



Effective Election Administration and the Prospect of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Abstract

With authoritarianism fast losing its appeal as a system of government and democracy emerging as possibly the best form of government suited to allowing people live in dignity and freedom, nations across the globe particularly those that have exited authoritarian rule are taking measures to consolidate democracy and ensure that they do not return to the dark days of authoritarianism. One of such measures is elections which have come to be accepted as the best way to determine who rules. In Nigeria, elections have held periodically, every four years since the return to democratic rule in 1999. However, conducting free and fair elections that meet international standards has remain a daunting challenge with the outcomes of most elections hotly contested up to the Supreme Court. Elections in Nigeria have been characterized by vote buying, harassment of the opposition, manipulation of election figures and most dangerously the collusion of election managers INEC and SIECs with the ruling parties using State apparatuses to alter the democratic choices of the people. These and many other ills such as the failure of the government to deliver tangible dividends of democracy have led many to question the appropriateness of democracy for Nigeria and many even looking back nostalgically to military rule. It is against this backdrop, that this paper is birthed with recommendations that amendment that insulates INEC from undue executive influence so as to protect its independence and impartiality is an imperative.

Keywords: Elections, Election management, Democracy, Democratic Consolidation, Constitution.

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Date Received: 11th May, 2026

Date Accepted: 21st May, 2026

Introduction

Ogu (2023) observed that no questions since the dawn of political thought have bothered political scholars, forming issues for debates and arguments than those pertaining to who should rule and how he should be determined. Since the Twentieth century, these questions have tended to elicit a single, almost

universally accepted response which is that the people should govern either directly or through their representatives chosen freely through an election. No other political ideals have enjoyed the unquestioning approval even reverence currently enjoyed by both democracy and elections. Leaders everywhere, whether Communists, Fascists, Socialists, Liberals,

Conservatives and so on are eager to proclaim their democratic credentials and to commit themselves to the democratic ideals and seek legitimacy for their governments through an election even when such offers the citizens/electorates no necessary alternatives for choice making. This is emphasized by the 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy in which the international community undertook to promote democracy worldwide. The Declaration establishes democracy as a universal right based on the values of human rights, the rule of law and free and pluralistic elections and defines democracy as a governance system with transparent institutions, where power is accountable and citizens' participation is guaranteed.

In democracies, elections are essential ingredients that promote transition from one government to another and through them, the electorates decide who and which party administers the affairs of the country based upon their perceived conviction on the agenda presented in the manifestoes of the party. Oni *et al*, (2017) aver that elections provide citizens the space for free expression and offers governments unique opportunities for legitimacy and is recognized as a way of building trust in former authoritarian states and as Brown (2003 and Sisk (2008) note, a way to validate negotiated pacts.

Election has meaning for most people only in a democratic context, because it leads to the choice of decision makers by the majority. Even in stable democracies, election serves as a way of strengthening

an already assumed perfect system (Majekodunmi and Adejuwon, 2012). Ashindorbe (2018) points out that elections are fundamental components and support systems in the democratic process as they underscore the principle of political or popular participation, accountability, legitimacy and freedom to choose, justice and rule of law.

This means that democracy and election are inextricably linked. The health of a democracy depends on the quality of elections that sustain it. In other words, election is one of the major signposts of a healthy democracy. Thus, elections do not only have to be periodic but must necessarily be free, fair and conducted through processes adjudged credible and transparent by all stakeholders. In Nigeria, elections have been one of the major problems of the consolidation process as conducting free, fair and credible elections have proven to be a very big challenge (Ogu, 2023). Omodia (2012) and Ojukwu and Oni (2016) note that the history of elections in Nigeria has been characterized by threats to statehood based on the manipulation of ethnicity as divisive mechanism for the acquisition of political power by political actors and the fragile nature of democratic cum political institutions which is acquainted with poor democratic culture among Nigerian citizens.

Elections in Nigeria have always been marred by rigging and fraud mostly arising from poor management of the election process by the administrators. The objective of this is to frustrate the

democratic aspirations of citizens who have voted or would have voted into office someone other than the declared winner. The outcomes of many elections have been so fiercely contested that the survival of the democratic order has been compromised. The result is that the outcome of elections has been the subversion of the democratic process rather than its consolidation (Adekanye, 1990).

Nigeria's struggles for sustainable democracy have been so daunting that various attempts at democratization have achieved very little success. The collapse of the first two republics and the stuttering progress of the current Fourth Republic have largely been blamed on election rigging and fraud orchestrated by politicians across party divide aided by the election managers who collude with them to subvert the will of the people. In order to ensure that Nigeria does not revert to her painful past of authoritarian rule, there is need to promote the culture of transparent elections which outcomes satisfy every party. It is against this backdrop, that the nexus between effective election management and democratic consolidation is here examined.

Conceptual clarifications

Election

Because of the widespread support election has received as a basic element of democracy, it has received wide research coverage among scholars of different persuasion and orientation. It is an

indispensable tool of democracy (Annan, 2015), designed to hold politicians accountable (Powell, 2000; Rudolph and Daubler, 2015). Oni (2016) refers to election as a popular means of attaining governmental power in modern political systems by which people vote for their preferred candidates or parties in a competitive manner. Through elections, therefore, the people exercise their sovereign rights to choose who governs them and what the priorities of the government should be. Thus, they afford the people to express their sovereignty through the ballot to confer legitimacy on their government, renew its mandate if necessary or withdraw from it the authority to govern (Ojukwu *et. al.*, 2019).

Gwinn and Norton (1992) view election as the formal process of selecting persons for public offices or accepting or registering a political proposition by voting. For them, election is one of the means by which a society organizes itself and makes specified formal decisions. They added that where voting is free, certain decisions regarding the power relations in a society is made and that the essence of a democratic election is freedom of choice.

As described by Dahl (1998), elections embody the principle of popular sovereignty where the authority of government is derived from the will of the people. It is for Lipjhart (1999), the primary instrument of democracy which enables the peaceful transfer of power and allows for citizens' participation in government decision-making. The process typically involves casting of votes

to select representatives including legislators, executives and other public officials. For Obiyan and Afolabi (2013), election is a series of processes that result in choosing individuals from a larger group to occupy positions of authority. They argue that elections are effective tools for refining the functioning of democracy, establishing a representative government, and facilitating the transition of leadership.

According to Akindele (2011), elections involve much more than the events on Election Day; they are part of a broader process that includes activities before, during and after the election. This process encompasses the legal and constitutional framework, the registration of political parties, party primaries and campaigns, media access and coverage, campaign funding, the role of security agencies and most importantly, the action of the incumbent government.

Akzin (1960) avers that elections have technical and social significance. In the technical sense, he says they are the process through which an office or a post is assigned to a person by an act of volition that requires the simultaneous expression of many people's opinion. In the social sense, they involve the process through a person is linked to an office through the due participation of the people who will bear the weight of his or her authority. It is this social aspect of elections that generates the idea of governing a society with the consent of the governed and this is what

distinguishes democracy from mere appointment.

Mackenzie (1967) identified four conditions needed for the conduct of a free and fair election:

- i. An independent judiciary to interpret the electoral law;
- ii. An honest, competent and non-partisan electoral body to manage the elections;
- iii. A developed system of political parties;
- iv. A general acceptance of the political community of the rules of the game.

According to Arnold and Roy (1998), elections have been seen as central to competitive politics. Ideally, they guarantee political participation and competition, which in turn are fundamental to democratic transition and consolidation.

Election Administration

Election administration is construed by Agbaje (1999) as the management of a parade of public affairs and events called the electoral process. Oni *et. al.*, (2017) and Jinadu (1997) refer to it as the organization and conduct of elections to elective public mostly political offices by an electoral body. It involves a process of ensuring a free and fair selection of candidates to fill public offices, through well-coordinated actions by men and women aimed at achieving the goal of peaceful and orderly elections and transition from one government to another. As Ighodalo (2008) said, the

overall objective of electoral administration is to ensure that democracy which is the foundation of elections is sustained as a mechanism for choosing the people's representatives at regular intervals. It is the mechanism of how elections are run, ranging from preparations for the election, to the methods by which people cast their votes to how winners are declared. It includes the organization of election agencies, the behavior and characteristics of election officials, the process of conducting elections and the interpretation of election policies. According to the Brennan Centre for Justice (2023), it is the management of the logistics of elections, particularly large democratic elections.

The various conceptualizations suggest that election administration is not restricted to what happens to Election Day only but includes activities starting before election such as registration of political parties, voters' registration, procurement of election materials, training of elections officials and post-election activities such as protests and contestation over the declared results leading to the search for justice in courts of law. The success or failure of litigation process also depends on the election managers to supply necessary election documents for litigants to support their applications.

The administration of elections varies substantially across democracies. Political institutions can determine the level of centralized control that a federal government exerts over election processes.

For instances, in the United States, election administration is completely decentralized with thousands of jurisdictions having primary responsibility over their own electoral process while in Nigeria, election is largely controlled by the Independent National Electoral Commission, a federal commission. Elections may also be fundamentally more difficult to administer in some jurisdictions than in others; for example larger jurisdictions may require more sophisticated apparatuses for collection and counting votes (Kimball and Baybeck (2012).

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation refers to the process through which new democracies mature, become stable and enduring, deeply institutionalized and legitimized that they are unlikely to revert to authoritarianism. It involves the deepening of democratic institutions and practices and norms including establishing a strong and functional civil society, independent judiciary, rule of law, safeguards for the protection of human rights and a culture of political participation and competition among political parties for power.

It is a process that starts with the enthronement of democracy after a free and fair election and spans through the period when its probability of breakdown is very low and when its probability of survival is very high (Ojo, 2006). For Beetham (1994), democratic consolidation begins where the 'transition to democracy' ends, i.e., with the inauguration of a new

government at the first free and fair elections since the end of pre-democratic regime. He notes that for democratic consolidation to happen, all political actors, relevant observers and the entire citizenry must express the optimism that the democratic regime can last into a foreseeable future, thereby having the capacity to build dams against what Huntington (1991) calls a 'reverse wake'.

The issue that needs to be resolved is how to identify a consolidated democracy, in other words, when do we say a democracy has been consolidated. Political scholars have identified two criteria critical to the foregoing discussion. The first is the 'two election test' also known as the 'transfer of power test'. This criterion argues that the probability of democratic survival is not high until and unless democratically elected regimes lose elections in subsequent contests and accept the verdicts (Ojo, 2006). Thus, democracy is not consolidated until a ruling party or class hands over power to an opposition party after losing the electoral contests. This scenario played out in 2015 when the Peoples Democratic Party and President Goodluck Jonathan handed over power to the All Progressive Congress and President Muhammed Buhari after losing the 2015 presidential election.

The second criterion is called the 'simple longevity or generation test' which argues that twenty years of regular competitive elections should be sufficient basis for adjudging a democracy consolidated even if power is not transferred from another

political party or class. It is in this sense that one can classify Nigeria democracy as consolidated having conducted competitive elections regularly (7 in total) since the return to democratic rule in 1999. This criterion posits that continuous and regular elections would have created in people a mind-set that develops apathy for any near alternative to democracy. It is therefore unthinkable for the electorates to explore any other system other than democracy in running their affairs (Ojo, 2006). It is on the basis of this that Linz and Stepan (1996) define a consolidated democracy as a 'political regime in which democracy as a system of institutions, rules and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase, "the only game in town"'.

The role of Elections in a Democracy

While democracy cannot be reduced entirely to elections or explained solely by elections, democracy cannot be discussed without reference to elections. If politics is about making decisions and implementing them, elections are the first decision; they determine how people are chosen and entrusted with the power to make those decisions through an institutionalized procedure and for a given period of time.

Elections ideally reflect and impact on the orderliness within society, and the stability, credibility and possibility of rejuvenating the political leadership through the change of decadent members of the elite and the advancement of the non-elite elements. Economically, when elections are properly conducted, they

promote an environment of capital mobility and higher productivity, especially in a post-authoritarian and post-conflict political order in dire need of reconstruction and development. Villalon (1998) rightly argued that many African leaders have employed elections as strategy for maintaining power and forestalling change thereby maintaining the status quo. Pursuing these agenda, elections have produced quasi-democracies in Africa.

Apart from facilitating political succession, elections also promote political accountability. Elections enable voters to select their leaders and hold them accountable for their performances in office. The threat of defeat at the polls exerts pressure on those in power to conduct themselves in a responsible manner and take account of popular interests and demands when they take decisions. Accountability can be undermined when elected leaders do not care whether they are reelected or when, for historical or other reasons, one party as in the case with Nigeria or coalition is so dominant that there is effectively no choice for voters among alternative candidates, parties or policies.

Nevertheless, the possibility of controlling leaders by requiring them to submit to regular and periodic elections helps to solve the problem of succession in leadership and thus contributes to the continuation of democracy. Moreover, where the electoral process is competitive and forces candidates or parties to expose their records and future intentions to

popular scrutiny, elections serve as forums for the discussion of public issues and facilitate the expression of public opinion. Elections thus provide political education for citizens and ensure the responsiveness of democratic governments to the will of the people. They also serve to legitimize the acts of those in power.

Elections also reinforce the stability and legitimacy of the political community. They link citizens to each other and thereby confirm the viability of the polity. As a result, elections help to facilitate social and political integration which is needed not just the development and stability of a nation.

Finally, elections serve as self-actualizing purpose by confirming the worth and dignity of individual citizens as human beings. Whatever other needs voters may have, participation in an election serves to reinforce their self-esteem and self-respect. Voting gives people an opportunity to have their say, it gives them voice and power (Agbaje and Adejumo, 2006), and through expressing partisanship, to satisfy their need to feel a sense of belonging. Even nonvoting satisfies the need of some people to express their alienation from the political community. For precisely these reasons, the long battle for the right to vote and the demand for equality in electoral participation can be viewed as the manifestation of a profound human craving for personal fulfillment.

Overview of Elections in Post-Independence Nigeria

The development of electoral system in Nigeria can be divided into two main periods: colonial (1900-1959) and post-colonial (1960-date). The post-colonial period is here referred to as post-independence period and can be further divided into the First Republic (1960-1966), the Second Republic (1979-1983), the Third Republic (1993) and the Fourth Republic (1999-date).

Elections in Nigeria date back to September 1923 when general elections were held for the first time when the Clifford Constitution introduced the first elective rights in Nigeria which led to the formation of the first political party in the country called the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). The first elections to hold in post-independent Nigeria were the 1964/1965 parliamentary elections which reelected Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as Prime Minister, a position he held till the first military coup in January, 1966 which brought to an end the First Republic.

The January 1966 coup triggered a series of further coups which delayed return to democratic rule till October 1979 bringing to birth the Second Republic. The first elections under the Second Republic were held in July and August 1979. The 1979 Constitution granted universal suffrage in Nigeria, reducing the voting age from 21 to 18 and extending voting rights to women across the country.

In 1983 another election was held in which the incumbent president Shehu Shagari won a second term. However, the Second republic was brought to an end in December 31st 1983 in a military coup led by Muhammed Buhari. General Ibrahim Babangida who took over from Muhammed Buhari in another coup in August 1985 made an attempt to return the country to democratic rule. The 1989 Constitution was drafted and parliamentary elections were held in 1992 while presidential elections were held in 12 June 1993. The unofficial election result suggested that Chief Moshood Abiola of the Social Democratic Party won. However, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) at the time refused to announce the result officially despite several court orders.

The annulment of the 1992 elections triggered a series of events such as protests and strikes particularly in the South West, the stepping aside from office by General Ibrahim Babangida and the constitution of an Interim National Government (ING) led by Chief Ernest Shonekan. The ING was in power only for three months before another military coup led by General Sani Abacha forced them out bringing to an abrupt end the Third Republic. General Abacha died in office in 1998 and General Abdulsalami Abubakar became Head of State and then ushered Nigeria's final return to democracy bringing to birth the current Fourth Republic.

The first elections held under the Fourth Republic in February 27, 1999 which was won by Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the Peoples Democratic Party defeating the candidate of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), Chief Olu Falae. The elections also produced state governors, members of the assemblies at both the federal and state levels. On April 19, 2003, the second elections in the Fourth Republic held produced the reelection of President Olusegun Obasanjo who defeated his closest rival Muhammed Buhari of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP). For the first time, Nigeria witnessed a staggered election cycle in which the presidential and national assembly elections were held before the gubernatorial and states houses of assembly's elections.

Since the 2003 general elections, Nigeria has witnessed 5 presidential and National Assembly elections held on the following days: April 27, 2007, April 16, 2011, March 28, 2015, February 23, 2019 and February 25, 2023. Similarly, gubernatorial and house of assembly elections have held including off cycle elections.

Appraisal of Elections under the Fourth Republic

To say election administration is one of the biggest challenges facing democratic consolidation in Nigeria is to say the least. Kurfi (2005) noted that major political conflicts have emerged around rigged elections. Ogu (2023) averred that elections are meaningfully democratic when among other things, they are free, fair, participatory, competitive and legitimate. They are credible when they

are administered by a neutral body, when the administrator is sufficiently competent and resourceful; to take specific precautions against fraud, when the security agencies and courts treat competing candidates and parties impartially, when electoral rules do not grossly handicap the opposition, when procedures for organizing and counting the votes are transparently open and known to all and when there are transparent and impartial procedures for resolving election complaints and disputes.

In Nigeria, many of these procedures that make elections meaningfully democratic are not followed in the conduct of elections. Elections in the country have been characterized by snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes, falsification of election results, illegal thumb printing of ballot papers, underage voting, deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas especially areas perceived to be the stronghold of the opposition, unauthorized announcement of results, vote buying, harassment and intimidation of candidates, agents and voters and so many other irregularities.

Candidates for elections in Nigeria particularly at the national level have always presented themselves as the champions of the values of their ethnic groups, religion and region. This is equally applicable to how Nigerians perceive political parties going back to the First Republic when political parties were formed and operated along ethnic lines, hence voting tended to follow this

particular configuration. The political elites have latched onto religious, sectional, communal and tribal sentiments when faced with stiff political opposition. In the Fourth, no elections typically exemplify this manipulation of primordial consideration than the 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections (Ogu, 2023).

The use of the so-called 'Federal Might' to win elections for mostly members of the ruling party has also called to question the credibility of elections in Nigeria. Presidents are known to manipulate the electoral systems to favour their friends and party loyalists. The history of elections in Nigeria has been a history of manipulation, concoction and inflation of figures by the executive controlled INEC aided by the security agencies (Ogu, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Researches have shown that no democracy thrives in the absence of credible and transparent procedures for determining who is assigned responsibility for the affairs of the state. When elections, which are the best system for selection of leaders are not credible and transparent, outcomes are questioned and violence may erupt like it happened in some parts of Northern Nigeria in the aftermath of the announcement of the results of the 2011 presidential election.

This paper has explored the nexus between effective election administration and democratic consolidation in Nigeria; it traced the history of elections in Nigeria and appraised the quality of elections

particularly in the current Fourth Republic and found out that elections in the country have fallen short of international standards as a result of inherent structural and systemic weakness of the election of the election administrators.

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

- i. Constitutional amendments to insulate the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) from the executive arm of government/president in terms of its composition and funding. To ensure the independence and impartiality of INEC, the powers to appoint the chairman and members of the board should be transferred from the president to a body of eminent Nigerians comprising of past presidents, past Senate Presidents and Speakers of the House of Representatives (if they are currently not members of a sitting National Assembly), past Chief Justices of Nigeria, The funding of the commission should be a first line charge on the Consolidated Revenue of the Federation.
- ii. Constitutional amendments that makes it mandatory for both presidential and governorship elections to hold on the same day which must be at least six months before the expiration of office of the current holders, Similarly, National Assembly and State

houses of assembly elections should hold on same date perhaps two months after the presidential and governorship elections .

- iii. An enactment into law of a bill prohibiting any elected person from being sworn into office until all cases against his election has been disposed of properly in the court of law. This is to ensure that the person does not use his office to influence the outcomes of the litigations. This demands that the number of tribunals dealing with election related cases be increased and with a reduction in the number of judges that sit on them. This will ensure speedy disposal of cases.
- iv. Establishing of Election Offences Tribunal to deal strictly with violations of the Constitution and Electoral Act.

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Citation: Ogu, Uchechukwu Kizito. "Effective Election Administration and the Prospect of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria". *Journal of People and Worldviews (JPW)*, 2026: pp146-157.

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