

NIGERIA'S ELECTORAL POLICY AND IMPACT IN DEMOCRATIC SUSTAINABILITY: THE SOCIAL CONTRACT PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study examines Nigeria's electoral policy and its roles in sustaining democratic governance from the perspective of social contract theory. The theory emphasizes that government legitimacy is derived from the consent of the people, expressed primarily through credible and participatory elections. The study explores how electoral policies influence democratic sustainability in Nigeria and identifies challenges affecting their implementation. Using a qualitative approach and secondary sources of data, the study finds that while electoral reforms have improved the electoral process, challenges such as electoral malpractice, vote buying, political interference, and voter apathy continue to undermine democratic development and sustainability. Content analysis and logical inference was the tool used for analyzing this study. The study concludes that effective electoral policies are essential for strengthening public trust, political participation, and democratic stability. It recommends the strengthening of electoral institutions, strict enforcement of electoral laws, and continuous electoral reforms to enhance democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

Keywords: Democracy, Policy, Democratic Sustainability, Social Contract, Democratic Governance

Introduction

Elections are widely regarded as one of the central pillars of democratic governance because they provide citizens with the opportunity to participate in the selection of their leaders and influence public policy. Electoral policies, which consist of the laws, regulations, procedures, and institutional frameworks governing electoral processes, play crucial roles in ensuring that elections are free, fair, transparent, and credible. In democratic societies, effective electoral policies strengthen political participation, promote accountability, enhance government legitimacy, and facilitate the peaceful transfer of power. Consequently, the sustainability of democracy depends

largely on efficiency and integrity of a country's electoral system.

Nigeria's electoral history has been characterized by a mixture of democratic progress and electoral challenges. Since independence in 1960, the country has experienced epochal periods of military intervention, electoral crises, political instability, and democratic transitions. The return to civilian rule in 1999 marked the beginning of the Fourth Republic and renewed efforts toward democratic consolidation through electoral reforms. Successive governments have introduced various electoral policies and legal frameworks aimed at strengthening electoral administration, enhancing voter participation, and improving the credibility

of elections (Jega, 2017). Notable reforms include amendments to electoral laws, improvements in voter registration systems, and the adoption of electoral technologies such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) on September 11, 2021, it was aimed at avoiding over voting and to show accurate number of voters in a polling unit and electronic transmission of election results.

Despite these reforms, electoral processes in Nigeria continue to face significant challenges. Electoral violence, vote buying, ballot manipulation, political interference, voter apathy, and judicial disputes have remained persistent features of many elections in the country (Ake, 2021; Omotola, 2020). These challenges often undermine public confidence in electoral institutions and raise concerns about the capacity of electoral policies to promote democratic sustainability. Diamond (1999), sustainable democracy requires not only regular elections but also credible institutions, citizen participation, political accountability, and adherence to the rule of law. Where electoral processes are perceived as fraudulent or unfair, democratic legitimacy and political stability are weakened.

Therefore, examining Nigeria's electoral policy and its impact on democratic sustainability is necessary for understanding the challenges and prospects of democratic governance in the country. The study seeks to assess the effectiveness of existing electoral policies, identify the challenges confronting their implementation, and evaluate their contributions to the sustainability of democracy practice and consolidation in Nigeria. It is of great importance to highlight the relationship between electoral policy, democratic sustainability and social contract. The relationship

between them is that of trust, where there must be an electoral body with a policy framework on how to carry out its assignment, for instance, voter registration, accreditation of voter through BVAS (Bimodal Voter Accreditation System), collation of result, party registration etc. when all these are effectively and efficiently carried out, it then build confidence on the people without thinking of manipulation. In the aspect of social contract, it is an agreement between the people of the nation and government by voting them and providing legitimacy to ensure good governance by providing the needed social amenities and others. By providing all the needed social amenities, democratic sustainability will be ensured avoiding protest, violence and will encourage people to come out in large number during subsequent election.

Methodology

The study utilized secondary sources of data collection. The study further adopted the use of content analysis and logical inference. The aim of this study is to examine Nigeria's electoral policy and its impact on democratic sustainability, with a view to assessing how electoral policies contribution to democratic consolidation, political stability, and good governance in Nigeria. To also examines the strategies that are capable of improving the democratic sustainability in Nigeria. On the overall, it adopted the social contract theory for the analysis of the intersection of the variables for discernibly comprehension. The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. Assess the impact of electoral policies in promoting democratic sustainability in Nigeria;

ii. Examine the relationship between electoral policy and citizens' trust in democratic institutions; and

iii. To examines the strategies to improving the democratic sustainability in Nigeria.

Conceptual Review

Policy: Policy refers to a deliberate course of action, guideline, or set of principles adopted by a government, organization, or institution to achieve specific goals and address identified issues. It provides a framework for decision-making and serves as a guide for the implementation of programmes and activities. Public policies are particularly important because they reflect governmental intentions and strategies for managing societal affairs and promoting public welfare. Dye (2017), public policy is "whatever governments choose to do or not to do," emphasizing those government actions and inactions both constitute policy decisions. Similarly, Lasswell and Kaplan (1970) define policy as a projected programme of goals, values, and practices designed to achieve desired outcomes. From this perspective, policy serves as a mechanism through which governments translate political objectives into practical actions. In democratic societies, policies are formulated to regulate political, economic, and social activities and to ensure the orderly functioning of institutions. Electoral policy, as a component of public policy, consists of the legal and administrative frameworks governing the conduct of elections, voter participation, electoral administration, and the management of electoral disputes. Effective policies contribute to institutional stability, accountability, and democratic development by providing clear rules and procedures for governance.

Democracy: Democracy is a system of government in which political authority is vested in the people, who exercise their power either directly or through elected representatives. The term is derived from the Greek words *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule), meaning "rule by the people." According to Abraham Lincoln, democracy is "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," emphasizing popular participation and representation. Similarly, Robert A. Dahl (1989) views democracy as a political system characterized by effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, and control of the political agenda by citizens. Democracy promotes fundamental principles such as political equality, accountability, transparency, the rule of law, protection of human rights, and periodic elections. It provides citizens with the opportunity to choose their leaders, influence public policies, and hold governments accountable for their actions. In contemporary states, democratic sustainability depends on strong institutions, credible electoral processes, active citizen participation, and adherence to constitutional principles (Diamond, 1999). Thus, democracy remains a vital mechanism for ensuring legitimate governance, political stability, and national development.

Democratic Sustainability: Democratic sustainability refers to the capacity of a democratic system to endure over time while maintaining its core principles such as political participation, accountability, transparency, rule of law, and respect for fundamental human rights. It emphasizes not only the existence of democratic institutions but also their ability to function effectively, adapt to challenges, and maintain public trust. Diamond (1999), democratic sustainability depends on the consolidation of democratic

institutions that are strong enough to withstand internal and external pressures, including corruption, weak governance, and political instability. Similarly, Dahl (1989) argues that sustainable democracy requires continuous citizen participation and institutional guarantees that ensure political equality and responsiveness. Factors such as electoral integrity, institutional independence, civic engagement, and adherence to constitutional principles are essential for sustaining democracy over time. Therefore, democratic sustainability is not a fixed condition but an ongoing process of institutional development and political accountability.

Electoral Integrity: Electoral integrity refers to the adherence of electoral processes to democratic principles such as fairness, transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and credibility throughout all stages of the electoral cycle. It ensures that elections are conducted in line with established legal and institutional frameworks, allowing citizens to freely choose their leaders without intimidation, manipulation, or fraud. Norris (2014), electoral integrity is achieved when elections are managed in a way that reflects international standards and genuinely represents the will of the electorate.

Electoral integrity is fundamental to democratic legitimacy because it shapes public confidence in both the electoral process and political institutions. When elections are perceived as credible and transparent, citizens are more likely to participate actively and accept outcomes, thereby strengthening political stability and democratic consolidation. Conversely, weak electoral integrity often manifested in vote buying, electoral violence, and administrative manipulation undermines

trust in democracy and with the potential to trigger political apathy and instability. Therefore, safeguarding electoral integrity is essential for sustaining democracy and ensuring good governance.

Good Governance: Good governance refers to the effective, transparent, accountable, and participatory management of public affairs and resources in a manner that promotes the welfare of citizens. It emphasizes the role of institutions and leadership in ensuring that public power is exercised in the interest of the people, guided by the rule of law, equity, responsiveness, and efficiency. According to the World Bank (2022), good governance is characterized by predictable, open, and enlightened policymaking, a professional bureaucracy, and strong civil society participation in public affairs. Similarly, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997) identifies good governance as encompassing participation, rule of law, transparency, responsiveness, consensus orientation, equity, effectiveness, and accountability. In democratic systems, good governance is essential for building trust between the government and citizens, promoting socio-economic development, and ensuring political stability. It creates the institutional environment necessary for the effective implementation of public policies, including electoral policies, and supports sustainable democratic practices. Where governance is weak, corruption, inefficiency, and lack of accountability tend to undermine development and weaken democratic institutions (2022). Therefore, good governance remains a critical condition for democratic sustainability and national development.

Relationship between Electoral Policy and Democratic Sustainability

The relationship between electoral policy and democratic sustainability is fundamental to understanding how democratic systems function and endure over time. Electoral policy refers to the body of laws, rules, regulations, and institutional arrangements that guide the conduct of elections, including voter registration, political party regulation, campaign financing, voting procedures, vote counting, and electoral dispute resolution. These policies serve as the operational foundation of democracy because they translate democratic ideals into practical procedures that regulate political competition and ensure orderly leadership selection. When electoral policies are clear, inclusive, and consistently enforced, they promote political legitimacy, strengthen institutions, and enhance citizens' trust in the democratic process. As Dahl (1989) explains, democratic systems are sustained through institutions that guarantee participation and political equality, both of which depend heavily on credible electoral frameworks.

Furthermore, democratic sustainability refers to the ability of a democratic system to persist over time while maintaining stability, legitimacy, and responsiveness to citizens' needs. This sustainability is largely influenced by the quality and effectiveness of electoral policies. Diamond (1999), democratic consolidation requires not only regular elections but also strong institutions that ensure fairness, accountability, and peaceful transfer of power. In this regard, well-implemented electoral policies reduce electoral malpractices such as vote buying, manipulation of results, voter intimidation, and political violence, thereby improving

public confidence in democratic governance. Norris (2014) further emphasizes that electoral integrity is essential for sustaining democracy because it strengthens citizens' belief that elections genuinely reflect their preferences. Schedler (2002) argues that electoral democracy can only be sustained when electoral processes are protected from fraud, coercion, and manipulation. Therefore, electoral policy and democratic sustainability are mutually reinforcing; effective electoral policies strengthen democracy, while a stable democracy provides the environment necessary for continuous improvement of electoral governance.

The relationship between electoral policy and democratic sustainability in Nigeria is evident in the way electoral laws and institutional reforms shape the credibility of elections and the stability of democratic governance. Electoral policy in Nigeria is primarily guided by constitutional provisions and the Electoral Act (2022), which regulates voter registration, political party conduct, campaign financing, voting procedures, and the management of election disputes by the judiciary and electoral bodies. Institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) are central to implementing these policies and ensuring that elections reflect the will of the people. In principle, strong electoral policies are intended to deepen democratic consolidation by promoting transparency, fairness, and inclusiveness in the electoral process.

Therefore, the Nigerian experience demonstrates that electoral policy is both a driver and a determinant of democratic sustainability, as it shapes the quality of governance, the legitimacy of leadership, and the long-term stability of democratic

institutions. However, the effectiveness of these policies in sustaining democracy depends largely on their implementation and the political environment in which they operate.

In Nigeria's Fourth Republic, electoral policy reforms have had mixed outcomes in promoting democratic sustainability. For instance, the introduction of the Electoral Act 2010 and later the Electoral Act 2022, along with technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IReV), were designed to improve electoral transparency and reduce fraud. The 2015 general elections are often cited as a milestone in democratic consolidation due to improved credibility and peaceful transfer of power, while the 2019 and 2023 elections revealed both progress and persistent challenges, including logistical delays, voter suppression concerns, and disputes over result transmission. These experiences show that while electoral policies in Nigeria have contributed to democratic sustainability by enabling regular elections and peaceful transitions, their effectiveness is often undermined by weak enforcement, political interference, and electoral malpractice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the social contract theory as advanced and postulated by Hobbes (1651), Locke (1690), and Rousseau (1762). The theory posits that government authority originates from an agreement between the state and the people, whereby citizens surrender certain freedoms in exchange for security, justice, and the protection of their rights. In democratic societies, elections serve as a mechanism through which citizens confer legitimacy on political leaders and periodically renew the social contract. Consequently, electoral policies that

guarantee transparency, inclusiveness, and fairness strengthen the relationship between citizens and the state, while flawed electoral processes weaken public trust and democratic legitimacy (Heywood, 2019).

The sustainability of democracy in Nigeria depends largely on the effectiveness of its electoral policies and institutions. Electoral policies that promote transparency, accountability, and political inclusion contribute significantly to democratic consolidation, whereas weak implementation of electoral laws may encourage political instability and governance crises.

Challenges Affecting Electoral Policy Implementation

The implementation of electoral policy in Nigeria faces several structural, institutional, and political challenges that continue to undermine the effectiveness of democratic governance. Although reforms such as amendments to the Electoral Act and the introduction of electronic technologies by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have improved electoral administration, practical implementation often falls short due to weak institutional capacity, political interference, and logistical constraints. Electoral policies are frequently well-articulated on paper, but inconsistently enforced during elections, leading to gaps between legal frameworks and electoral realities.

One major challenge is electoral violence and political intimidation, which significantly affects voter participation and the credibility of elections. Scholars such as Diamond (1999) argue that electoral competition in weak institutional environments often generates conflict rather than democratic consolidation. In

Nigeria, reports from organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2023) indicate that election periods are frequently characterized by violence, ballot box snatching, and intimidation, particularly in highly competitive regions. Similarly, vote buying remains a persistent issue that undermines electoral fairness and distorts voters' choices, thereby weakening the effectiveness of electoral policies.

Another major challenge is weak institutional capacity and logistical inefficiency. Norris (2014), electoral integrity depends heavily on the capacity of electoral management bodies to administer credible elections. In Nigeria, issues such as delayed deployment of electoral materials, technological failures in result transmission, and inadequate training of electoral officials continue to affect the implementation of electoral reforms. These challenges were notably observed during the 2019 and 2023 general elections, where technical and logistical shortcomings generated public controversy and post-election disputes.

Furthermore, political interference and weak enforcement of electoral laws remain critical constraints. Electoral institutions are sometimes perceived as being vulnerable to influence from political elites, which undermines their independence and credibility. Mahmood Yakubu, the then Chairman, Independent Electoral Commission has repeatedly acknowledged the difficulties faced in ensuring full compliance with electoral guidelines due to political pressures and security challenges. Additionally, prolonged electoral litigations as observed in Nigeria's post-election judicial processes, shifts electoral competition from the ballot box to the courts,

weakening public confidence in democratic outcomes.

Lastly, voter apathy and declining trust in electoral processes further threaten the sustainability of electoral reforms. Robert (1989), democracy requires continuous citizen participation and confidence in institutions. However, repeated experiences of electoral irregularities in Nigeria have contributed to political disengagement among citizens, reducing voter turnout in several elections. Therefore, strengthening electoral policy implementation in Nigeria requires institutional independence, stricter enforcement of electoral laws, improved electoral logistics, and sustained civic education to rebuild public trust in the democratic process.

Findings

The study on Nigeria's electoral policy and its democratic sustainability reveals that electoral policies play a central role in shaping the credibility, stability, and effectiveness of democratic governance in the country. It was found that successive electoral reforms, including the Electoral Act 2022 and the introduction of technological innovations by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), have improved transparency and administrative efficiency in the electoral process. However, despite these improvements, the practical implementation of electoral policies remains inconsistent, thereby limiting their full impact on democratic consolidation. The findings further show that challenges such as electoral violence, vote buying, political interference, weak institutional capacity, and voter apathy continue to undermine the effectiveness of electoral policy implementation in Nigeria. These challenges reduce public trust in electoral outcomes and weaken citizens' confidence

in democratic institutions. As a result, democratic sustainability is often threatened by recurring electoral disputes and post-election litigations, which shift political competition from the ballot box to the courts. In addition, the study finds that the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria is strongly dependent on the credibility of elections and the independence of electoral institutions. Where electoral processes are perceived as fair and transparent, voter participation and political legitimacy increased and people will have confidence on the people they voted. Conversely, flawed implementation of electoral policies leads to political disengagement and weak democratic consolidation. Overall, the study concludes that while Nigeria has made significant progress in electoral reforms, more effective enforcement, institutional strengthening, and civic engagement are required to ensure sustainable democracy. From the above findings, it shows that the operational agreement embedded in the social contract is absolutely violated and therefore, all the challenges earlier highlighted will surface and the people of the nation will have negative attitudes towards democratic sustainability.

Conclusion

This study concludes that Nigeria's electoral policy plays critical impacts in determining the sustainability of democratic system. Electoral reforms such as the Electoral Act 2022 and innovations introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) have contributed to improving electoral transparency and credibility. However, despite these improvements, persistent challenges such as electoral violence, vote buying, political interference, weak institutional enforcement, and voter apathy continue to weaken the effectiveness of

electoral policy implementation. The study added that democratic sustainability in Nigeria depends largely on the credibility of electoral processes and the strength of democratic institutions. When electoral policies are effectively implemented, they tend to enhance public trust, encourage political participation, and strengthen democratic legitimacy. Conversely, weak implementation undermines confidence in elections and threatens democratic consolidation.

Therefore, for Nigeria to achieve sustainable democracy there is a need for stronger institutional independence, strict enforcement of electoral laws, continuous reforms, and increased civic education. These measures are essential for ensuring that electoral policies translate into credible elections and long-term democratic stability.

Recommendations

Based on the study objectives, the following recommendations are made to strengthen electoral policy, improve citizens' trust, and address implementation challenges in Nigeria:

1. Strengthening the role of electoral policies in democratic sustainability: Electoral policies should be continuously reviewed and strengthened to ensure they effectively promote free, fair, and credible elections. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should be granted greater operational independence, adequate funding, and improved institutional capacity to implement electoral reforms without political interference. In addition, the use of electoral technologies such as BVAS and electronic result transmission should be fully consolidated through infrastructure improvement and staff training to enhance transparency and efficiency.

2. Enhancing citizens' trust in democratic institutions: To improve the relationship between electoral policy and citizens' trust, government and electoral stakeholders should prioritize transparency and accountability in the electoral process. Regular publication of electoral data, prompt communication during elections, and effective management of electoral disputes will help to build public confidence. Furthermore, sustained civic and voter education programmes should be implemented to increase political awareness and encourage informed participation. Strengthening internal democracy within political parties will also reduce post-election dissatisfaction and improve trust in democratic institutions.

3. Independent National Electoral Commission should continuously focused on the failed strategies of elections in order to offer new strategies that is capable of been better than the old ones than to allows it continue as the electorates will continue not to have confidence on the electoral commission. These have to do with over voting, vote buying, snatching of ballot boxes, and transportation of essential materials a few to mention.

4. The use of electoral technology, including BVAS and electronic result transmission systems, should be improved through better infrastructure, staff training, and reliable technical support to reduce logistical failures during elections.

Government and electoral stakeholders should intensify voter education and civic awareness programmes to reduce voter apathy and encourage informed political participation among citizens.

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