



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol. 10., No. 2, June, 2016

FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF UYO, NIGERIA



Perceptions of Election Quality and Institutionalization of Democracy in Nigeria: An Overview of the 2011 General Elections

by

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Abstract

The study focused on the perceptions of election quality and institutionalization of democracy in Nigeria, with emphasis on the 2011 general elections in Nigeria. The study adopted the empirical approach by using logistic regression analysis on Nigeria's Afro-barometer Round 5, 2011 post-elections survey data (n=2400) to assess and evaluate citizens' perceptions of election quality and its inherent implications on institutionalization of democracy in the country. The study hypothesized that citizens' socio-economic factors such as age, education, residence, economic and employment status, perceptions of electoral irregularities, their evaluation of election commissions, including exposure to news media are likely to influence their perceptions of election quality. Negative perceptions of election quality accounted for contestable election results and political apathy in the political system. The hypotheses were tested in the context of 2011 general elections and the hypotheses were confirmed. The results indicated that the performance of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was strongly associated with citizens' perceptions of election quality, though citizens' perceptions of electoral irregularities, exposure to news media and socio-economic factors also matter. Following the findings of the study, it was recommended that policy makers and development partners should support the strengthening of

democratic institutions to guarantee citizens' confidence in the electoral system. The overall efficacy of the study findings relate to the implications of Election Management Body (EMB) with professionalism and impartiality in administering elections in a developing democracy such as Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, elections, election-related institutions, electoral irregularities, public opinions.

1. Introduction

Elections are meaningfully democratic if they are free, fair, credible, participatory, competitive, and legitimate. This is possible when they are administered by a neutral authority:

“when the electoral management body is sufficiently competent and resourceful to take specific precautions against fraud; when the police, military and courts treat competing candidates and parties impartially; when contenders all have access to the public media; when electoral districts and rules do not grossly handicap the opposition when the secret of the ballot is protected; when virtually all adults can vote; when procedures for organizing and counting the votes are widely known; and when there are transparent and impartial procedures for resolving election complaints and disputes” (Diamond, 2008).

The above quotation succinctly encapsulates the study's focus as well as suggesting the basic components of an ideal democratic system. Democracy can only be institutionalized when there is popular confidence of citizens in the conduct of electoral processes, particularly elections (Kerr, 2013). Bratton *et al.* (2005) and Moehler (2009) concluded that when citizens evaluate elections as credible, free and fair, they will be more satisfied with the democratic process, more supportive of the ruling government, and more willing to accept defeat in the electoral contest. In this context, very little has been researched about how citizens formulate their assessment of election quality, despite the relevance of elections in shaping political attitudes and behaviours in a democratic society. Do citizens evaluation of the performance of the election commissions associated with their perceptions of election quality? Do perceptions of electoral irregularities influence perceptions of election quality and institutionalization of democracy in Nigeria or did socio-economic factors influence the perceptions of election quality in Nigeria in 2011?

The purpose of this study was to investigate the potential determinants of citizens' perceptions of election quality and how they negatively affect institutionalization of

democracy in Nigeria. By institutionalization of democracy is meant the entrenchment of democratic practice in a hitherto non-democratic society. This usually through the conduct of free, fair and transparent elections. This will involve the application of democratic rules to guarantee political participation and encourage democratic process.

Using survey data from Afro-barometer (AB) Round 5 on the 2011 general elections in Nigeria, the study examined how citizens' evaluation of the performance of election-related institutions, socio-economic factors, exposure to news media and perceptions of electoral irregularities are associated with perceptions of election quality as the main dependent variable. The manner at which citizens rate or evaluate election quality do negatively or positively affect democratic practice (Bratton, 1998; 2008; Schedler, 2002b; Shaffer, 2007). Citizens' perceptions of the electoral processes including the electoral body often results in series of election-related litigations after elections and these can ultimately leads to political apathy among citizens. Bratton (1998) argued that the institutionalization of democracy entails citizens' wider acceptance of the electoral processes.

The existing literature has offered basic explanations on the potential determinants of perceptions election quality and its inherent association with democratic process. Performance of election-related institutions. refer to election management (election commissions) bodies and other state institutions directly or indirectly engaged in the election administration such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the courts (Diamond, 2002; Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002; Ibrahim, 2007; Alvarez *et al.*, 2008b; Hartlyn, McCoy and Mustillo, 2008; Birch, 2008; Hall *et al.*, 2009; Omotola, 2010; Fall, *et al.*, 2011; NDI, 2012). Socio-economic factors (Lipset, 1959, 1960, 1994; Lewis-Beck, 1980, 1983; Crewe, 1984; Aghion *et al.*, 2004; Ikpe, 2004; Papaioannou and Siourounis, 2008). Exposure to news media (Decalo, 1992; Pope, 2000; Duru, 2002; Ikpe, 2004; McFaul, 2005; Omotola, 2008; Electoral knowledge Network, 2012). Citizens' perceptions of electoral irregularities (McCann and Dominguez, 1998; Schedler, 1999; Lehoucq, 2003; Garuba, 2007; Schaffer, 2007; Bratton, 2008; Collier and Vicente, 2008; Kerr, 2013).

Two election-related institution- Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and the courts of law were examined within the context of Nigeria's 2011 general elections. Throughout this paper, the terms Election Management Bodies (EMBs), Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and election administration are used interchangeably to mean one and the same thing. This study also aimed at assessing the efficacy of citizens' opinions about election quality through information available to them. Few literature reviewed doubt the reliability and validity of certain information media because citizens' are likely prone to information deficits.

This implied that not all information access by the citizens about electoral issues may be accurate (Norris, 2004; Bratton *et al.*, 2005; Moehler, 2009; Birch, 2011). The efficacy of information accessed by citizens in formulating their election quality opinions was gauged using available media like news from television and radio.

2. Correlates of election quality opinions

Within the emerging literature below, there are certain factors that are directly related to citizens' perceptions of election quality. They include:

2.1 Performance of election-related institutions

Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999 after marathon years of military dictatorship. This return was accompanied by the establishment of Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Under the Nigerian Constitution (1999) as amended and the Electoral Act (2010) as amended, INEC is the electoral umpire in the country, with the responsibility for organizing elections to various political offices in the country. However, every successive election organised by INEC since 1999 has raised the credibility question (Ajayi, 2012). The 2011 general elections did not witness any radical departure from previous elections in terms of credibility. Ikpe (2004) argued that the weak election-related institutions such as INEC, police, courts of law, etc. had effectively reduced elections in Nigeria to periodic rituals.

Omotola (2010) contended that election administration involves constitutional interaction, including legal, institutional rules and organizational practices that ascertain the basic rules for electoral processes-campaigns, registration of voters, voting on the election day, resolution of election disputes and certification of election results. By this, Omotola mean the application of constitutional procedures and electoral laws in organisation of elections including declaration of results. Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006) contended that election commissions are a strategic part of an institutional set that jointly ascertain the probity of the electoral processes. Hartlyn, McCoy and Mustillo (2008) in their comparative study of Latin America to test the level of significance of election administration to the institutionalization of democracy, identified important positive professional roles within the context of independent electoral commissions on electoral outcomes. Their study showed that the rules of the game are likely to be respected when there exist formal legal independence within the election administration. However, Mozaffar and Schedler (2002) submitted that good elections are practically not possible without effective and efficient electoral institutions.

Birch (2008) used data from 28 elections in Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to investigate the institutional correlates of election quality. Birch identifies EMB's independence along with proportionality of elections and political parties' financing as the institutional factors that structure citizens' confidence in the electoral process. She argued that citizens are more likely to regard elections as not free and fair in countries where the EMBs are independent. Birch's findings contradicted the existing theoretical and empirical literature because it was only tailored to the effect of EMB's institutional independence while neglecting other institutional dimensional designs. Birch ascribed the contradictions to the fact that formal legal independence of EMB might mean independence of the EMB in the real sense. Several empirical findings have concluded that EMBs with considerable levels of autonomy are more likely to provide the context for credible elections (Pastor, 1999; Hartlyn *et al.*, 2008). Hall *et al.* (2009) conducted promising studies in the American context for single dimensional assessment of the election commission's performance. The study focused on the EMB's capacity by exploring citizens' assessment of poll worker performance during the 2000 US general elections. Their finding revealed that citizens who rated the performance of the poll worker as excellent had a considerable level of confidence in the elections. Similarly, Alvarez *et al.* (2008b) showed that how citizens evaluate the credibility of the electoral processes including voting technology has direct implications for their confidence in the electoral processes. The inadequacies in the treatment of the multiple dimensional approach to the assessment of EMB performance by different scholars has left a gap in the literature.

2.2 Socio-economic factors

The implications of socio-economic factors in any electoral process cannot be over-emphasized (Ikpe, 2004). Papaioannou and Siourounis (2008) argued that socio-economic factor's diversity can invariably block democratization process if the political system is polarized. Aghion *et al.* (2004) modelled socio-economic factors' diversity and concluded that they have considerable impacts on elections and electoral outcomes. Crewe (1984) asserted that elections and democratic perceptions are a function of inflation and unemployment rates in a country. Crewe's assertion was based on findings where he statistically modelled the indices of socio-economic factors' in UK Parliamentary Election (1979-83).

Lewis-Beck (1980) however maintained that socio-economic factors are good permanent indices that influence perceptions of election quality. Lewis-Beck (1983) concluded that socio-economic conditions of individuals, both personal and collective,

exerted a significant influence on the French legislative elections in 1981. Although Lewis-Beck did not succinctly point to which aspect of socio-economic factors and the level to which it exerted influence, he demonstrated that there was interrelationship between socio-economic factors and electoral outcomes. Lipset (1959; 1960; 1994) noted that democracy is more likely to emerge and become institutionalized in more educated and affluent societies.

2.3 Exposure to News Media

A study undertaken by Electoral Knowledge Network (2012) on the role of the media in the democratic process showed that free and fair elections are not only about the freedom of voters to vote or knowledge on how to cast vote but the outcome of such processes. This Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) concluded that the capacity of voters to access adequate information about political parties, policies of government, party candidates and the capacity of voters to access adequate information about political parties, policies of government, party candidates and the electoral processes, as well as their engagement in public discourse, is a determinant of their perceptions of the electoral process itself. Edet and Asua (2013) argued that the media acts as a crucial watchdog in some instances, to any democratic process through safeguarding the transparency and credibility of the process. In Nigeria, the neutrality of media in electoral issues are often disputed (Duru, 2002).

Decalo (1992) and Pope (2000) noted that impartial and professional media was crucial to sustainable democracy. This according to Omotola (2009) would facilitate the EMB's role in communicating necessary information to the political competitors as well as strengthen citizens' confidence in the political processes. It is for this reason that election observers, in most cases, routinely comment upon media access and coverage during elections as a criterion for evaluating the freeness or fairness of such elections (NDI, 2012). However, studies undertaken by McCann and Dominguez (1998), Pastor (1999), Banducci and Karp (2003), Bratton *et al.* (2005), Birch (2008) and Conroy-Krutz (2009) all argued that media intricacies in the electoral process can shape citizens' perceptions of election quality. Kerr (2013) concluded that the mediating factors in these intricacies relate to the information available to the citizens. These information may be correct or incorrect. The information may vary among citizens with some accessing greater information about the electoral processes than others. The level of information available to citizens about the electoral processes can potentially influence their perceptions of election quality (Kuenzi and Lambright, 2011). Kerr (2013) submitted that politically informed citizens have basic knowledge of the principles that guide transparent and credible elections. In this context, they are

most likely to know when elections deviate from, or adhere to principles. This might have led Norris (2004) to conclude that when electoral processes fall below acceptable standards, it is the active participants in the process that are usually the most dissatisfied.

Within the context of information, Mochler (2009) pointed out that there is tie between political knowledge and attitudes about election quality in Africa. Moehler's research revealed that African voters who rely on radio and television information frequently for political education were usually critical of the quality of elections across the 18 African nations he investigated.

2.4 Perceptions of electoral irregularities

In Nigeria, conducting free and fair elections is undoubtedly a weighty albatross in her repeated attempts at sustained democratic system (Inokoba and Kumokor, 2011; Edet, 2015). Garuba (2007) conducted analysis of electoral irregularities during the 2003 general elections in Nigeria and concluded that the events before the elections were intentionally designed strategies to manipulate the electoral process. Electoral irregularities involve the adoption of illicit means by political actors move to alter election" outcomes or to undermine the whole process (Lehoucq, 2003). A permanent feature of elections and the electoral process in Nigeria is that it has been marred by irregularities, fraud and a significant lack of credibility (David *et al.*, 2014). Some studies adopt indirect measures to investigate electoral irregularities that do not capture the negative influence of electoral fraud on the perceptions of election quality. Birch (2008) analysed the Corruption Perception Index as a proxy for electoral irregularities and concluded that citizens in countries where corruption was endemic were more likely to perceive election administration to be corrupt. McCann and Dominguez (1998), Schedler (1999), Schaffer, Alvarez *et al.* (2008a) Bratton (2008), and Collier and Vicente (2008) all relied on survey data to assess citizens' perceptions of electoral irregularities. Bratton (2008) undertook a thorough examination of citizens' perceptions of electoral irregularities within the context of Nigeria's 2007 general elections and concluded that Nigerians who experienced threats of violence and intimidation in the pre-election periods were less likely to vote or rate the 2007 general elections highly. This research therefore investigated the effects and impacts of electoral irregularities on election quality opinions.

3. Hypotheses

- H₁:** Citizens with positive evaluations of the performance of election-related institutions are not likely to perceive elections as free and fair.
- H₂:** Citizens with experience of electoral irregularities are less likely to perceive elections as free and fair.
- H₃:** Citizens' socio-economic status are not likely to influence their perceptions of election quality.
- H₄:** Citizens with adequate exposure to news media are not likely to be critical of election quality.

4. Research Design, Measurement and Variables

This study used data from the Nigeria's 2011 post-election survey. The survey is called „Afro-barometer Round 5“. The Afro-barometer is a comparative public attitude surveys, covering 35 African countries in Round 5 (2011-2013). In Nigeria, the survey was coordinated by CLEEN Foundation. The survey interviewed 2,400 adult Nigerians of 18 years and above, and a sample yielding results with a margin error of $\pm 2\%$ at 95% confidence level (www.afrobarometer.org). The Afrobarometer survey respondents were randomly sampled using multistage sampling technique. The sampling frame was drawn from 2012 population projections developed by the National Population Commission (NPC) based on the 2006 Nigerian Census. In examining the efficacy and reliability of the survey, the survey outcome rate was reported as: 97.3% (contact rate), 92.4% (cooperation rate), 1.5% (refusal rate) and 89.9% (overall response rate) (www.afrobarometer.org).

The main dependent variable; perceptions of election quality, captures respondents' perceptions of Nigeria's 2011 general elections. Information on the coding and recoding/rescaling of all variables are included in Appendix A and B.

Respondents were asked, "On the whole, how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national elections held in 2011?" Potential responses included, "Not free and fair", "Free and fair with major problems", "Free and fair with minor problems" and "completely free and fair". The original variable is re-scaled into dichotomous variable with 0 indicating "Not free and fair" while 1 denotes "free and fair". Birch (2011) uses a similar dichotomous measure while analysing the data from Centre for the Study of Electoral Systems (CSES). Bratton (2007) and Moehler (2009) employed the original binary measure with Afro-barometer data. Though, rescaling election quality perceptions into a binary variable has the potency of limiting the variability in citizens' assessments, we employ binary measure because it offers a better interpretation of the results. In this context, the study statistically analysed the potential determinants of

perceptions of election quality; which included socio-economic factors, perceptions of electoral irregularities, exposure to news media and performance of election-related institutions. According to Banducci and Karp (2003), Bratton *et al.* (2005), Birch (2008) and Ker (2013) all concluded that these potential determinants of perceptions of election quality can block democratization process. This implied that the negative perceptions of election quality rather than accelerate democratic growth, constitute a brake.

Table 1: Citizens' Perceptions of Election Quality, 2011

Code	Original coding	%	Code	Binary coding	%
1	Not free and fair	11	0	Not free and fair	27
2	Free and fair with major problem	16	1	Free and fair	71
3	Free and fair but with minor problems	33	9	Missing values	2
4	Completely free and fair	38			
8	Do not understand question	0			
9	Don't know	2			
	Total	100			100
	N	2400			2400

Dependent Variable: Perceptions of election quality.

Source: Nigeria Afro-barometer Round 5 (2012) survey

Table 1 shows that distribution of Nigeria's perceptions of election quality. A plurality of respondents rated the elections as "Free and fair" (71%) while 27% rated the elections as "Not free and fair". For the potential explanatory variables, the hypotheses were assessed by evaluating the performance of election-related institutions associated with election governance in Nigeria: INEC and courts of law. Socio-economic factors like age, residence, employment status, educational level, gender and economic status of citizens were assessed to see if they had any significant impacts on their evaluation of election quality.

Perception of electoral irregularities was examined using two indicators: freedom of voting and fear of political intimidation. The first indicator assessed the ability of the electorate to vote without feeling pressured. Kerr (2013) concluded that freedom of voting connotes procedural liberty. The second indicator assesses the extent to which political intimidation shapes citizens' perceptions of election quality. The Afro-barometer survey has no clear questions on citizens' level of political knowledge, but

we utilized citizens' level of exposure to news media. The indicators included two items (radio and television news) weighted on a scale from 0 to 2.

Table 2. Potential determinants of citizens' perceptions of election quality-Logistic Regression

Variable	Coefficient B (Std. err.)
Evaluation of Election-Related Institutions	
INEC Performance	1.116*** (0.177)
Courts of law	0.490* (0.240)
Socio-Economic Factors	
Age	-0.441(0.332)
Residence	- 0.327** (0.121)
Employment Status	0.687*** (0.164)
Educational Level	0.664***(0.117)
Gender	0.387**(0.117)
Economic Status	0.586***(0.135)
Exposure to News Media	
Radio News	-0.613*(0.275)
Television News	0.288 (0.176)
Perceptions of Electoral Irregularities	
Freedom of Voting	0.907*** (0.248)
Fear of Political Intimidation	0.499** (0.176)
Intercept	- 1.502** (0.443)
- 2 log likelihood	2079.36
Nagelkerke R ²	0.27(27%)
Omnibus χ^2 (Model) Hosmer and Lemoshow χ^2	442.73***
Cox and Snell R ²	7.96
	0.19
N	2131

Dependent Variable: Perceptions of election quality

* p < 0.05; ** p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001

Source: Nigeria Afro-barometer Round 5 (2012) survey.

N/B: For the marginal effects, all non-binary explanatory variables are held at their mean, while gender is set at female, residence set to urban and INEC performance set to poor.

5. Results/Findings

We begin the analysis by hypothesizing that election-related institutions, electoral irregularities, socio-economic factors and exposure to news media influenced citizens' perceptions of election quality. While imputing the explanatory variables, we controlled for socio-economic factors. The results of the logistic regression model are shown in Table 2. First, the results indicated that the performance of INEC and the courts of law were associated with perceptions of electoral fairness after controlling for relevant covariates, as demonstrated by the significant coefficients. Citizens who

express dissatisfaction with the performance of election-related institutions, or experienced electoral irregularities, or frequently listened to radio news were likely to judge the election quality as unfair. This might elicit considerable apathy in the political system. Citizens' socio-economic status was also found to exert considerable impact on their election quality opinions. Citizens' age and their exposure to television news did not have a statistically significant effect on their election quality verdicts when all other variables were controlled for, in the model. From the logistic regression model and their significant levels, all the four hypotheses were confirmed. Citizens who expressed concern about being victimized during elections were less likely to consider elections free and fair. The findings provided support for the idea that informed citizens have greater insight on what free and fair elections should be and are more likely to know when elections deviate from these norms.

INEC performance was found to be the strongest determinant of election quality opinions. Citizens who rated INEC performance as good were most likely to rate the election quality as high. In summary, Nigerians place more emphasis on the performance of election-related institutions when forming opinions about the 2011 general elections. The overall implications of the study findings relate to the fact that negative perceptions of election quality has the potency of retarding democratic growth and consolidation.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined the correlates of the perception Nigerians have regarding election quality. Using the Afro-barometer Round 5 survey data on 2011 Nigeria elections, the study indicates that citizens' evaluations of the performance of election-related institutions: INEC and courts of law, matter more than other potential determinants. Of the two election-related institutions examined, citizens' evaluation of the INEC's performance seems to have the strongest association with perceptions of election quality. The findings provide evidence that socio-economic factors and frequent exposure to radio news influences citizens' opinions of election quality. The findings further provide evidence that electoral irregularities have the potency of negatively influencing citizens' perceptions of election quality. These findings have important theoretical and policy implications. It has highlighted the significance interest ordinary Nigeria put on the effective performance of election-related institutions, particularly, INEC. Policy makers and development partners should be encouraged by these findings, because they highlight the democratic dividends of enhancing the effective performance of election-related institutions.

Within this context, policy makers should devote more intellectual and financial resources to the effective performance of democratic institutions involved in elections organization such INEC, and the judiciary, among others. The study further underscores the role of INEC in popular legitimacy of the electoral process. Achieving this, would place INEC and courts of law closer to what Przeworski (2000) described as being an essential component to democratic institutionalization.

7. References

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