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ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND VOTER BEHAVIOUR IN NIGERIA'S FOURTH REPUBLIC, 1999–2023

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Abstract

Electoral integrity remains a pivotal determinant of democratic consolidation, yet Nigeria's electoral landscape continues to be characterised by irregularities, violence, and declining voter turnout. This study investigates how perceived electoral integrity, ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and awareness of electoral reforms jointly shape voter turnout, vote choice, and institutional trust across Nigeria's seven general election cycles (1999–2023), with primary data drawn from the 2023 presidential election. A convergent mixed-methods design was used: quantitative data from a nationally representative survey (n = 1,200) were analysed using hierarchical logistic regression, moderation analysis, chi-square tests, and t-tests, while qualitative insights were drawn from 30 semi-structured interviews with voters, electoral officials, and civil society observers. Findings show that perceived electoral integrity is a significant predictor of turnout (β = 0.41, p < .001), raising the predicted probability of voting from 51% to 74% between low- and high-integrity perceivers; that ethnic identity moderates the relationship between policy preferences and vote choice, muting the influence of policy considerations at high levels of ethnic salience; that lower socioeconomic status is associated with heightened voter apathy ($\chi^2(4) = 18.34$, p = .001, Cramer's V = .12); and that awareness of electoral reforms is associated with modestly higher institutional trust (Cohen's d = 0.52), although this gain is tempered by continued suspicion of the collation process. Qualitative themes of insecurity, normalised vote buying, institutional cynicism, and double-edged ethnic mobilisation explain the mechanisms behind these statistical associations. The study contextualises Norris's (2014) electoral integrity framework within a non-Western, resource-constrained democratising setting and proposes recommendations on collation-stage transparency, targeted voter education, anti-vote-buying enforcement, and inclusive candidate selection.

Keywords: Electoral Integrity, Voter Behaviour, Democratic Consolidation, Anti-Vote-Buying-Enforcement

Introduction

Since its return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has conducted seven successive general elections, an unprecedented run of procedural continuity for the country's post-independence history. Despite this continuity, each electoral cycle has been marred by allegations of fraud, logistical failures, ethnic mobilisation, and violence that undermine the legitimacy of declared outcomes (Ibrahim, 2017). According to the Independent National Electoral

Commission (INEC), voter turnout declined from 69.1% in 2003 to a historic low of 26.7% in the 2023 presidential election (INEC, 2023). This downward trend raises fundamental questions about the health of Nigerian democracy and about what, precisely, is driving citizens away from the polls.

Norris (2014) defines electoral integrity as the degree to which the entire electoral cycle, from the design of the legal framework to the announcement of results, meets international standards of fairness, transparency, and professional competence. Electoral integrity is widely treated as a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy: where citizens perceive the process as flawed, they may disengage, resort to protest, or shift allegiance to non-democratic alternatives (Birch, 2011). Nigerian scholarship has documented ballot box snatching, underage voting, and result manipulation at length (Adebayo, 2020; Okafor, 2019), yet the pathway from these documented malpractices to measurable shifts in individual voter behaviour and system-level trust remains comparatively underexplored, particularly using individual-level survey data linked to qualitative accounts of the same election. Eze (2021) has argued that electoral fraud in Nigeria is not merely a technical failure but a reflection of deeper elite bargaining and state capture that shapes citizens' calculus of whether participation is worthwhile.

The Fourth Republic offers a useful setting for examining these dynamics because it spans dominant-party rule, a rare alternation of power in 2015, and successive legal reforms. The Electoral Acts of 2002, 2010, and 2022 introduced biometric voter registration, card readers, and, most recently, electronic transmission of results, yet implementation gaps persist between what the law promises and what happens at the polling unit and collation centre (Nwangwu, 2022). Uzochukwu (2020) contends that these reforms, while symbolically important, have not adequately addressed the structural incentives for rigging that operate largely after votes are cast. Understanding how voters perceive these efforts, and whether that perception changes their behaviour, is therefore central to this study.

Nigerian voter behaviour has traditionally been analysed through the lenses of ethnicity, religion, and clientelism (Paden, 2015). Recent elections, however, suggest a more layered calculus involving issue-based voting, candidate assessment, and retrospective performance evaluation (Lewis, 2021). Bratton and Kimenyi (2008) argue that African ethnic voting is not simply primordial sentiment but an instrumental strategy: voters support co-ethnics because they expect more reliable access to state resources through them. The extent to which concerns about electoral integrity interact with, rather than sit alongside, these ethnic and economic calculations is not yet well theorised for Nigeria. This study addresses that gap by modelling institutional and socio-psychological determinants of turnout and vote choice together, with the quality of the electoral process treated as a variable rather than a backdrop.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study is guided by four central questions. First, to what extent does citizens' perception of electoral integrity influence voter turnout in Nigerian presidential elections? Given the steady decline in participation since 1999, understanding whether people vote because they believe the process is fair is critical. Second, the study asks how ethnic identity shapes voting decisions. Specifically, does ethnic identity moderate the relationship between policy preferences and vote choice? In a plural society like Nigeria, voters may prioritize shared

identity over policy platforms, and this paper tests whether that is the case. Thirdly, the study examines the role of socioeconomic status in political disengagement. Are poorer citizens more likely to withdraw from voting, and if so, how does this relate to the wider problem of voter apathy? Finally, the study investigates whether awareness of recent electoral reforms such as BVAS and IReV affects public trust in the electoral process. Have these technological innovations translated into greater confidence, or has scepticism persisted? Based on these questions, four hypotheses are tested:1: Perceived electoral integrity has a significant positive effect on voter turnout, even after controlling for age, education, and region. Citizens who view elections as credible are expected to be more likely to participate. 2: Ethnic identity significantly moderates the effect of policy preferences on voting choice. It is expected that at high levels of ethnic salience, the influence of policy considerations on vote choice will diminish.3: Lower socioeconomic status is associated with higher levels of voter apathy. Resource constraints and experiences of exclusion are expected to reduce participation among poorer citizens.4: Awareness of electoral reforms significantly increases public trust in elections. Voters who are familiar with innovations like BVAS and IReV are expected to report higher levels of institutional trust

Literature and Theoretical Review

Nigeria's electoral system presents something of a paradox: although its democratic institutions have endured for more than two decades, citizen trust in elections and rates of voter participation continue to decline. Existing studies have examined electoral malpractice (Human Rights Watch, 2020), voter apathy (Oyewole, 2021), and identity politics (Amuwo, 2018) largely as separate literatures. Few have integrated these strands into a single explanatory model that traces the perceptual pathway from electoral quality to individual behaviour. Nnoli (2019) observes that much Nigerian electoral scholarship remains descriptive, or relies on aggregate turnout and violence statistics, and so cannot reveal the micro-level reasoning through which citizens process what they see, hear, and experience during an election. Absent that micro-level evidence, policy interventions risk addressing symptoms rather than the mechanisms that actually produce disengagement.

Methodological gaps compound the problem. Quantitative studies of Nigerian elections are often cross-sectional and cannot separate cause from effect; qualitative studies are typically localised to a single state or community and cannot speak to the national picture. A design that triangulates statistical association with narrative explanation is needed to provide both breadth and depth (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This study responds to that need by asking: how does perceived electoral integrity influence voter turnout and voting choice in Nigeria, and what roles do ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and reform awareness play in shaping these outcomes and public trust?

History of Nigerian Elections (1999–2023)

Nigeria's electoral trajectory since 1999 is a record of contested legitimacy punctuated by incremental reform. The 1999 and 2003 elections, conducted under a military-crafted transition, were widely criticised for organisational chaos and blatant rigging (Ibrahim, 2017). The 2007 elections, described by domestic observers as a low point for electoral credibility, prompted then-President Umaru Yar'Adua to acknowledge the process's failures and establish

the Uwais Electoral Reform Committee (Agbaje, 2010). The 2011 elections were seen as a relative improvement, owing to a new voter register and the deployment of university vice-chancellors as returning officers, though post-election violence in the north claimed over 800 lives and underscored the lethal stakes of electoral competition (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The 2015 elections marked a genuine turning point: an incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, conceded defeat to Muhammadu Buhari, strengthening the sense that alternation of power was possible through the ballot box. The 2019 elections, however, saw a regression, with widespread reports of vote buying, logistical delay, and security-force interference (YIAGA Africa, 2019). Adebayo (2020) argues that the monetisation of the process reached new heights in 2019, with parties reportedly running well-resourced vote-buying operations near polling units. The 2023 elections introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and electronic transmission of results, both intended to curb impersonation and result alteration, but were nonetheless marked by technological failures, violence, and allegations of manipulation at the collation stage, further eroding public confidence (INEC, 2023). The overall pattern is one of two steps forward and one step back, with institutional innovation repeatedly blunted by weak implementation and, at times, deliberate obstruction.

Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity refers to the procedural and normative standards that ensure elections reflect the will of the electorate. Norris (2014) sets out a comprehensive framework of eleven sub-dimensions spanning electoral laws, boundary delimitation, voter registration, party and candidate registration, media coverage, campaign finance, the voting process, vote count, result announcement, and the electoral authorities themselves. Birch (2011) similarly stresses that integrity is not binary but sits on a continuum, and that citizens' perceptions of that continuum often matter more for behaviour than the objective facts of administration. In Africa, Lindberg's (2006) study of Ghana found that repeated elections can, under favourable conditions, generate a self-reinforcing cycle of democratic learning in which each cleaner election raises expectations for the next. Nigeria illustrates the less favourable alternative: repeated flawed elections appear to have produced a cycle of cynicism rather than learning (Okafor, 2019). Eze (2021) contends that the persistence of electoral fraud in Nigeria has, over time, normalised a culture of impunity in which citizens have come to expect manipulation as the default outcome rather than treating it as an aberration.

Electoral integrity has been linked in the broader literature to government legitimacy, the risk of civil conflict, and even economic performance (Norris, 2014; Schedler, 2013). In the Nigerian case specifically, Nwangwu (2022) found that perceived malpractice in the 2019 general election significantly reduced satisfaction with democracy, an effect concentrated among urban youth. International observation missions have repeatedly documented procedural deficiencies, but their recommendations are often only partially implemented by the time of the next election (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2019). What this body of work has not done, and what the present study attempts, is to connect macro-level integrity assessments directly to individual-level behavioural data collected from the same election cycle, using both survey and interview instruments.

Voter Behaviour

Voter behaviour in established democracies is conventionally explained through three theoretical lenses: the sociological model associated with the Columbia School, which emphasises social cleavages such as class, religion, and region; the psycho-social model associated with the Michigan School, which stresses long-run party identification; and the rational choice model, which frames voting as a cost-benefit calculation (Downs, 1957). The direct applicability of these models to Africa is contested. Bratton and Kimenyi (2008) argue that ethnic voting on the continent is instrumental rather than primordial: voters back co-ethnic candidates because doing so is expected to secure greater access to state resources, not simply out of inherited loyalty. This instrumentalist reading is supported by Lewis (2021), who uses Afrobarometer data to show that policy preferences and retrospective performance evaluation increasingly compete with ethnic cues in shaping Nigerian vote choice.

Identity nonetheless remains a powerful heuristic. Paden (2015) argues that Nigeria's tripartite ethnic structure, Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo, sustains a durable federal-character calculus that structures both elite pacts and mass mobilisation. Oyewole (2021) found that ethnic and religious priming raised turnout in the North-West but suppressed it in the South-East, where separatist sentiment worked against participation. What has received comparatively little attention is the role of electoral integrity as a cognitive filter that sits upstream of these identity and policy considerations: when voters believe the process itself is rigged, the expected utility of voting falls regardless of which candidate they would otherwise prefer. As Uzochukwu (2020) puts it, the rational Nigerian voter must weigh not only the probability that a preferred candidate will win, but the separate and prior probability that a cast vote will be counted as intended.

Gap in the Literature

Four gaps motivate this study. First, few Nigerian studies have tested the direct and interactive effects of electoral integrity perceptions on turnout and vote choice within a single statistical model that also controls for the ethnic and socioeconomic variables long treated as dominant. Second, existing research tends to underplay socioeconomic status as a driver of apathy in a context where vote buying is widespread; poorer voters may be simultaneously targeted for cash mobilisation and structurally alienated from the process, an interaction that a simple resource model of participation would not predict. Third, the hypothesis that awareness of electoral reforms raises trust has been asserted more often than tested with individual-level data capable of separating awareness from other correlated attitudes. Fourth, qualitative accounts of how voters make sense of elections are rarely integrated with quantitative findings from the same sample and election, which limits how much either data type can explain about the other. This study addresses all four gaps through a mixed-methods design that estimates the quantitative relationships and uses interview data to explain the mechanisms behind them.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in Norris's (2014) electoral integrity theory, which holds that the quality of electoral procedure directly shapes democratic legitimacy and citizen engagement, and treats perception of that quality as a necessary link in the causal chain between

administration and behaviour. This is integrated with rational choice institutionalism (North, 1990), which treats behaviour as shaped by the incentives and constraints embedded in both formal and informal rules. In Nigeria, formal rules include the Electoral Act and INEC regulations; informal institutions include clientelistic networks, ethnic bargains, and entrenched norms of impunity around rigging. Three adaptations are made to fit Norris's framework, developed with reference to established Western democracies, to this setting. First, where Norris treats perceived integrity primarily as a predictor of satisfaction with democracy, this study treats it as a direct predictor of the turnout decision itself, on the grounds that in a context of weak formal accountability, perceived futility of voting is a more immediate barrier than diffuse dissatisfaction. Second, the framework is extended to allow ethnic identity to moderate, rather than simply co-occur with, the effect of policy preference on vote choice, reflecting the instrumentalist account of ethnic voting set out by Bratton and Kimenyi (2008). Third, informal institutions, specifically the moral economy of vote buying documented in Section 4.3, are incorporated as a mechanism that can override the purely economic cost-benefit logic Norris's framework otherwise assumes. Under this adapted model, a Nigerian voter assesses the credibility of the electoral process, weighs that assessment against ethnic and economic considerations that operate partly independently of it, and decides whether the expected benefit of participation exceeds its cost. Where integrity is perceived to be low, this study expects participation costs to dominate, producing apathy or protest non-voting, while ethnic identity and socioeconomic position continue to shape whichever behaviour, voting or abstention, ultimately follows.

Methodology

A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently, analysed separately using methods appropriate to each data type, and merged at the interpretation stage (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This design was chosen because it allows the statistical generalisability of survey findings to be read alongside the contextual and motivational detail available only from interviews, which together provide a fuller account of a phenomenon, the link between perceived integrity and behaviour, that neither method could establish convincingly on its own. The target population comprised registered voters across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones who were eligible to vote in the 2023 presidential election. A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was used for the quantitative component. In the first stage, three states were randomly selected from each of the six geopolitical zones, yielding 18 states in total. In the second stage, two local government areas (LGAs) were selected per state, one urban and one rural, to capture the urban-rural divide documented in prior turnout research. In the third stage, households within each selected LGA were sampled using a systematic random walk from a randomly chosen starting point, and within each household one adult (18 years or older) who self-identified as a registered voter was selected using the last-birthday method to avoid interviewer selection bias.

For the qualitative component, purposive sampling was used to recruit 30 participants across three groups: 15 ordinary voters (stratified by the same six geopolitical zones, with roughly equal urban and rural representation), 8 INEC ad hoc staff who served in the 2023 election, and 7 civil society election observers affiliated with domestic monitoring organisations. Participants were identified through community gatekeepers and observer-organisation contact lists and screened to ensure first-hand experience of the 2023 election cycle.

Thematic saturation, defined as the point at which successive interviews produced no new codes, was judged to have been reached after 25 interviews; five further interviews were conducted to confirm this judgement, consistent with saturation practice in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase approach: familiarisation, initial coding, theme generation, theme review, theme definition, and write-up. Two coders independently coded the first ten transcripts, compared codes, and resolved discrepancies through discussion to build a shared codebook, which was then applied to the remaining transcripts by both coders working in parallel with periodic cross-checks.

Hypothesis Testing Results

H1: Perceived electoral integrity positively predicts voter turnout. The hierarchical logistic regression (see Table 1 summary below) showed that, after controlling for age, education, and geopolitical zone in Step 1, the perceived electoral integrity index was a significant predictor of turnout in Step 2 ($\beta = 0.41$, $p < .001$, $Exp(B) = 1.51$), meaning that each one-point increase on the five-point integrity scale was associated with roughly 51% higher odds of having voted. The model explained 18% of the variance in turnout (Nagelkerke $R^2 = .18$). In substantive terms, the predicted probability of voting was 74% among respondents one standard deviation above the mean on perceived integrity, compared with 51% among those one standard deviation below the mean, a 23-percentage-point gap that is large enough to plausibly account for a meaningful share of the aggregate turnout decline documented by INEC. The Step 3 interaction term between integrity and geopolitical zone was not significant ($p = .34$), indicating that the integrity effect on turnout held broadly uniformly across regions rather than being concentrated in any one zone. This finding supports the theoretical expectation that citizens who believe elections are conducted fairly are considerably more likely to participate in them.

H2: Ethnic identity moderates the effect of policy preferences on voting choice. The moderation analysis found a significant interaction effect ($b = -0.23$, $t = -3.45$, $p < .001$). At low ethnic salience, policy preferences strongly predicted voting for a co-ethnic candidate ($b = 0.58$, $p < .001$); at high ethnic salience, this effect weakened substantially and became statistically non-significant ($b = 0.12$, $p = .19$). Practically, this means that among voters for whom ethnic identity is not especially salient, a one-unit increase in the stated importance of policy issues raises the probability of choosing a co-ethnic candidate by an amount roughly five times larger than the same increase produces among voters for whom ethnic identity is highly salient, whose vote choice is instead driven by factors the policy measure does not capture. Ethnic identity therefore functions as a perceptual screen that can crowd out policy evaluation rather than simply sitting alongside it. One interviewee summarised this dynamic directly: as one respondent put it, once a candidate is seen to be looking out for one's own community, detailed manifesto commitments become largely beside the point (male voter, Kano).

H3: Lower socioeconomic status is associated with higher voter apathy. A chi-square test of independence showed a significant association between wealth tercile and apathy category ($\chi^2(4) = 18.34$, $p = .001$). Among low-wealth respondents, 48% reported that they rarely or

never vote, compared with 29% in the high-wealth group, a 19-percentage-point gap. Cramer's V was .12, indicating that while the association is statistically robust in a sample of this size, wealth alone accounts for a modest share of the overall variation in apathy, consistent with the theoretical expectation that socioeconomic status operates alongside, rather than instead of, integrity perceptions and ethnic considerations. Interview data suggest one reason the association is not larger: poorer voters were often drawn back into the process through cash inducements even when they held apathetic or fatalistic views about the outcome, a dynamic explored further in Section 4.3. One respondent described this experience of being paid despite expecting the result to be predetermined regardless of her vote (female voter, Enugu).

H4: Reform awareness increases trust in elections. An independent-samples t-test found that respondents aware of BVAS reported significantly higher institutional trust ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 1.14$) than those unaware ($M = 2.54$, $SD = 1.08$), $t(1198) = 6.21$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.52$, a medium-sized effect. Awareness of IReV showed a similar pattern ($M = 3.45$ versus $M = 2.67$, $p < .001$). These effects indicate that awareness of specific technological reforms does raise trust, but a medium effect size on a five-point scale also implies a ceiling: even aware respondents' mean trust score of roughly 3.1 to 3.5 sits only modestly above the scale midpoint, well short of confident trust. Qualitative data help explain this ceiling: several participants distinguished between trusting BVAS as a machine and trusting the human-run collation process that follows it, a distinction the survey's dichotomous awareness measure cannot capture on its own. As one INEC ad hoc staff member observed, the technology performs reliably even when the people operating around it do not (INEC staff, Rivers).

Findings

Insecurity as a turnout suppressor. Interview accounts described how violence, and the anticipation of violence, depressed turnout in specific and geographically uneven ways, particularly in the South-East, where separatist-linked sit-at-home orders discouraged movement on election day, and in parts of the North-West, where banditry disrupted access to polling units. A female observer from Anambra recalled wanting to vote but staying indoors after threats that anyone leaving home would be targeted. This theme illuminates a suppression mechanism that operates independently of, and likely compounds, the integrity effect identified in H1: a voter who is both doubtful of the process and afraid to travel to a polling unit faces two separate, additive barriers to participation rather than one.

Vote buying as a normalised transaction. Participants across zones described vote buying not as an isolated bribe but as a standardised, semi-public transaction, with cash amounts in the range of N2,000 to N5,000 distributed with the involvement of community leaders. Several voters reported feeling morally obliged to vote for the party that had paid them, with one elderly respondent from Oyo describing a belief that failing to do so after accepting payment would invite spiritual sanction. This moral-economy framing complicates the purely economic, cost-benefit reading of vote buying found in earlier literature (Birch, 2011) and helps explain why the H3 association between wealth and apathy, while significant, has a comparatively small effect size: poorer voters are not simply disengaged, they are actively, if coercively, remobilised through cash payments that survey items on turnout cannot distinguish from voluntary participation.

Institutional distrust and rigging as inevitable. A recurring view across zones held that no matter how transparently votes were cast and counted at the polling unit, results would still be altered before final announcement. Civil society observers noted that even where polling-unit results were posted publicly and matched what observers had recorded, this transparency did not restore confidence, because the perceived point of manipulation, the collation centre, remained opaque to ordinary citizens. This theme directly explains the ceiling on the H4 trust effect described above: awareness of BVAS and IReV raises trust in the parts of the process those tools cover, but does not resolve suspicion of the stage those tools do not reach.

Ethnic mobilisation as a double-edged sword. Ethnic appeals were described as capable of both energising and dividing the electorate. A National Youth Service Corps member serving in Sokoto observed that once candidates began invoking communal, in-group rhetoric, the contest took on the character of a zero-sum contest between communities rather than a policy debate. This account is consistent with the H2 finding that policy considerations lose influence as ethnic salience rises, and extends it by suggesting that this salience is often actively produced by candidates and party agents during the campaign rather than a fixed, pre-existing voter trait, a point developed further in Section 5.1.

Interpretation of Findings

The positive association between perceived electoral integrity and turnout (H1) supports the central claim of electoral integrity theory, that citizens participate more readily when they believe doing so matters (Norris, 2014). With 38% of the achieved sample reporting that they did not vote, integrity perceptions appear to function as a real psychological gateway to participation rather than a minor attitudinal correlate. This extends Adebayo's (2020) finding that electoral violence depresses turnout by showing that even non-violent procedural doubts, about the register, about intimidation, about the accuracy of the count, can demobilise voters on their own. The moderating effect of ethnic identity on policy voting (H2) supports the instrumentalist account of ethnic voting: ethnicity displaces policy evaluation specifically when it is made salient, which is consistent with Bratton and Kimenyi's (2008) argument that ethnic voting is context-dependent rather than automatic. The qualitative data suggest a further refinement worth flagging as an alternative explanation: rather than ethnic salience being a stable individual trait that simply interacts with policy preference, interview accounts point to campaign-period elite rhetoric as an active trigger of that salience. If so, the moderation effect documented here may be as much a product of a particular campaign's messaging as of enduring voter psychology, and could plausibly vary in size across election cycles with more or less inflammatory campaigning.

The association between low socioeconomic status and voter apathy (H3) is broadly consistent with resource-based models of participation, but the qualitative data suggest that, in the Nigerian case, economic deprivation interacts with the experience of vote buying to produce a distinct and more complicated form of alienated participation, rather than straightforward non-participation. Poor voters are simultaneously courted through cash payments and, in their own accounts, aware that the system as a whole favours wealthier and more politically connected citizens. Okafor (2019) captures this tension in describing an electoral market that excludes the poor even as it exploits them. An alternative explanation worth considering is that the modest effect size for H3 partly reflects measurement limits rather than a genuinely weak relationship: self-reported apathy categories may understate true

non-participation among the poorest respondents, who could be under-represented in a household survey that requires a fixed address and the time to be interviewed. The modest effect of reform awareness on trust (H4) illustrates the limits of technological fixes applied to only part of a multi-stage process: BVAS and IReV were received positively where they operate, but their credibility gains were capped by continuing suspicion of collation, reinforcing Nwangwu's (2022) finding that reforms without corresponding behavioural change among electoral and political actors yield only shallow trust gains.

Comparison with Previous Research

These results both complement and complicate existing scholarship. Consistent with Lewis (2021), this study finds that policy preferences do shape vote choice, but conditionally, only when ethnic identity is not strongly primed, a nuance that is easily lost in analyses treating ethnicity as a constant background factor rather than a variable condition. In contrast to Oyewole (2021), who reported a broadly uniform depressive effect of insecurity on turnout, this study finds regional variation: in the South-East, insecurity suppressed turnout, whereas in parts of the North-Central zone, interview accounts suggested that threat perceptions instead galvanised defensive mobilisation among communities that felt targeted. This indicates that insecurity's net effect on turnout is mediated by how a threat is collectively interpreted, rather than operating as a uniform deterrent.

Set against the wider West African region, Nigeria's pattern of ambitious reform rhetoric alongside inconsistent implementation echoes experiences described for Sierra Leone and Liberia (Agbaje, 2010), though Nigeria's scale and regional heterogeneity plausibly make consistent implementation a harder problem to solve. The finding that vote buying operates partly through a sense of moral or even spiritual obligation, rather than as a simple quid pro quo, extends the vote-buying literature, which has more often assumed a straightforward economic exchange (Birch, 2011). This spiritual dimension, in which community or ancestral sanction is invoked to enforce post-payment compliance, appears distinctive to the cultural context studied here and would benefit from focused ethnographic attention beyond the scope of this study.

Limitations

Several limitations qualify these findings. First, the cross-sectional design precludes firm causal inference: the association between integrity perceptions and turnout could run in the direction assumed here, or could partly reflect the reverse process, in which non-voters rationalise their abstention after the fact by rating the process as less fair than voters do. Longitudinal or panel designs following the same respondents across election cycles, or survey-experimental designs that manipulate information about electoral administration, would be needed to establish direction of causation with more confidence. Second, the self-reported turnout measure (62%) sits well above INEC's official figure of 26.7%, a gap far too large to attribute to sampling variation alone and almost certainly reflecting social desirability bias in a face-to-face interview setting; validated turnout data linked to individual respondents were not available, since Nigeria has no centralised, publicly accessible voter file that could be matched to survey records. This gap means the turnout models in Section 4.2 should be read as explaining variation in the willingness to report having voted, which is very likely correlated with actual turnout but is not identical to it. Third, the qualitative sample,

while deliberately stratified by zone and role, overrepresented urban and semi-urban voices relative to the rural population because of access and safety constraints in conflict-affected rural areas; rural voters in the most insecure LGAs, who may hold the most extreme views on both insecurity and apathy, are likely underrepresented in the interview data specifically. Fourth, the study is limited to presidential elections and may therefore miss subnational dynamics, particularly around gubernatorial and state assembly races, where integrity concerns and voter behaviour could differ in either direction. Finally, while the convergent design allowed quantitative and qualitative findings to be read against one another throughout Chapter 4 and this discussion, the judgement of where a theme explains, qualifies, or complicates a given statistical result remains an interpretive one made by the research team, and reasonable analysts working from the same transcripts and data might draw somewhat different connections.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined how electoral integrity, ethnic identity, socioeconomic status, and reform awareness shape voter behaviour in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, using a nationally representative survey linked to interviews conducted around the 2023 general election. The findings show that perceived electoral integrity is a robust predictor of turnout, that ethnic identity conditions the influence of policy preference on vote choice, that lower socioeconomic status is associated with greater apathy even as poorer voters are simultaneously targeted by vote buying, and that awareness of specific technological reforms modestly raises trust without resolving suspicion of the collation stage those reforms do not cover. Qualitative material on insecurity, vote buying, and institutional cynicism supplies the mechanisms behind these statistical patterns. Taken together, the results affirm Norris's (2014) core thesis that electoral integrity is a necessary condition for sustained democratic engagement, while showing that in a setting like Nigeria's, integrity operates through, and is partly filtered by, culturally specific pathways, ethnic mobilisation, the moral economy of vote buying, and locally specific insecurity, that a framework built primarily on Western cases does not anticipate on its own.

Five recommendations follow directly from the findings above.

1 Strengthen post-voting result integrity. Because H4 and the qualitative data both point to the collation stage, rather than polling-unit voting itself, as the primary locus of continuing distrust, technological tools such as BVAS should be paired with independent, real-time auditing at collation centres specifically. INEC should grant accredited domestic and international observers unrestricted access to collation proceedings and should apply, and publicise, sanctions against officials found to have manipulated results. Parallel vote tabulation conducted by domestic civil society organisations, as recommended by YIAGA Africa (2019), can serve as an independent check on official collation figures.

2 Target voter education toward the specific belief that rigging is inevitable. Because this belief, documented directly in Section 4.3, appears to depress turnout independently of actual administrative quality, civic education should highlight concrete, verifiable instances in which vigilant citizens and observers protected a result, rather than relying on generic exhortations to vote. Messaging should be tailored to low-income communities specifically, given the H3 finding that this group reports the highest apathy, and should be

delivered through channels, such as community leaders and local radio, that were repeatedly named in interviews as trusted sources.

3 Pair anti-vote-buying enforcement with economic support. Since the qualitative data show poverty and vote buying operating together rather than separately, enforcement of existing anti-vote-buying provisions, including prosecution of high-profile vote buyers, should be paired with social protection measures that reduce the immediate financial pressure that makes cash inducements effective in the first place. A dedicated electoral fraud unit within the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), with a specific mandate to investigate vote-buying networks rather than treating each incident in isolation, would give this enforcement institutional continuity between election cycles.

4 Encourage inclusive candidate selection to reduce the ethnic-salience effect identified in H2. Political parties could be encouraged, through both legal requirement and public reporting on ticket composition, to field ethnically balanced tickets and to limit campaign rhetoric that explicitly frames contests in communal terms. Donor-funded inter-party dialogue platforms could support consensus-building around norms of peaceful, non-communal campaigning ahead of future cycles.

5 Institutionalise a reform feedback loop between INEC and citizens. INEC should establish a standing citizens' advisory panel, drawing on voters, civil society, and academic researchers, to provide regular input on the design and communication of reforms such as BVAS and IReV. This would help close the gap this study identifies between well-intentioned technological reform and the persistent, collation-stage distrust that such reform alone has not resolved.

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