electoral reform stakeholders, should strengthen the institutional, financial and administrative independence of State Independent Electoral Commissions through transparent, merit-based appointment procedures, clear tenure protections, predictable funding arrangements and safeguards against political interference. State electoral laws should establish objective criteria for appointing commissioners, transparent procedures for releasing approved electoral funds and enforceable requirements for publishing electoral timetables, polling-unit results, audit reports and responses to formal complaints. Furthermore, each SIEC should prepare and publish an election-specific budget that distinguishes personnel costs, electoral materials, transportation, technology, logistics, collation and post-election reviews from routine agency expenditure. Actual expenditure should subsequently be reconciled with approved budgets and supplementary allocations, with explanations provided for significant variations. State Houses of Assembly and the appropriate state audit institutions should scrutinise these financial records within their respective constitutional and statutory mandates. In the longer term, constitutional and legislative reforms should be considered to establish more predictable funding arrangements and appropriate safeguards against undue executive influence, including a constitutionally grounded mechanism for the direct funding of SIECs where adopted through the prescribed amendment process. These measures would help narrow the gap between the formal independence of SIECs and their practical capacity to conduct credible, impartial and financially accountable local government elections.

ii. State Independent Electoral Commissions should introduce and consistently implement electoral reforms aimed at improving voter participation, strengthening political competition and promoting citizens' involvement in local governance. Such reforms should include timely and accessible voter education, reliable distribution of electoral materials, transparent publication of results, equal administrative treatment of eligible political parties and candidates, and accessible mechanisms for reporting and resolving electoral complaints. In addition, SIECs should publicly disclose candidate nomination charges, applicable exemptions, the legal basis for such charges and aggregate receipts from nomination processes, while ensuring that fees are transparent, proportionate to legitimate administrative requirements and consistent with applicable law. Electoral commissions should also cost proposed technologies before approving election budgets, including expenditure on equipment, training, maintenance, technical support and deployment, to reduce the risk of operational limitations arising from inadequate planning. Payments to ad hoc electoral personnel and contractors should be supported by verifiable records, evidence of service delivery and reconciled payment schedules. Following each election, the relevant commission should publish a post-election administrative and financial report detailing actual expenditure, budget variances, complaints received, logistical challenges, audit findings and corrective actions. Collaboration with civil society organisations, community associations, traditional institutions and other relevant civic groups should complement these measures by encouraging informed participation and strengthening public scrutiny. These reforms would enable electoral performance to be assessed not merely by whether elections are conducted, but also by whether public resources are responsibly managed, citizens have meaningful opportunities to choose their representatives and elected local government councils remain accountable to the communities they serve.

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