

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE DEMOCRATIC QUALITY OF ELECTIONS? EVIDENCE FROM NIGERIA

Ibrahim Sani

The Electoral Institute, Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Nigeria

Corresponding Author's email: ibraheemsanii@gmail.com



Abstract

Growing attention about election integrity continue (s) to resonate among intellectuals and policy makers. The use of statistical assessments of experts' and voters' viewpoints appeared to have dominated the evaluation of the quality of an election, outshining any attempt to provide an in-depth case-to-case comparative examination of election quality. Corroborating multiple evidence from the Nigerian Independent Electoral Commission, in-depth interview, Afrobarometer Round 4 Survey and Media House reports and election observer reports, the paper address this gap by focusing on the 2007, 2011, and 2015 elections in Nigeria. Findings suggest that the two most recent elections (2011 and 2015) are better than the 2007 elections in terms of competition, participation, and legitimacy.

Keywords: Election, Democracy, Participation, Competition, Perceived Legitimacy

Introduction

In democratic system, the election is the only legitimate route to power. Majority of nation states (over 90%) across the world have accepted elections at regular intervals as the legitimate means to power (Hyde and Marinov, 2012). Africans and African nations are not left behind as majority of them (84%) prefer to choose their leaders through regular, open, and honest elections (Afrobarometer Round 5, n = 49,204 weighted result)¹. This laudable recognition is been challenged by the failure of some countries to hold credible elections (Norris, Frank, and Coma, 2013; Norris, Frank, and Martinez iComa, 2014).

In Africa, for example, the abuse of incumbency, weak institutions, inchoate operational rules and regulations, and passive political followership predominate electoral politics (Cheeseman, 2010, Bogaaards, 2013). Elections in competitive authoritarian regimes have attracted the attention of several scholars with some working more on electoral frauds and manipulations (Lopez-Pintor, 2010, Darhof, 2011, Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009, Levitsky and Way, 2010) and others trying to develop standards upon which to build a comparative assessment of quality of elections (Elklit & Svensson, 1997; Elklit & Reynolds, 2005; Bland, Green, & Moore, 2013; Norris, 2013; Norris, Frank, & Martinez iComa, 2014; Norris, Frank, & Martinez iComa, 2013). Much of these efforts are expert-based surveys. Several theoretical and methodological challenges compelled intellectual engagements to remain expert-driven (Sani & Alkali, 2016). It could also be explained by the composite of issues that make up an electoral cycle.

The Perception of Election Integrity Index (PEI) (Norris, 2013, Norris, 2014, Norris, Frank, and Martinez iComa, 2013, Norris, Frank, and Martinez iComa, 2014) and Election Administration System Index

¹ This is recoded data from Afrobarometer Round 5 (2010-2012) covering: Algeria 2013, Benin 2012, Botswana 2012, Burkina Faso 2012, Burundi 2012, Cameroon 2013, Cape Verde 2011, Côte d'Ivoire 2013, Egypt 2013, Ghana 2012, Guinea 2013, Kenya 2011, Lesotho 2012, Liberia 2012, Madagascar 2013, Malawi 2012, Mali 2012, Mauritius 2012, Morocco 2013, Mozambique 2012, Namibia 2012, Niger 2013, Nigeria 2012, Senegal 2013, Sierra Leone 2012, South Africa 2011, Swaziland 2013, Tanzania 2012, Togo 2012, Tunisia 2013, Uganda 2012, Zambia 2012, Zimbabwe 2012. The question reads: 'Which of the following statements is closest to your view? *Statement 1:* We should choose our leaders in this country through regular, open and honest elections; *Statement 2:* Since elections sometimes produce bad results, we should adopt other methods for choosing this country's leaders.'

(EASI) (Bland, Green, and Moore, 2013) have provided good grounds but are equally exposed to methodological biases. For example, there is the tendency for an expert to pay more attention to separate aspects of an election as against other important processes such as the independence of the electoral umpire, level of party institutionalisation, and logistics challenges associated with the conduct of national elections. Also, an expert assessor could be influenced by the complexity and multidimensional character of an election (Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002, Martinez iComa and VanHam, 2015) or even personal biases especially in instances where there are overlapping issues .

This paper analysed the democratic quality of three national elections conducted in Nigeria, drawing upon existing approaches to assessing democratic elections. This is very significant as the quality of elections is seriously affecting public perception, confidence and legitimacy of electoral processes and government. Also, domestic, and international democracy donors have spent and are spending fortunes to improving elections quality as democracy gets consolidated when quality of elections are strengthened. In fact, the United Nations believed that credible election is the only and sincere route to authority to govern. Using various attempts at conceptualising credible election such as “democratic election” (Lindberg, 2006 and 2009), “democratic and unfair election” (Levitsky and way, 2010), “democratic voting” (Birch, 2011), and recently the “election integrity” index (Norris, 2013 and 2014, Norris, Frank, and Martinez iComa, 2013 and 2014), this article applied Lindberg’s framework to the three national elections (2007, 2011, and 2015 General Elections) in Nigeria. It contributes to the growing literature on democracy and elections, providing a comparative examination of the quality of elections in transitional democracy – Nigeria. Specifically, this Nigerian case study has expanded the scope of the number of factors that are very significant to explaining electoral participation and competition which key components of every democratic elections.

Election quality: Where to draw the line? Demo-optimists vs pessimists

Presumably, election is an essential and unavoidable aspect of all liberal democracies (Katz, 1997, Lindberg, 2009, Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009, Przeworski, 2010, Coppedge, et al., 2011, Bogaaards, 2013). It is the democratic institution that empowers individuals to actualise self-government (Katz, 1997, Lindberg, 2006, Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009, Przeworski, 2010, Birch, 2011). The clamour for credible election and its endorsement as the best process for accessing political power is a clear indication that there cannot be democracy without “real”¹ elections.

While there is a general acceptance of election as legitimate route to power, increasing evidence from different parts of the globe continue to question the reliability of its democratising effects (Lindberg, 2006 and 2009). Examining how consistent is the claim that repeated elections could lead to democratisation in Africa, Matthijs Bogaards indicated that only three out of 43 countries seem to have followed this pattern and called for a systematic review of the argument. Stressing that “... our existing knowledge regarding the relationship between democratisation and elections in Africa needs to be revised” (Bogaaards, 2013:152). Moreover, a country’s acceptance of elections as the legitimate means to power had little influence to individual country’s compliance with democratic values (Levitsky and Way, 2010, Morse, 2012, Ochieng’Opalo, 2012, Bratton, 2013). Thus, instead of making people the ultimate source of authority, some elections tend to be mere rituals for recycling existing rulers (Schedler, 2002).

Election is logically constrained by established rules and procedures. By default, voting is conducted and managed under established rules and regulations often set up by incumbents and players that have a defined interest in its outcome (Przeworski, 2010). In addition, absolute requirements such as inclusiveness are matters of gradation. Likewise, political systems do “... combined both democratic and undemocratic features, [as] polyarchy was a matter of degree” (Lindberg, 2006: 143 cf. Sklar, 1987 and Dahl, 1973). Perhaps the persistent call that elections have to be periodic at regular intervals, conducted under equal suffrage based on the idea of ‘one-person, one-vote’ suggests the inherent value of holding repetitive and credible elections.

Extant literature on election and *electoralism* is not clear about what constitutes credible or reliable election. Many of the existing efforts though helpful have suffered some conceptual and methodological challenges (Morse, 2012:163) as “the quality of [electoral] contests may vary in very significant ways” (Norris, Frank, and Martinez iComa, 2013:124). In addition, the development of scales of participation and contestation was not helpful methodologically (Munck, 2007:35) nor did the emergence of checklists (Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002).

To bridge this gap, Staffan I. Lindberg’s *“Democracy and Elections in Africa”* provided an interesting gateway. Lindberg explained that an election needs to be participatory, competitive and legitimate to be democratic. He measured participation by the extent of voter turnout, presence of the opposition, and absence of autocratic guards. The understanding is that a large turnout signifies people’s exercise of political power, while opposition participation confirms contestation, and its absence portends a significant threat to the overall electoral processes. Similarly, when existing autocrats decide to quit and observe the rules of the game, electoral processes assume a considerable measure of integrity. Competition is measured using four indicators – the winner’s share of the votes, largest party’s share of seats, second party’s share of seats and power alternation. A legitimate election is one in which losers accept defeat, peace characterises the process, electoral rules are observed, and the electoral regime survives (Table 1).

Table 1 Lindberg’s Democratic Elections

	Participation	Competition	Legitimacy
Democratic elections	Voter turnout	Winner’s share of votes	Losers’ acceptance of defeat
	Presence of opposition	Largest party’s shares of seats	Peaceful electoral process
	Absence of autocratic guards	Second largest party shares of seats	Election regime survival
		Power alternation	

Source: Author’s compilation

This conception appears well suited to compare democratic elections, however, these indicators can be improved. More so, elections could have significant gradations in terms of participation and competition. Also, elections have been found to suffer from either “outcome determinative or “non-outcome determinative” frauds (first-order or second-order electoral malpractices).² Thus, for Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, elections in democracies are free to the degree or relative presence or absence of fraud and voter intimidation; and fair to the extent that oppositions are not subjected to any form of repression or harassment (Levitsky and Way, 2010:7). Each contestant, they posited, has to have an unrestrained access to media and can campaign without any form of political intimidation (Table 2). Instead of operationalising free and fair elections, Levitsky and Way, however, focused on unfair elections, seeing them as tools in the hands of autocratic incumbents. Consequently, the list of indicators for components two, three and four are almost referring to the same issue, making it difficult, if not impossible, to examine and weight/classify each empirically (Table 2). This is conflicting as even established democracies are battling with campaign finance and fair media coverage (Norris, Frank, and Coma, 2013). Similarly, clientele and personality politics are still relevant in both Europe and developing countries (Elischer, 2013). Perhaps this explains Levitsky and Way’s contradiction with other scholars of electoral authoritarianism, as for them “any one of the following indicators is sufficient to score an election as unfair” (Levitsky and Way, 2010:366).

Table 2 Levitsky and Way’s Democratic and Unfair Elections

	Element	Indicators ²
Unfair elections	Major candidates are barred for political reasons	Serious partisan manipulation of voter rolls, large scale voter intimidation or disruption, ballot-box stuffing, multiple voting, or other forms of ballot tampering, and falsification of result.
	Coordinate or tolerated electoral abuse	
	Significant formal or informal impediments – coordinate or tolerated by the national government – prevent the opposition from campaigning on an equal footing	Violence against opposition party activists, candidates, or infrastructure and use or abuse of laws regulating public meetings limits the opposition's ability to campaign
	Uneven electoral playing field	Electoral authorities systematically biased in favor of incumbent, highly uneven media (state-owned biased in favor of incumbent, significant share of private media packed by incumbent using taxes, advertisements, subsidies, debts, censorship, bribery, and systematic slant of coverage in favor of government), highly uneven access to resources

Source: Author's compilation

Another important conception of credible election is Sara Birch's democratic voting. Birch defined voting based on inclusivity and policy orientations. Thus, an election is democratic to the extent that it offers people the chance to choose among contestants their leaders and "... results are determined on the basis of these choices by means of pre-established rule" (Birch, 2011:17). Individual voters, Birch suggested, have to have equal, adequate, and accurate access to information about the policy proposals and performance of the options on the ballot paper so as to make an informed choice (Birch, 2011:23). Equally, votes cast must be given equal weight. In other words, counting and tabulation must be accurate and based on actual votes cast. The votes versus seats conversion formula must be neutral and transparent such that no contestant – candidate or party – is short-changed. Impliedly, Birch appeared the first to attempt a linkage between the act of voting and government responsiveness (Table 3). This viewpoint appears workable, however, the requirements for equal and accurate information about policy options limits its applicability. For example, citizens could conflate good policy goals with personal, tribal or group interests, making such choices subjective.

² For details of these indicator see Levistky and Way, (2010) appendixes I, 1; 3.2.; and 3.3., pp. 366-367.

Table 3 Birch's Democratic Voting

	Inclusiveness	Policy-oriented voting	Effective aggregation
Democratic voting	Right to vote	Equal access to information	Accurate counting
	Opportunity to vote	Free expression of preferences	Neutral vote-seat conversion
	Right to stand for election		Impartiality
			Transparency

Source: Author's compilation

Also, the political orientation of elites in many developing democracies is that of adapting various strategies to hold on to power, including the use of ethnic and clientele politics as against clear cut policy proposals and options (Bratton, 2013, Posner and Young, 2007). Indeed, scholarship is still grappling with the ways to establish a linkage between election and responsive government (Huber & Powell, 1994; Powell, 2000 and 2004). This perhaps explains the absence of policy issues in the manifestos of the major political parties and candidates that contested for Nigeria's Presidential elections of at least 2007 and 2011. In fact, as I examined elsewhere no political party in the country as at 2011 had a single unit or department devoted to research, policy and development (Sani, 2013). However, the analytical value of Birch's view remains. Key indicators such as the right to vote, opportunity to vote and the right to stand for elections clearly expressed basis for government inclusivity and popular participation (Birch, 2011:18).

As indicated elsewhere,³ the Election Integrity Project⁴ defines as credible an election that corresponds to:

... international conventions and universal standards about elections reflecting global norms applying to all countries worldwide throughout the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, on polling day, and its aftermath (Norris, 2014: 21).

Thus, indicating that such international principles could be seen as suitable instruments for judging electoral integrity. And, because countries have ratified them, they are to guide and govern the political actions of individuals or institutions acting on behalf of the state.⁵ The integrity group maintains that international norms could be seen as binding on all the countries that have ratified them either at regional or international fora. Consequently, "[e]lectoral contests are evaluated as legitimate ... if they respect international and regional conventions, principles, and treaties that governments have endorsed" (Norris, 2014: 23). Table 4 summarizes some of these principles and the relevant citation of each.

Table 4 Some International Norms of Election Integrity

Global Norm	Principles
Article 21(3) universal declaration of Human Rights (1948)	Government authority shall flow from elections; held at periodic intervals; where people have universal and equal suffrage; ballot are confidential and secured.
Article 25 of the United Nations International Covent for Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR of 1966)	Periodic elections at regular intervals; universal suffrage that includes all sectors of society; equal suffrage, in the idea of one-person, one-vote; the right to stand for public office and contest elections; the rights of all eligible electors to vote; the use of secret balloting; genuine elections that reflect the free expression of the will of the people.

Venice Commission's Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters (2002)	Universal, equal, free, secret, and direct suffrage
UN Resolution 63/163	Stressed the importance of fair, periodic and genuine elections
Chapter 7 Article 17 of the African Union (AU) Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance	Transparent, free and fair elections; managed by an independent and impartial electoral commission and electoral dispute resolution mechanism; and fair media houses.

Source: Authors' Compilation

The assumption is where these principles are applied to the latter, electoral politics tend to be fairer, leveling the ground for active and equal contestation. So, credibility in elections is seen as dependent upon the transparency of the processes, impartiality of electoral bodies, and plainness of the electoral field to all contestants and electorate such that each could participate and make an unimpaired choice (Table 4). The volume of the requirements as stipulated by these norms (the principles column) appear biased to context, downplaying the relevance of things that have relevance in the conduct of good and better elections. For example, it has neglected the influence of institutional legacies of colonialism, legacies of postcolonial authoritarian regimes, ethnopolitical cleavages, and political negotiations to the electoral lop-sidedness in some Africa states which have all been found to have certain level of influence on elections (Mozaffar, 2002).

In a sense, the literature about election appear dichotomous – those who seek for a comprehensive list of the necessary and sufficient conditions of good election - “*demo-optimists*” and others looking for a list with some additives that could reduce domineering tendencies of incumbents which often alter electoral outcomes - “*demo-pessimists*”.⁶ Election are credible when they provide equal voter suffrage using genuine voter list, adequate electoral materials, and when the electoral process minimises different forms of fraud, repression or intimidation such that large number of contestants could operate freely. In other words, elections have to be participatory, competitive and perceived as legitimate route to political power. This procedural conception is simple and eases empirical and methodological complexities.

Determining effective political participation goes beyond looking at Lindberg's three indicators of voter turnout, the presence of the opposition and the absence of autocratic guards, especially considering that share of registered voter was used instead of voting age to generate the percentage of turnout. Also, such measures have not and cannot capture the relative influenced of other factors, such as abuse of incumbency which is prevalent in Africa (Bratton, 2013; Sebastian, 2013). Also, the presence or absence of an opposition boycott is a good indicator but how could a judgement of quality be based on the subjective decisions of the opposition? Moreover, we need to know what causes the boycott, as the existing literature points to the relevance of the strategic calculation of actors in explaining the presence or absence of an opposition in transitional regimes (Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009).

Also, while democratic elections had to have viable contestation, ‘vote-share thresholds’ is not enough in weighting the strength of individual actor competitiveness. These thresholds do not consider what happens at the level of candidate nomination even if it is at this level that deliberate restrictions, selections, and favouritism take place. Indeed, it has been observed that electoral competition is better understood by way of going beyond electoral outcomes and a focusing on other aspects of electoral processes that structure actor competitiveness (Diamond, 2002 and 2008; Bogaards, 2007). Thus, a combination of other variables with Lindberg's would provide a better lens to understand Nigerian elections.

To interpret effective participation, this paper goes beyond Lindberg's three measures of voter turnout, presence of oppositions, and the absence of autocratic guards. These measures cannot

adequately capture the quality of a national voter list in terms of composition, presence, or absence of multiple, underage, phantom, and deceased entries. However, combining some of Lindberg's indicators with the latter issues provides a better though subjective measure of effective participation (Table 5, column 2). Also, to supplement this subjectivity, I introduced a quantitative measure which divides the total number of valid votes cast in any election by the total voting age population (VAP). The result obtained is then placed on a scale of 0 – 1, where 0 represents a perfect non- participation (no citizens voted) and 1 a perfect participation (all voting age citizens voted and cast valid votes) (Table 5 column 2).

Table 5 Operationalising Democratic Quality

	Participation	Competition	Perceived Legitimacy
Democratic elections	Presence/absence of universal suffrage	Absence of tampering with voter list, ballot paper, vote tallies and results	Absence of state repression such as political arrest or intimidation
	Quality of national voter roll	Corrupt practice such as payment of commission on services rendered, commitment to future governmental contracts	Losing candidate/party accept defeat or winning candidate/party accept the presence of major flaws
	No deliberate exclusion of key candidate		Peaceful
	Effective participation value is 1 or closer to 1	Use of petty cash/food/clothing materials to seduce voters And effective political competition is 1 or closer to 1.	Fewer cases of electoral petition

Source: Author's compilation

Moreover, a democratic election is inclusive when all eligible voters have been registered (Hartlyn, McCoy, and Mustillo, 2008, Calingaert, 2006, Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2006 *cf.* Azinge, 1994). Likewise, all minors and those exempted by law, if any, are not included. Otherwise, it runs the risk of fraudulent ballots. In addition, democratic elections allow the existence of competent oppositions as "... individuals and political parties have equal rights to exist and field candidates" (Lindberg, 2006).

Secondly, in contrast to Lindberg, competition in Nigeria and perhaps other emergent electoral democracies is better examined by looking at prevalence of electoral malpractices such as tampering with the voters list, ballot papers or election results, vote tallies, payment of commission on any services rendered by electoral officials or other groups which could alter the final result, commitment – oral or written – on future benefits including a contract or appointment, reported cases of the offer of petty cash, the selective application of party and candidate rule and the use of violence to change electoral results in addition to vote share thresholds. Like the measure of participation, an additional objective measure is introduced which is calculated as $(100 - [\text{winner's percentage of presidential votes or legislative seats} - 2^{\text{nd}} - \text{place percentage share of votes of legislative seats}]/100)$ the result of it is equal to 1 and reflects perfect competition and perfect uncompetitive election if it is 0 (Table 5, column 3).

Lastly, a legitimate election is characterised by the absence of state repression, either through the use of the police or other instruments of coercion such as 'engaged thugs.' Indeed, state repression and political intimidation affect elections and electoral outcomes in various ways. It can alter the quality of voter lists, diminish voter turnout, provoke the withdrawal of key contenders and damage electoral outcomes (Fabrice, 2003, Ozor, 2009). For instance, the opposition leader in Uganda was arrested and charged with treason in the build up to the 2006 general elections. It is claimed that this was the immediate cause of the protests and riots on the streets of Kampala (Ozor, 2009). Similar incidence

happened in Nigeria in the build-up to the 2007 elections and perhaps it was part of what undermines the credibility of that elections. In this regard, an election is perceived legitimate when the losing candidate/party accepts defeat/winner accepts major flaws. When citizens, observers, partisan/non-partisan election stakeholders endorsed elections as credible with less cases of abuse of incumbency, manifesting in the arrest of key politicians, unnecessary charges against political opponents or the use of hired political thugs to intimidate voters or the opposition. Lastly, when there are fewer electoral petitions (Table 5, column 4).

Patterns of Election Quality in Nigeria

Democratic elections are participatory when each individual as a voter or candidate is given an equal opportunity to take part in public affairs without discrimination. From the two broad theoretical dimensions of participation – frequency and intensity,⁷ when an election fails to give individual participants the chance to be registered as a prospective voter, it has undermined their right to participate. In other words, in a country like Nigeria where a person is only legally allowed to vote when registered as a voter, controlling the registration process means controlling people's frequency and intensity of participation.

In terms of frequency, the 2011 elections were more inclusive than the 2007 elections. This is not because the 2011 elections recorded a higher voter turnout compared to the 2007 elections, but because it successfully listed almost all eligible voters in the country (90%).

Table 6 Presidential Elections Voter Turnout 1979 – 2015

Year	Voter Turnout	Total vote Cast	Registration	VAP Turnout	Voting age population	Population	Invalid votes
2015	43.65 %	29,432,083	67,422,005	32.11 %	91,669,312	181,562,056	2.87 %
2011	53.68 %	39,469,484	73,528,040	48.32 %	81,691,751	155,215,573	3.19 %
2007	57.49 %	35,397,517	61,567,036	49.85 %	71,004,507	131,859,731	
2003	69.08 %	42,018,735	60,823,022	65.33 %	64,319,246	129,934,911	6.00 %
1999	52.26 %	30,280,052	57,938,945	57.36 %	52,792,781	108,258,359	1.40 %
1993		14,039,486	27.79 %		50,526,720	105,264,000	
1979	35.25 %	17,098,267	48,499,091	44.83 %	38,142,090	77,841,000	2.00 %

Source: INEC 2007 and 2011 Presidential election and IDEA, 2011 Nigeria's presidential election result results

The 2007 registration diverged and disenfranchised almost 10 million or 13.3% of Nigeria's eligible voters (Table 6, column 4). This variation might appear insignificant. Consider the fact that the total of over 73 million eligible voters declared in the 2011 elections was after the removal of a total of 870,612 cases of multiple and underage registrants. This is far compared to the 61million voters used in the 2007 elections which had several cases of multiple, underage and phantom registrants. For instance, it is reported that among those registered there were names like Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela and the commission did nothing to clean these inconsistencies (TMG, 2007, EU EOM, 2007, LDC, 2009). In addition, available evidence shows that the 2011 elections had better registration machinery and provided a more comprehensive national voter roll. This confirms the view that a good election cum democracy, provides citizens with the basic right to participate in public affairs.⁸

The 2015 presidential election seems much better. In fact, it is in great variance with previous elections. In it, INEC was bold enough to report more than 80% success. The Commission indicated in several places that it had registered almost 70Million (67,422,005) voters out of the 90 milion assumed eligible voters (Table 6). This was after biometric crossmatching of individual data and verification of

all registrants. The biometric crossmatch has drastically reduced the frequency of double, multiple, and underage registration. This authentication of the national voter list while applauded is not enough. At least there is the need to voter authentication either using voter-to-list or list-voter approach.

It could be argued that getting all eligible voters on a national voters list does not account for frequency of participation except when all voters present at the polling booth cast their votes. Thus, looking at the voter turnout of the 2007, 2011, 2015 presidential elections indicate (57.49%, 53.68%, and 43.65%, respectively), it is difficult to see any significant differences. It is difficult to argue for any significant differences. It is equally not acceptable, however, for an election to produce different sets of electoral outcomes – winners. For example, the 2007 presidential election result appeared in two sets – one which indicated 35,397,517 as the total valid votes cast, in which the winner and second runner scored 69.60% and 18.66% of the total votes and another which showed 35,425,208 as total valid votes cast, in which the winner and the second runner scored 69.96% and 18.65% respectively.³ This is incomparable with the two most recent sets of election results declared during the 2011 and 2015 presidential elections. These elections shared almost common features such as voter turnout and VAP turnout. In addition, it is reported that the incumbent president instantly accepted defeat and congratulated the declared winner. The table also reveals the uniqueness and exceptionality of both the 2011 and 2015 presidential elections as each was conducted with a seemingly cleaner national voter list.

Also, the 2015 election appears cleaner and more credible in many respects. Assuming we accept the figures, introducing a new measure of effective participation, provided deeper insights about the three rounds of elections. Intensity of participation is used here to refer to the partial powers given to citizens to influence decision making (Katz, 19987). In accordance with this, evidence on the three sets of elections revealed all as very weak. Each has fallen short of the African average of 0.5 scoring 0.49, 0.47, and 0.32 for 2007, 2011, and 2015 respectively (Table 7). Interestingly, however, the 2015 election which is the most applauded by almost all partisan and nonpartisan electoral stakeholders seemed to fall far below previous elections. Perhaps as there were no similar violent reactions in 2015 than 2011 and the electoral atmosphere was not charged and tensed by the “crisis of expectation” (Jega, 2012). Also, the authentication of the voter list surely exerted some level of influence and built peoples’ and politicians’ confidence. In fact, these plausible explanations have been supported by the degree of competition among contestants which would be explain later.

Table 7 Measuring of Effective Participation

	Elections		
	2007	2011	2015
Average voter turnout	57.49%	53.68%	43.65%
Effective Participation (President)	0.4985	0.4799	0.3211
Effective Participation (Congress)	-	0.2579	0.3211

Source: Author’s compilation

More so, the legislative elections were poorer in both the 2011 and 2015 elections with each recording very insignificant level of effective participation 0.26 and 0.31 respectively. In other words, these results were close to perfect non-participation (Table 7). Notwithstanding this poor performance, efforts at getting the total number of valid votes cast during the 2007 legislative elections proved unsuccessful, making it difficult to make any possible comparison between it (2007 legislative

³ Copies of these results are available on request from the author.

elections) and both the 2011 and 2015 legislative elections. While not providing sound ground for valid inferences, the above lends support to the view that voter turnout in Africa is dependent on other factors (Elischer, 2013, Bratton, 2013, Gandhi and Lust-Okar, 2009) and a weak determinant of effective participation.

Secondly, the presence or absence of competition among contestants is a good parameter of election quality. As a hallmark of any democratic election, credible election offers contestants a fair chance to compete. When an election records severe cases of outcome determinative frauds and second order malpractices, the result would be uncompetitive elections even if it recorded high vote shares. A careful examination of the three successive elections in the country revealed that the 2011 and 2015 elections were more competitive compared to the 2007 presidential elections. For example, the 2011 and 2015 presidential elections had more formidable contenders than the 2007 presidential election.

Table 8 Nigerian 2007, 2011, and 2015 Presidential elections results

Candidate	Party	Votes	%
2007			
Yar'Adua	PDP	24, 638, 063	69.60
Buhari	ANPP	6, 605, 299	18.66
Atiku	ACN	2, 637, 848	7.45
Mojisola A. O.	MMN	4, 309	0.01
2011			
Jonathan	PDP	22, 495, 187	56.99
Buhari	CPC	12, 214, 853	30.95
Ribadu	ACN	2, 079, 151	5.27
Christopher C. N.	LDPN	8, 472	0.02
2015			
Buhari	APC	15,424,921	52.40
Goodluck	PDP	12,853,162	43.67
Adebayo	APA	53,537	0.181
Galadima	ACPN	40,311	0.136

Source: Author's compilation

In the 2007 presidential election, incumbent party – PDP – almost assumed the status of a dominant party, winning an absolute majority (70%) of the total votes cast, while the entire oppositions (24 political parties that contested the elections) put together shared the remaining votes. On the contrary, in the 2011 presidential elections, the degree of electoral competition among contending political parties and candidates in the 2011 presidential election was fairly reasonable. In fact, the runner-up alone scored a significant proportion of 31% of the votes cast which is more than the total score of all the oppositions in the 2007 elections.

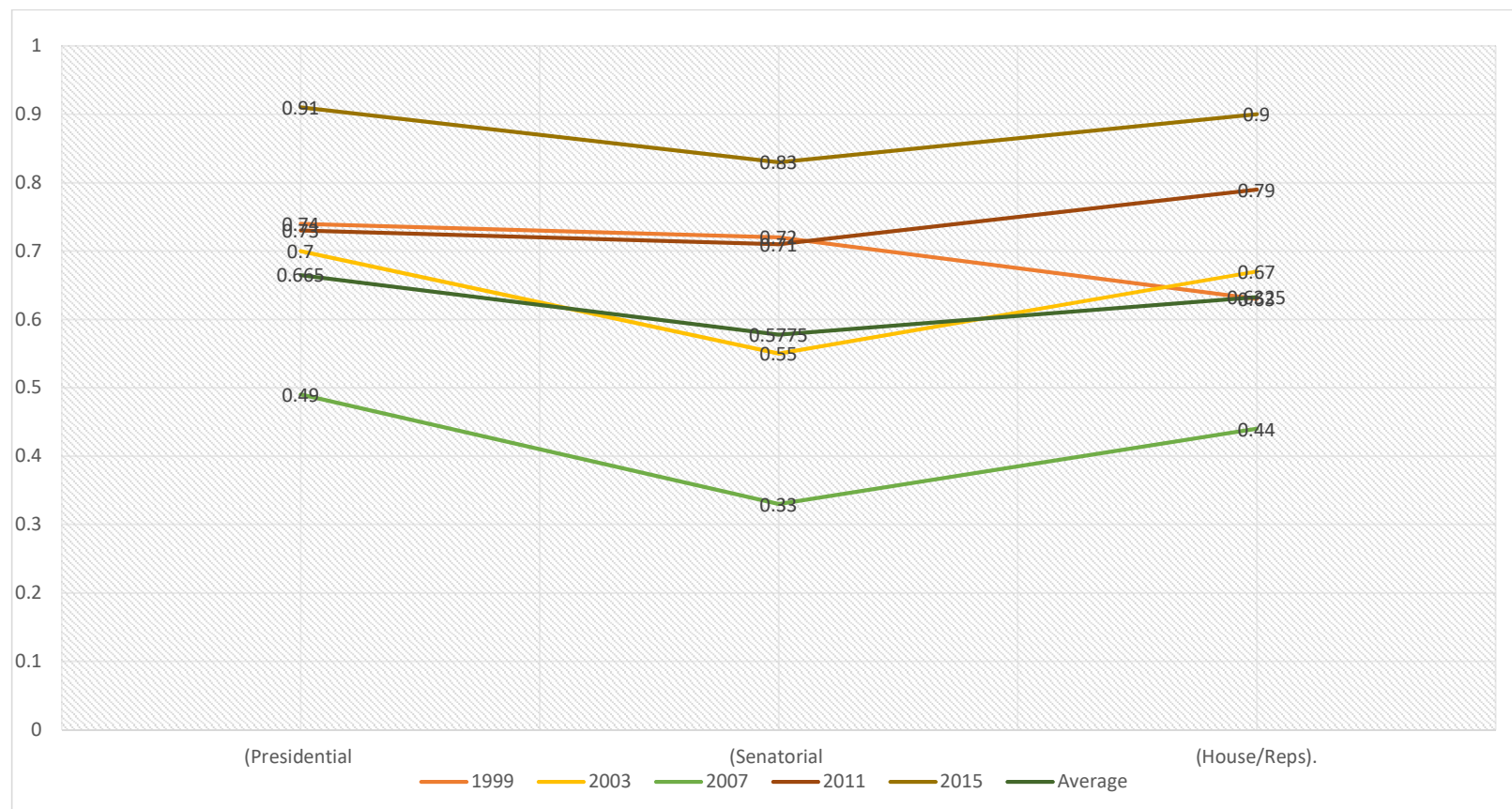
But this was not significant enough moreover competition between individual actors – candidates or parties remained at its lowest ebb. Using the formula to measure political competitiveness, Figure 1 shows that the 2007 elections had the lowest average competitiveness compared to all elections conducted in the country since 1999. This indicates that the 2007 presidential election was less competitive compared to the 2011 election and has fallen far below all other elections, the national and continental averages (0.76 and 0.59).⁹ The quality of the competition was so poor that the

legislative elections were almost close to being perfectly uncompetitive (0.3) for the Senatorial and (0.4) for members of the House of Representatives.

This confirms that all those who contested and won both as president or a congress member in the 2007 elections did so comfortably and all losers whether second place or otherwise only established a presence among the voters during elections (Bratton, 2013: 24). On the contrary, those who contested and won elective positions in the 2011 elections either as president or a member of congress faced better political opponents that had put more viable challenges. Put differently, the 2011 Presidential, Senatorial and House of Representatives elections were more competitive than the 2007 elections as the level of competition at each level of the elections was close to a perfect competition of 0.73, 0.71, and 0.79 respectively. The scores were almost equivalent to what is obtained in some established democracies. Despite the foregoing, there were pockets of observed irregularities spread across both the 2011 and 2015 elections which some analysts feared to have somewhat influenced the declared results.

Lastly, a democratic election needs to be perceived as legitimate. Evidence indicates that the 2011 and 2015 elections were more peaceful and well administered than the 2007 election. Several sources confirmed that the 2011 and 2015 elections were more peaceful and have recorded more acceptable results than the 2007 elections. Only a handful of the oppositions appear unconvinced regarding the perceived legitimacy of the 2011 and 2015 elections.¹⁰ This contrasts with the 2007 elections which almost all partisan and nonpartisan electoral stakeholders had described as 'failed elections. In fact, majority of both urban and rural dwellers, 76% and 67%, respectively described the 2011 elections as "free and fair" and a greater percentage, 65% and 63% respectively regarded the 2007 elections as "not free and fair" (NDI, 2007 & 2011; EU EOM, 2007 & 2011). Overall, most Nigerians rated the 2007 elections as poor and the 2011 elections more credible (NDI, 2007 & 2011; EU EOM, 2007 & 2011).

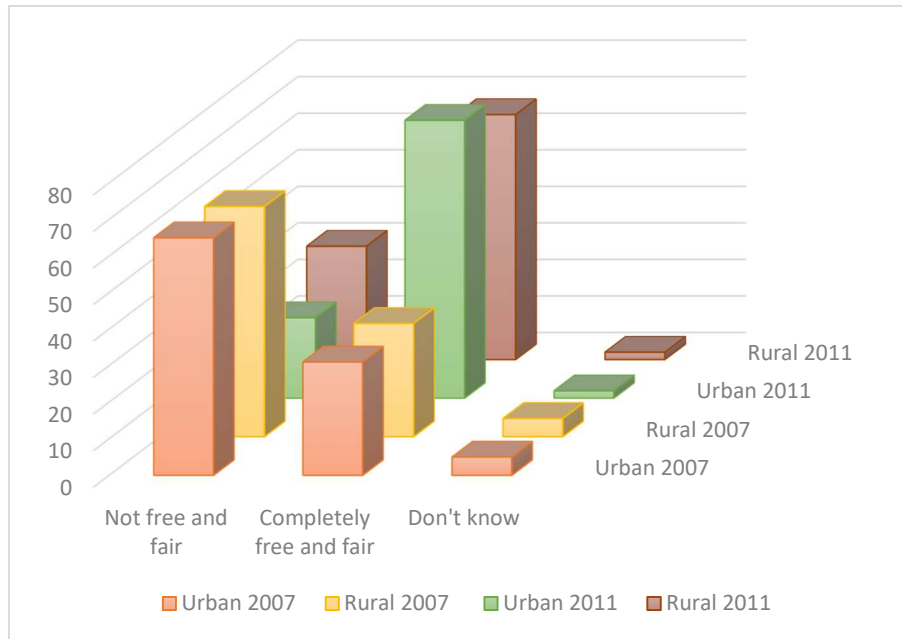
Figure 1 Electoral Competition in Nigeria (1999 – 2015)



Source: Author's compilation

Moreover, some politicians despite losing in the 2011 elections accepted the results declared by INEC. For example, the former Speaker of the Federal House of Representatives accepted the elections as a true reflection of the wish of the people while commending the peacefulness of the process.^{xi} The 2015 presidential election -was more promising and served as point of departure from the old narrations about elections in Nigeria. In fact, the declared results by the Commission were greeted with jubilations. In fact, it could be argued that the two general elections of 2011 and 2015 were the turning points of electoral democracy in the country. The public applauded the elections, almost all domestic and foreign election observers rated the elections as credible, and many contestants for various elective positions seemed to have accepted the declared winners even though there were litigations arising after from the elections of 2011.

Figure 2 Perception of Free and Fairness of 2007, 2011, and 2015 Elections in Nigeria



Source: Afrobarometer Round 4 (n = 2,324 weighted results) and Round 5 (n = 2,400 weighted results)⁴

Figure 2 further corroborated the increasing quality of the elections in the country. The general perception is that the 2011 election is to an extent free and fair. An interesting majority of people 76% and 67% both in the urban and rural Nigeria respectively perceived the 2011 election as completely free and fair which clearly diverged from the judgement of the previous election in 2007. In fact, only handful 31% of urban and rural dwellers viewed the 2011 election negatively which is in stark difference with the 2007 that many 65% and 63% of urban and rural areas judged as not free and fair. In short, the 2011 election could be seen as the turning points in changing the narratives of flawed elections in Nigeria.

⁴ The survey asked respondents about the freeness and fairness of the last election.

Conclusion

This paper provides a comparative evaluation of the democratic quality of three national elections – 2007, 2011, and 2015 – in Nigeria by drawing upon several approaches from extant literature. It corroborates several sources on the conduct of the three elections, explaining their differences in terms of participation, competition, and legitimacy. Evidences from these elections support the views that election is a complex and dependent process (Elklit and Svensson, 1997, Elklit and Reynolds, 2005, Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002, Lopez-Pintor, 2010, Lindberg, 2009), highlighting the importance of participation, competition and legitimacy in explaining election quality. While indicating that election has preoccupied intellectual discourse, common efforts^{xii} concentrate on democracy measures and it was not until 1999 when Robert A. Pastor examined the role of electoral administration in democratic transition that interest in election quality began to crystallise. Staffan Lindberg appeared the first to put forward a systematic framework for analysing the democratic quality elections.^{xiii} A closer look at Lindberg's contribution and others that followed (Norris, 2013, Norris, Frank, and Coma, 2013, Birch, 2011, Levitsky and Way, 2010, Norris, Frank, and Martinez iComa, 2014) necessitates the need for fine-grained modifications that provide better insights about the degree of participation and competition between and among candidates and parties in an election.

Equally, vote share thresholds and turnover (Lindberg, 2006) while significant in explaining electoral competition, are at distant from other essential attributes of competition.^{xiv} For instance, the 2007 presidential election was less competitive compared to the 2011 and 2015 elections. Indeed, the former had fallen far below the average of all other elections conducted in the country since 1999 to date. the same applied to the legislative elections as the 2007 legislative elections were poorer closer to perfect non-competitive election, confirming that all those who contested and won both as president or a congress member in 2007 did so comfortably and all losers whether second place or otherwise only established a presence among voters (Bratton, 2013). On the contrary, those who contested and won elections in the 2011 and 2015 elections either as president or a member of congress did face tighter competition. In fact, despite fielding an incumbent candidate in the 2011 election over a handpicked successor in the 2007 presidential election, the PDP struggled to get re-elected in the last 2011 election.^{xv} The same incumbent president had to give up to the opposition candidate in the 2015 elections.

The foregoing does not imply that the three major parameters of participation, competition, and legitimacy are key to democratic quality of elections, or that the use of experts' assessments is not enough in judging election quality and should be renounced. As I have argued, identifying, and determining the democratic quality of election require efforts beyond voter turnout and other parameters such as absence of vote buying, voter inducement, acceptance of defeat by incumbent or contestants etc, rather certain indices must be taken into cognisance. For example, the paper shows that competition between individual actors – candidates or parties remained at its lowest ebb in the 2007 elections with records far below all other elections conducted in the country since 1999. It is obvious that the 2007 presidential and legislative elections have fallen far below all other elections, the national and continental averages. In fact, the legislative elections were almost close to being perfectly uncompetitive, confirming Bratton's judgement that all those who contested and won both as president or a congress member in the 2007 elections did so comfortably and all losers whether second place or otherwise only established a presence among the voters during elections (Bratton, 2013: 24). Also, it is established that turnout is not enough in telling the story of electoral competition and the degree of electoral participation. Introducing the last measure of intensity of participation for example indicated that all the three elections of

2007, 2011, and 2015 have failed to offer that citizens Richard Katz (1998) partial power to influence decision making as all happened to fall far below 1 or even the African average of 0.5. Overall, however, it is well established that the two elections (2011 and 2015) are better than the 2007 elections in terms of competition, participation, and legitimacy.

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¹ The term real is use here to connote good or genuine election. The fact that Many sit-tight leaders such as President Paul Biya of Cameroon and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Gambia's Yahya Jammeh have either remained in or been removed from office indicates the use of election by political leaders to legitimize their unconstitutional stay.

² The former are set of frauds that alter the final election result and the later are frauds that could tilt but might not change the outcome (see Lopez-Pintor, 2010; Norris, 2013). Similarly, violent intimidation, repression and coercion carried out by the state or its security apparatus, and hired thugs by the opposition or any other groups or individuals which challenged regime stability is first-order malpractice and second-order malpractice are those challenges of electoral maladministration, technical inefficiency and frequent human errors that undermine the electoral process (Norris, 2013).

³ See our paper: (Sani & Alkali, Election Quality: Judgement and Measurement Challenges , 2016).

⁴ See the Electoral Integrity Project on why elections fail <https://sites.google.com/site/electoralintegrityproject4/about-this-project>.

⁵ For detail discussion of global norms and behavior of political actors see for instance (Norris, 2013 and 2014 Cf. Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001).

⁶ For detail discussion about demo-optimism and pessimism see for example (Bogaards, 2013; Bratton, 2013).

⁷ The elitist theories of democracy use periodic elections as a yardstick of participation. For example, according to Mill election "a political act, to be done only once in few years, and for which nothing in the daily habits of the citizen has prepared him, leaves his intellect and his moral dispositions very much as it found them (Katz, 1997: 69)." Intensity of participation is classified into three: pseudo-participation which is a situation where members are given the chance to ask and discuss aspects of a decision, but the power to make final decision rest with the superior. The second is partial participation which is a situation where people are given more chance and power of involvement but the ultimate power is with their principals. The last is full power to the making of a decision (Katz, 1997: 69-70).

⁸ Article 25 - of Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

⁹ I calculated the national average using the elections conducted in the country from 1999 to 2011 and the continental average using Bratton's figures provided in Table 2.1 (2013: 23).

¹⁰ See the reports of both the domestic and foreign election observers on the conduct of the two elections.

^{xi} See 'Bankole accepts defeat, congratulates winner', Vanguard, 10th April, 2011.

^{xii} Cutright (1963), Cutright and Wiley (1969), Dahl (1973), Gastil (1991), Arat (1991), Vanhanen (1990, 1997, 2003 and 2004), Alvarez et al. (1996), Przeworski et al. (1996 and 2002), Beck et al. (2002).

^{xiii} Refer to *Democracy and Elections in Africa and Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition* (Lindberg, 2006, 2009 respectively) for details.

^{xiv} Morse, (2012), Bogaard, (2007), and Diamond, (2002; 2008).

^{xv} For the debate on the relevance of fielding an incumbent and an incumbent handpicking a successor see Cheeseman (2010).