ELECTORAL MALPRACTICE AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY IN NIGERIA: AN INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This study examines how electoral fraud and violence contribute to political and economic instability in Nigeria. Electoral malpractice is defined as the illegal and coercive interference in electoral processes, leading to the manipulation of outcomes. Such practices undermine confidence in Nigeria's democratic system and erode trust in electoral results. The study explores the nature and manifestations of electoral malpractice in Nigeria, with key objectives to: (1) assess whether electoral fraud threatens political and economic stability, and (2) establish the relationship between electoral fraud and societal disorder. Anchored in Neo-Institutional Accountability Theory as the theoretical framework, the research employs a qualitative approach, relying primarily on secondary data sources. Findings indicate that electoral malpractice significantly impedes democratic consolidation and poses a severe threat to Nigeria's political and economic stability. Additionally, a clear link between electoral fraud and social disorder is identified. The study recommends comprehensive reforms to the Electoral Act of 2022, alongside strengthening judicial independence and electoral laws to enhance transparency and accountability.

Keywords*: Electoral Malpractice, Political Instability, Institutional Accountability, Democratic Consolidation, Nigeria*

Introduction

Elections are central to democratic governance, providing citizens with the opportunity to choose leaders and influence policy direction. However, in Nigeria, electoral processes have been consistently undermined by widespread malpractice, eroding public trust and weakening democratic institutions (Casmir, Omeh & Ike, 2013; Donald & Godson, 2021; Nwamara & Etumnu, 2022). Electoral fraud in this context refers to illegal interference in elections, including ballot-box stuffing, vote buying, underage voting, intimidation of voters, manipulation of results, and the use of state security forces or militant gangs to suppress opposition strongholds. Such practices distort the mandate of the people and compromise the legitimacy of elected governments.

Since the return to civil rule on May 29, 1999, Nigeria has conducted seven general elections, alongside several reruns and local government polls. Yet, none of these elections have fully met both local and international standards of credibility. Each successive election has been marred by greater irregularities and violence than the one before, with the partial exception of the 2023 polls, which witnessed relatively lower levels of violence. This trend underscores the deepening crisis in Nigeria's electoral system, rendering it challenging to consolidate democracy in such an environment. The persistence of electoral malpractice has had far-reaching consequences. Poverty has been weaponized by political elites, turning youths into ready tools for electoral violence. Voters, in turn, often trade their votes for immediate material benefits, undermining the principles of democratic participation. As a result, elections, which should serve as a legitimate mechanism for leadership selection, increasingly fail to reflect the will of the people.

The abuse of the electoral process has fostered political apathy among citizens who believe their votes no longer count. Many eligible voters avoid polling stations out of fear of violence or frustration with recurring manipulation. Consequently, electoral fraud not only erodes legitimacy but also undermines political stability, weakens democratic culture, and fuels insecurity. Nigeria's over two decades of uninterrupted democracy contrast sharply with the long-established systems of countries like the United States or the United Kingdom, where democratic traditions span centuries. In Nigeria, the persistence of anti-democratic practices, such as flawed elections, disregard for the rule of law, and weak constitutionalism, continues to generate crises of legitimacy and governance. Electoral malpractice has thus become both a symptom and a cause of instability, contributing to the breakdown of order and the erosion of democratic consolidation. This paper, therefore, examines the relationship between electoral fraud and political breakdown in Nigeria. Specifically, it examines how electoral malpractice undermines political stability, discourages voter participation, and contributes to broader social disorder.

Review of Related Literature

The prevalence of electoral fraud as a major challenge to Nigeria's democracy has attracted significant scholarly attention. This is not only due to the absence of good governance, but also because electoral fraud undermines the role of the electorate in determining who occupies public office. In reviewing the literature, the terms “electoral fraud” and “electoral malpractice” will be used interchangeably, both referring to manipulations of the electoral process.

Okolie (2004) described electoral fraud as encompassing all forms of electoral malpractice, irregularities, and rigging, which have an underlying criminal intent and purpose. According to him, these are electoral acts designed to sway electoral victory in a predetermined and unpopular direction unduly. He noted that electoral fraud involves deliberate acts perpetrated by self-serving actors throughout the electoral process. Such practices may include stuffing ballot boxes, hoarding electoral materials, manipulating or fabricating results, using law enforcement agencies to intimidate or disenfranchise voters, or even the murder of political opponents.

Okolie further argued that not all irregularities amount to electoral fraud. To him, fraud requires deliberate and criminal acts; irregularities resulting from unconscious system shortcomings should be distinguished. Thus, the defining ingredient of electoral fraud is that it is deliberate, illegal, criminal, and intended to undermine democratic principles and the will of the people. He summarized Nigeria's general elections as being characterized by violence, intimidation, coercion, and widespread disenfranchisement.

Ezeani (2005), drawing from Baines' (1964) definition of elections as the formal process by which electorates select officials and decide on submitted issues, emphasized that elections must involve fairness, justice, independence, and genuine choice. He defined electoral malpractice as irregularities committed by government officials, political parties, or individuals with the intention of influencing an election in favor of a particular candidate. According to him, electoral malpractice negates the principles and essence of elections.

This view is corroborated by Ikejiani-Clark, who linked such acts to corruption, describing them as unacceptable practices that compromise democratic integrity. Ezeani (2005) observed that Nigeria's elections have been marred by massive malpractice, as confirmed by reports of both local and international observers, as well as the reactions of candidates and voters. He explained that malpractices often stem from the desperation of incumbents to secure second terms at all costs, which escalates political tension. Tactics include manipulating party registration processes and abusing incumbency powers to intimidate opponents, resulting in recurring political crises.

Chikendu (2003) similarly argued that Nigerian elections revealed the entrenched nature of rigging, showing that the political class had learned little from past experiences. He noted that election rules were routinely flouted, party discipline was undermined, and in many cases, multiple candidates were produced for a single party seat. According to him, the magnitude of rigging has eroded public faith in Nigeria's democracy.

Electoral malpractice, ranging from vote buying to outright fraud, has been extensively studied for its detrimental effects on societal stability. Norris (2014) argued that perceptions of unfair elections erode public trust in democratic institutions, creating instability and undermining governmental legitimacy. Similarly, Bratton and Van de Walle (1997) highlighted how flawed elections can trigger protests, riots, and even civil conflict, especially in contexts with ethnic or religious divisions such as Nigeria. Electoral malpractice, therefore, deepens societal grievances and exacerbates instability.

The consequences of electoral malpractice are ev[ident in corruption and political instability, which deter foreign investment and hinder economic growth. This creates a vicious cycle, as economic hardship further fuels social unrest and political instability (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

Iwu (2010) defined electoral fraud as any random or organized act, such as intimidation, physical harm, blackmail, or abuse, aimed at influencing or disrupting the electoral process. Similarly, Balogun (2011) described electoral fraud as encompassing violence in its various forms,

physical, psychological, administrative, legal, and structural, carried out before, during, or after elections by candidates, supporters, security agencies, or election officials.

According to Wikipedia, electoral fraud refers to illegal interference in the election process, including manipulation of vote counts to favor certain candidates, voter intimidation, illegal registration, and improper counting. While definitions vary across legal jurisdictions, electoral fraud universally undermines democracy, destabilizes governance, and can push the electoral process into a credibility crisis, eroding citizens' acceptance of electoral outcomes.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Neo-Institutional Accountability Theory, which emphasizes the central role of political institutions, rule enforcement, and accountability mechanisms in shaping democratic outcomes. The theory draws from neo-institutionalist scholarship and democratic accountability theory, which together argue that electoral integrity and political stability depend not merely on the intentions of political elites but on the autonomy, credibility, and enforcement capacity of institutions responsible for managing political competition. Neo-institutionalism emerged as a corrective to behavioralist explanations of political outcomes by redirecting attention to the formal rules, norms, and organizational structures that constrain political behavior. March and Olsen (1984) argue that political actors operate within institutional contexts that shape their preferences and actions through rules and norms rather than pure rational calculation. Similarly, North (1990) conceptualizes institutions as the "rules of the game" that structure political and economic interactions, contending that weak or poorly enforced rules generate instability, inefficiency, and conflict.

In comparative political analysis, Hall and Taylor (1996) further advanced neo-institutionalism by demonstrating how institutional arrangements distribute power and structure political outcomes over time. From this perspective, democratic breakdowns occur not solely because of elite greed or moral failure but because institutions fail to regulate political competition, enforce sanctions, and guarantee procedural fairness. This insight is particularly relevant to Nigeria, where electoral management bodies, security agencies, and judicial institutions have often lacked operational independence and have been susceptible to political interference, thereby undermining the credibility of elections.

The accountability dimension of the framework is grounded in O'Donnell's (1998) theory of democratic accountability, which distinguishes between vertical accountability, exercised by citizens through elections, and horizontal accountability, exercised by state institutions empowered to check abuses by other state actors. O'Donnell argues that democracy becomes fragile when institutions responsible for oversight, such as courts, legislatures, and electoral commissions, are weak, politicized, or subordinated to executive authority. In such contexts, electoral malpractice flourishes because political actors operate in an environment of impunity, where violations of electoral laws carry little or no consequence. This condition has been evident in Nigeria, where the failure to prosecute electoral offenders has normalized fraud and violence

as acceptable strategies for political competition.

The framework also incorporates insights from procedural justice theory, particularly the work of Tyler (1990), who demonstrates that citizens' willingness to accept political outcomes and comply with authority depends more on the perceived fairness of decision-making processes than on whether they personally benefit from the outcome. When electoral procedures are widely perceived as unjust, manipulated, or biased, public trust in democratic institutions declines, voter participation decreases, and the likelihood of social unrest increases. In Nigeria, repeated experiences of electoral fraud have eroded citizens' confidence in elections as a legitimate means of political representation, contributing to widespread political apathy, post-election violence, and broader social disorder.

Neo-Institutional Accountability Theory further recognizes that persistent institutional failure may necessitate structural re-foundations during critical junctures in political development. Hall and Taylor (1996) note that moments of prolonged crisis often create opportunities for renegotiating foundational rules and institutional arrangements. Within the Nigerian context, recurring electoral crises signal deep-seated institutional dysfunction rooted in constitutional design, centralized power structures, and winner-takes-all politics. Consequently, electoral fraud is understood not as an isolated phenomenon but as a systemic outcome of weak institutions, deficient accountability mechanisms, and procedural injustice. Within this theoretical framework, electoral malpractice in Nigeria is interpreted as a predictable consequence of institutional breakdown rather than an aberration. Elections lose their legitimizing function and instead become instruments through which political elites capture and retain state power, thereby generating political instability and social disorder.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative research approach, which is appropriate given the nature of the study. Qualitative research emphasizes the exploration and interpretation of social phenomena within their specific contexts, and it is particularly suitable for examining electoral fraud, political instability, and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Unlike quantitative methods that rely on numerical measurements, the qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of the underlying causes, dynamics, and consequences of electoral malpractice. The study relies primarily on secondary sources of data. These sources include peer-reviewed academic literature such as journal articles, books, and conference papers that provide theoretical insights, historical accounts, and empirical analyses of electoral fraud in Nigeria and other developing democracies. Furthermore, credible newspaper reports and media publications were utilized to capture contemporary perspectives and real-time accounts of electoral malpractice and violence during Nigeria's general elections. These reports serve as valuable complements to scholarly works, as they provide firsthand evidence of incidents that shape the political climate and electoral outcomes.The data collected were subjected to content analysis, which involves systematically reviewing, categorizing, and interpreting the existing body of knowledge in order to identify recurring themes, patterns, and contradictions. In selecting sources for review, priority was given

to peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and official reports of local and international electoral observer missions (including those of the European Union, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations Development Programme) published on Nigeria's electoral experience since the return to civil rule in 1999. Materials lacking verifiable scholarly or institutional standing, such as unattributed online commentary, were excluded from the analysis. These inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to ensure that the study drew on credible, empirically grounded accounts of Nigeria's electoral history.

Electoral Fraud as a Threat to Political Stability in Nigeria

To ground the foregoing narrative analysis in a clearer empirical overview, Table 1 presents a comparative summary of Nigeria's seven general elections since the return to civil rule in 1999, alongside their primary reported irregularities.

Year	Notable Feature	Primary Reported Irregularities
1999	First elections of the Fourth Republic, ending military rule	Pre-election, electoral, and post-election violence; weak party competition amid a transitional, elite -brokered process
2003	Re-election of the incumbent	Widespread ballot -box stuffing, violent clashes, and manipulation of results; widely regarded as one of the most violent and fraud-ridden elections of the period
2007	First civilian -to-civilian transfer of power	Described by local and international observers as the most flawed election since 1999; marked by poor organization, lack of transparency, and large-scale manipulation during result collation
2011	Return of incumbent presidency	Improved administration relative to 2007, but followed by severe post -election violence and rioting in parts of the country, with significant loss of life
2015	First opposition victory through the ballot box	Widely praised as a marked improvement in credibility, though vote buying, ballot -snatching, and localized violence were still reported
2019	Re-election of incumbent	Persistent allegations of rigging, voter intimidation, and ballot -box snatching in several states, alongside logistical failures
2023	Introduction of new electronic accreditation and result -viewing technology	Technical failures in result transmission, attacks on electoral commission facilities, widespread vote buying, and record-low voter turnout

Table 1: Comparative overview of Nigeria's general elections since 1999 and their primary reported irregularities.

As the table illustrates, no general election since 1999 has been entirely free of significant irregularity, and the specific manifestations of malpractice, ranging from outright rigging and violence to more recent technical and logistical failures, have evolved even as the underlying pattern of institutional weakness has persisted.

Electoral fraud has caused extensive harm to democratic stability in Nigeria. Uncontrolled electoral violence has the potential to truncate democratic order in any country. One major consequence is the sabotage of the electorate's will during elections. This may create a situation where leaders emerge through the votes of a minority, as the majority, fearing for their safety, avoid participation in the electoral process. Furthermore, large-scale electoral fraud undermines democratic stability because it negates the essential purpose of elections as the legitimate foundation of government. As Ezeani (2005) observed, a government that sustains itself in power through fraud, against the wishes of the majority, lacks both legitimacy and the moral authority that a popular mandate bestows.

Electoral fraud has also facilitated the rise of incompetent individuals into vital political positions, enabled by political demagogues. Many such individuals, being mediocre, are incapable of delivering the dividends of democracy expected by the masses. Additionally, political fraud has victimized and excluded some of the best minds in political and economic management from governance, while others have been brutally eliminated, as was the case with Chief Bola Ige.

Without doubt, electoral fraud threatens national security and contributes to economic decay, terrorism, political upheavals, and even the possibility of military intervention. Any act that undermines the democratic process or destabilizes a nation socially, politically, or economically constitutes a national threat. Civil disturbances resulting from electoral fraud and violence can disrupt the harmonious coexistence of the various communities that make up Nigeria. Moreover, when the political environment is unstable due to pre- and post-election fraud, violence, and grievances, businesses cannot thrive and investors are discouraged. This inevitably leads to economic decline, reduced gross domestic product, rising unemployment, and a significant reduction in trade and commerce.

Electoral fraud also undermines both political and economic development. It creates conditions where opposition groups may resort to sponsoring or supporting terrorist organizations as a way of testing or destabilizing the system. Such actions run contrary to the values of democracy, civilization, and humanity. Since independence, Nigeria's democratization process has been consistently marred by massive electoral fraud and associated violence. These practices have compromised the ethics of liberal democracy despite numerous electoral reforms. Instead of abating, electoral fraud has been on the increase, with no evidence of any serious or sincere effort to halt its escalation. This situation has fostered recurrent violence and instability, to the extent that some commentators now view Nigeria as edging toward the status of a failed state.

In previous general elections, the European Union Observer Mission reported that Nigeria's elections fell short of basic international and regional standards. They noted that due to a lack of transparency and credible evidence of fraud, particularly in the result collation process,

confidence in the electoral outcomes was impossible. Democracy, despite its multiple definitions and universal acceptance as the best form of government, has become difficult to practice in Nigeria. This difficulty stems from the inability to meet the very conditions that qualify a government as democratic.

Electoral Fraud and Electoral Participation in Nigeria

The primary reason why voters go to the polling booths is to cast their ballots for candidates of their choice. In other words, people vote, or refrain from voting, for multiple reasons, which implies that a multiplicity of factors can influence electoral participation. The number of candidates contesting and the personal relationship (if any) between a voter and a candidate may affect the decision to participate in the electoral process.

One of the major factors that has affected voter turnout in Nigeria's general elections is the threat to voter security. Politicians often mobilized thugs across electoral wards, disguising them under the label of vigilante groups. These groups frequently acted violently, threatening and intimidating helpless voters. Such threats inevitably dampened voter morale as elections approached. According to Nweke (2005), the government, through its agencies, tacitly encouraged supporters of the ruling party to violate electoral laws. This practice reflects the tendency of the Nigerian state to serve as an instrument for the satisfaction of unrestrained desires of the political elites, who seek to maintain power at all costs, even against the popular will. Consequently, the state mobilized its instruments of oppression, exploitation, and subjugation to guarantee electoral victory. As a result, elections frequently assumed the character of inter-party confrontations, with the ruling party arming itself to suppress opposition parties.

Another significant factor that has negatively influenced voter turnout is the decline in political awareness, which is evident in the widespread apathy among citizens. Day and Choudbury defined apathy as a lack of interest, while Okolie (2004) described it as indifference toward issues that would normally provoke active engagement. He further explained that political or electoral apathy is not merely a psychological predisposition but also a behavioral trait. It is marked by an individual's passivity toward political activity. Some citizens lack the necessary interest to participate in the political processes of their country, thereby contributing to low voter turnout.

Political Instability and Social Disorder in Nigeria Resulting from Electoral Fraud

Elections are central to the existence, stability, and development of democracies, and political parties play significant roles in sustaining them. Free and fair elections promote and ensure democracy. However, in Nigeria's democratic history, electoral violence has adversely affected the country to the extent of causing major political upheavals and even terminating democratic rule. Politically, electoral fraud has shaken the very foundations of Nigeria's democracy. Although violence is often considered an indispensable aspect of human existence (Ayene, 2000), its use in the electoral process has been particularly destructive.

Electoral fraud in Nigeria has weakened people's confidence in, and support for, democratic institutions. For decades, organized electoral fraud has been perpetrated at the national, state, and local government levels, undermining Nigeria's development programs and prospects. The scale of electoral malpractice has been so pervasive that organizations such as the European Union, the Commonwealth, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) have carried out studies to determine why Nigerians have lost faith in democracy. Their findings concluded that the pillars of democracy in Nigeria remain weak, and that electoral manipulation and fraud are routinely used to truncate the popular mandate and deny citizens their democratic rights.

Electoral fraud has thus become one of the major challenges facing the growth and development of Nigeria's political system. Rather than abating, the trend has worsened and become more daring over the years. For example, the 2007 general elections were described by both local and international observers as the worst elections ever conducted in Nigeria, a fact that undermined efforts to consolidate democracy (Ebirim, 2013).

The absence of free and fair elections further compounds this challenge. As Osinakachukwu (2011) noted, participation in elections is only meaningful when votes count, but in Nigeria votes are often subverted to serve the interests of a few. Leaders who emerge through fraudulent processes rig themselves into office, thereby blocking the chances of more credible candidates, even when the latter are the people's choice. In a society where candidates are imposed against the will of the electorate, true democratic consolidation is impossible. Furthermore, persistent electoral rigging in Nigeria has led to violations of fundamental human rights, including the right to life as advocated by A. V. Dicey.

Democracy in Nigeria is intended to promote political stability and safeguard fundamental rights. Elections, ideally, should provide the basis for stable governance founded on the consent of the people. However, electoral fraud has consistently undermined this goal, jeopardizing the stability and security necessary for democracy to flourish. Since independence, elections in Nigeria have been treated as a do-or-die affair, instilling fear among peace-loving citizens and discouraging them from exercising their rights.

Evidence shows that electoral fraud has drastically reduced voter participation due to disillusionment and the absence of credible candidates. Adekanye (1990) observed that Nigeria's electoral history, marred by fraud, has been characterized by tension, crises, and violence. Politics in Nigeria is often seen as a zero-sum game where winners take all and losers lose everything. This desperation has resulted in the loss of lives of voters and popular candidates, targeted by hoodlums seeking to capture power by dubious means. Consequently, many well-meaning citizens have chosen to avoid politics altogether, for fear of death or victimization, further threatening Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Electoral bodies, which should remain neutral, have often been compromised. In some cases, officials collude with powerful elites to secure victory for unpopular candidates at the expense of both the electorate and democratic integrity. This trend has normalized rigging as a "solution" for political actors, undermining the principles of democracy and eroding public confidence.

As Kurfi (2005) observed, election rigging has become almost synonymous with Nigerian

elections. The primary aim of such malpractice is to frustrate the democratic aspirations of citizens. In recent times, votes no longer count, as electoral management bodies are expected to "deliver" predetermined results without challenge. Elections have become so cruelly contested that the very success of Nigeria's democratic order has been compromised. This persistent malpractice has had a profoundly negative effect on the country's democratic future, as the trend continues to worsen rather than improve. The cumulative effect is a steady erosion of opportunities for credible elections and the consolidation of democracy in Nigeria

Conclusion and Recommendations

So far, this paper has demonstrated that the principles of democracy are universally accepted, particularly because they are founded on the consent of the people. Adherence to these principles would ordinarily lead to the development and strengthening of the political system. However, electoral fraud of any kind, regardless of its magnitude, hinders and retards the process of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. The persistence of electoral malpractice has hindered Nigeria's political advancement. This is most clearly reflected in the erosion of citizens' freedom to participate meaningfully in political activities, especially the right to vote and to be voted for. Political participation, which ordinarily refers to voluntary activities through which members of a political society play a role in selecting their leaders, has been seriously undermined. Increasingly, citizens exhibit political apathy due to the entrenchment of violence, particularly the widespread use of political thugs by parties during elections. These practices have created a participatory political culture characterized by fear, intimidation, and indifference, making electoral fraud a direct obstacle to political development in Nigeria.

This paper anchored its analysis on Neo-Institutional Accountability Theory, which emphasizes that political stability and electoral integrity depend on the autonomy, credibility, and enforcement capacity of political institutions rather than merely on the intentions of political elites. The theory holds that where institutions responsible for managing elections and enforcing accountability, such as electoral commissions, the judiciary, and security agencies, are weak, politicized, or subject to executive interference, impunity flourishes and electoral malpractice becomes normalized. Within this framework, the persistence of electoral fraud in Nigeria is understood not merely as a product of elite greed but as a systemic outcome of institutional failure to regulate political competition, enforce sanctions, and guarantee procedural fairness.

The paper concludes that the tendency to cling to political power at all costs has led to the recruitment of thugs during elections, significantly lowering voter turnout across polling units. Furthermore, political parties that control state machinery exploit it for selfish purposes, particularly through ballot-box stuffing and other manipulations. Such practices erode the electorate's right to freely choose leaders who genuinely represent their interests. Ultimately, the high rate of electoral fraud continues to undermine the process of democratic consolidation and political development in Nigeria.

In light of these findings, the paper makes the following recommendations:

1. **Sovereign National Conference:** A sovereign national conference should be convened to enable the state to fundamentally restructure governance. This would pave the way for a transitional regime tasked with organizing a new government based on a truly democratic constitution and people-oriented economic policies. Such policies should emphasize full employment, social security, maximum welfare for citizens, and sustained human and infrastructural development, while also laying the foundation for a credible electoral system.
2. **Accountability and Prosecution:** A legal and institutional framework should be established to prosecute individuals who use their positions to rig elections or enrich themselves after their tenure. This will serve both as deterrence and as a means of restoring public trust in governance.
3. **Promotion of Electoral Justice:** All stakeholders must commit to eliminating electoral fraud by ensuring fairness and justice in the conduct of elections. Strengthening the credibility of the electoral process is crucial for the consolidation of Nigeria's nascent democracy.

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