

Examining Citizens' Perception of Electoral Integrity in Anambra State, Nigeria

Chidebelu Munachi Victoria

*Department of Economics, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam, Anambra
State, Nigeria*

Abstract

Electoral integrity, understood as the extent to which an election meets internationally recognized standards of fairness, transparency, and accuracy across its full cycle, from voter registration through result declaration, remains a central concern in assessments of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. This paper examines citizens' perception of electoral integrity in Anambra State, distinguishing perceived integrity, the subjective judgment citizens form about an election's fairness, from the more technical, observer-assessed conception of electoral integrity documented in formal election observation reports. Drawing on the Electoral Integrity Project's global framework for assessing perceived election quality, and social judgment theory, the paper synthesizes documented survey research, election observation reports, and post-election commentary specific to Anambra State's recent electoral cycles, including the 2021 gubernatorial election and Anambra's participation in the 2023 general elections, to examine how citizens form judgments of electoral integrity across the distinct stages of the electoral cycle: pre-election administration, voting day conduct, and result collation and declaration. The paper finds that citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity in Anambra State are shaped not only by directly observed or experienced irregularities but substantially by the alignment, or misalignment, between electoral outcomes and citizens' own political preferences, alongside the credibility of information sources through which citizens learn about electoral conduct, including social media and party-aligned commentary. The paper concludes that improving genuine electoral integrity, while necessary, is not alone sufficient to improve citizens' perceptions of integrity, and recommends complementary transparency and communication measures targeted specifically at the perception-formation process.

Keywords: Electoral integrity, perception, Anambra State, election quality, social judgment theory

1. Introduction

Electoral integrity has become a central analytical concept in the study of democratic governance, denoting the extent to which an election's conduct, from voter registration and candidate nomination through voting day administration and result declaration, meets internationally recognized standards of fairness, accuracy, and transparency. While formal assessments of electoral integrity, typically conducted by domestic and international election observation missions, provide one important measure of election quality, citizens' own subjective perceptions of electoral integrity constitute an independently significant object of study, given their documented influence on political trust, willingness to accept electoral outcomes, and future electoral participation.

This paper examines citizens' perception of electoral integrity in Anambra State, asking: how do Anambra State citizens form judgments about the integrity of elections conducted in the state, and to what extent do these perceptions align with, or diverge from, the assessments of formal election observation bodies? The paper is particularly attentive to the possibility that perceived and observed electoral integrity may diverge systematically, given documented patterns in comparative electoral behaviour literature linking perceived integrity closely to whether citizens' preferred candidates prevailed.

The paper proceeds as follows: section two reviews relevant literature on electoral integrity assessment and perception formation; section three presents the theoretical framework; section four outlines the methodology; section five discusses findings across the pre-election, voting day, and result declaration stages of the electoral cycle, along with the role of information sources in shaping perception; and section six concludes with recommendations.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Electoral Integrity

Electoral integrity scholarship, notably associated with the Electoral Integrity Project led by Pippa Norris, conceptualizes election quality along multiple sequential stages, including electoral laws, electoral procedures, boundary delimitation, voter registration, party and candidate

registration, media coverage, campaign finance, voting process, vote count, and results management. This multi-stage framework provides a useful structure for disaggregating citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity by the specific stage of the electoral cycle to which those perceptions relate, rather than treating electoral integrity as a single undifferentiated judgment.

2.2 Perceived versus Observed Electoral Integrity

A significant strand of comparative literature distinguishes citizens' subjective perceptions of electoral integrity from the more technical assessments produced by election observation missions, generally finding that these two measures, while correlated, frequently diverge, with citizen perceptions more heavily influenced by whether one's preferred candidate won, prior partisan identification, and the framing of electoral conduct in media and social media discourse, relative to the more procedurally focused assessments of trained election observers.

2.3 Electoral Integrity Assessments in Anambra State

Formal election observation reports covering Anambra State's 2021 gubernatorial election and the state's participation in the 2023 general elections have generally characterized these elections as substantially, though not entirely, compliant with procedural integrity standards, noting isolated instances of technical and administrative irregularity alongside broadly peaceful voting day conduct relative to some other Nigerian states. Existing survey-based political attitude research in Anambra State and the wider South-East region has, however, documented more variable citizen perceptions of electoral integrity, suggesting a degree of divergence between formal observer assessment and citizen perception consistent with the broader comparative literature discussed above.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on the Electoral Integrity Project's multi-stage framework for conceptualizing election quality, which provides the structural basis for disaggregating this paper's analysis of citizen perception across the pre-election, voting day, and result declaration stages of the electoral cycle, rather than treating electoral integrity perception as an undifferentiated single judgment.

This is complemented by social judgment theory, associated with Muzafer Sherif, which holds that individuals evaluate new information relative to existing reference points, including prior attitudes and group identifications, with information consistent with prior attitudes assimilated readily while inconsistent information is often contrasted away or discounted. Applied to this paper, social judgment theory helps explain why citizens' perceptions of a given election's integrity are likely to be shaped substantially by their prior political preferences and partisan reference points, such that supporters of a winning candidate may assimilate ambiguous evidence of irregularity as insignificant, while supporters of a losing candidate may weigh the same evidence as more substantially compromising to the election's legitimacy.

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design based on a desk review and thematic synthesis of formal election observation reports covering Anambra State's recent electoral cycles, documented survey-based political attitude research specific to the state and the wider South-East region, and post-election media and civil society commentary. Thematic analysis is applied to organize the review according to the Electoral Integrity Project's stage-based framework, examining citizen perception separately across pre-election administration, voting day conduct, and result collation and declaration, and additionally examining the role of information source credibility in shaping these perceptions. This approach is appropriate given the exploratory nature of the inquiry and the paper's reliance on documented secondary sources rather than original primary survey administration.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Pre-Election Administration

The evidence reviewed suggests that citizen perceptions of pre-election administration in Anambra State, encompassing voter registration and permanent voter card distribution processes, are shaped significantly by direct personal experience with these administrative processes, with citizens reporting difficulty in voter card collection or registration verification exhibiting more

negative overall perceptions of electoral integrity than those experiencing smooth administrative processes, independent of formal observer assessments of these processes at an aggregate level.

5.2 Voting Day Conduct

Regarding voting day conduct specifically, the findings indicate that citizen perceptions are shaped by both directly witnessed events at polling units and by broader social and media narratives circulating during and immediately after the voting period, with isolated incidents of reported irregularity, including at times unverified or exaggerated social media claims, appearing capable of disproportionately shaping aggregate public perception relative to their actual documented scale in formal observer reports.

5.3 Result Collation and Declaration

Consistent with social judgment theory's prediction regarding partisan assimilation and contrast effects, the findings indicate the most pronounced divergence between citizen perception and formal observer assessment occurs at the result collation and declaration stage, where supporters of prevailing candidates generally report high confidence in the declared results, while supporters of candidates perceived to have underperformed relative to expectations frequently report substantially lower confidence in the same collation and declaration process, even where formal observer assessments characterize the process as substantially compliant with procedural standards.

5.4 The Role of Information Sources

Finally, the findings point to the significant role of information source credibility in shaping citizen perception of electoral integrity, with citizens relying predominantly on social media and party-aligned commentary for real-time information about electoral conduct exhibiting more polarized and volatile perceptions than those relying more heavily on formal INEC communications or established news media, consistent with the broader literature on social media's amplifying effect on politically charged and sometimes unverified information during electoral periods.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has examined citizens' perception of electoral integrity in Anambra State, finding that these perceptions are shaped substantially by direct personal administrative experience, exposure to social and media narratives, and, most significantly, by prior partisan preference and whether one's preferred candidate prevailed in the declared result, consistent with the assimilation and contrast effects predicted by social judgment theory. These findings indicate a meaningful divergence between citizen-perceived and formally observed electoral integrity, with implications for how electoral integrity interventions should be designed.

The paper recommends: first, INEC and relevant electoral administration bodies should prioritize proactive, transparent, and rapid communication regarding electoral conduct and results, particularly during the result collation stage, to reduce the space in which unverified social media narratives can shape public perception; second, civic education initiatives should aim to improve citizens' capacity to critically evaluate the credibility of electoral information sources, given the documented role of source credibility in shaping perception polarization; third, election observation and communication strategies should specifically anticipate and address the partisan assimilation and contrast dynamics identified in this paper, rather than assuming that procedural compliance alone will translate into broadly shared citizen confidence; and fourth, further empirical research, including direct primary survey work measuring Anambra citizens' electoral integrity perceptions disaggregated by partisan preference and information source reliance, is recommended to more precisely quantify the patterns identified in this qualitative synthesis.

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