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### Abstract

Elections are widely regarded as the cornerstone of democracy and a critical mechanism for ensuring good governance. This article explores the role of elections as a midwife of good governance, emphasizing their function in legitimizing political authority, fostering accountability, promoting citizen participation, and strengthening institutional frameworks. It argues that while elections alone cannot guarantee good governance, they serve as a necessary condition for its realization when conducted in a free, fair, and transparent manner.

**Keywords:** Elections, Democracy, Good Governance, Political Authority, Citizen's Participation

### Introduction

Good governance, often invoked as the moral compass of democratic societies, finds its true meaning in the lived experience of accountability, transparency, inclusivity, responsiveness, and fidelity to the rule of law (Towah, 2019; Olaniyan, 2024). These attributes are central to the governance frameworks advanced by the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, both of which emphasise accountability, transparency, participation, effectiveness, equity, and the rule of law as defining elements of sound governance (World Bank, 1992; UNDP, 1997). At the heart of this normative ideal lies the question of how power is acquired, exercised, restrained, and, when necessary, relinquished. Elections provide the most visible and institutionalised answer to this question, offering citizens a structured pathway through which sovereignty is expressed and authority is conferred. In this sense, elections may be conceived, metaphorically, as the midwife of good governance, ushering political authority into legitimacy while nurturing the institutional environment required for leadership that is both effective and people-centred (Dahl, 1971; Przeworski, Stokes, & Manin, 1999; Lindberg, 2006). Where elections are predictable, regular, credible, and broadly accepted, they lay a durable foundation for democratic consolidation and reinforce the principle that governance derives its authority from the consent of the governed (Ojo, 2007, Omotola, 2010, Olaniyan, 2026).

Beyond their periodic occurrence, elections constitute a continuous process through which democracy is sustained and renewed, and good governance forged (Ojo, 2007, Olaniyan, 2024). They are not mere ceremonial exercises but vital mechanisms that legitimise political authority, structure political competition, and entrench institutional norms (Dahl, 1971; Lindberg, 2006), all towards development (Olaniyan, 2024). When conducted with integrity, elections expand the realm of meaningful choice, enabling citizens to participate in shaping their collective future. This strengthens trust in governance structures and reduces the likelihood of authoritarian drift or systemic instability (Diamond, 2008; Norris, 2014). Conversely, where electoral processes are compromised, the consequences extend far beyond the ballot. Flawed elections weaken public confidence, damage legitimacy, depress participation, trigger protest, and, in some cases, deepen conflict and regime instability (Norris, 2014; Birch, 2011; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018).

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The interplay between elections and good governance becomes particularly pronounced in contexts such as Nigeria, where the promise of democracy has often been mediated by electoral malpractice, violence, institutional weakness, and declining public trust (Olaniyan, 2020). In such environments, the credibility of elections assumes heightened significance because it directly affects both leadership legitimacy and the quality of governance outcomes (Omotola, 2010; Norris, 2014, Olaniyan, 2021). When citizens perceive elections as credible, their confidence in governance is strengthened, and leaders are more likely to pursue policies that reflect public expectations because electoral accountability links political survival to public approval (Przeworski et al., 1999; Schedler, 1999; Ofori, 2019). However, when electoral integrity is questioned, as witnessed in election cycles marked by irregularities, violence, and declining participation, the resulting erosion of trust undermines not only the electoral process but also the wider democratic project (Norris, 2014; Lindberg, 2006; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Elections also perform a critical communicative function, serving as a feedback loop between citizens and those who govern (Turska-Kawa & Wojtasik, 2013). Through the ballot, citizens articulate approval, dissent, and aspiration, compelling leaders to remain attentive to pressing socio economic concerns such as poverty, infrastructure, security, and social justice. This reciprocal dynamic ensures that governance remains anchored in the needs and expectations of the populace, reinforcing democratic ideals of participation and inclusivity. In this regard, elections do not merely determine who governs; they shape how governance unfolds by aligning public policy with the collective will and by making leaders answerable to citizens (Przeworski et al., 1999; Schedler, 1999; Dahl, 1971; Ofori, 2019).

Ultimately, the indispensability of elections to good governance cannot be overstated. They confer legitimacy upon authority, provide mechanisms for accountability, empower citizens to influence the direction of public affairs, and reinforce the institutional foundations of democratic rule. Yet, their transformative potential is contingent upon the credibility of the processes that produce them, the resilience of the institutions that administer them, and the commitment of political actors to uphold democratic norms. Where these conditions are absent, elections risk degenerating into hollow rituals, stripped of their capacity to deliver meaningful governance. Where they are upheld, however, elections remain among the most potent instruments through which democracy realises its promise and governance becomes truly reflective of the people it serves (Dahl, 1971; Lindberg, 2006; Diamond, 2008; Norris, 2014; Cheeseman, 2015).

### **Elections and Good Governance**

The relationship between elections and good governance has occupied a central place in political science discourse, with a rich body of scholarship illuminating both the transformative promise of electoral processes and their inherent limitations within fragile democratic contexts. Across this literature, a broad consensus emerges that regular, competitive, and credible elections constitute the bedrock of democratic governance, serving as the principal mechanism through which legitimacy is conferred, accountability is enforced, political participation is encouraged, and institutional stability is sustained (Dahl, 1971; Huntington, 1991; Diamond, 1999; Lindberg, 2006; Norris, 2014, Olaniyan, 2026). Elections, in their ideal democratic form, translate the abstract principle of popular sovereignty into tangible political reality by ensuring that authority flows from the consent of the governed and remains subject to periodic renewal through public participation.

Classical democratic theory reinforces this position by situating elections at the center of participatory governance and constitutional order. Dahl's concept of polyarchy emphasises competitive elections, inclusive participation, freedom of expression, and access to alternative sources of information as indispensable pillars of democratic life (Dahl, 1971). Schumpeter (1942) similarly conceptualises democracy as an institutional arrangement through which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote. Also, Adam Przeworski (1991:10) defines democracy as the "system in which parties lose elections". Within this framework, elections are not isolated political rituals but components of a broader democratic ecosystem that enables citizens to shape political outcomes, influence policy direction, and constrain political authority (Held, 2006; Beetham, 1994). Contemporary democratic scholarship further argues that democracy cannot survive in the absence of free and fair elections because legitimacy becomes fragile, accountability weakens, and authoritarian tendencies begin to emerge (Diamond, 2008; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Norris, 2014). In African political thought, these democratic assumptions are increasingly linked to development discourse, where credible

elections are associated with poverty reduction, conflict management, social inclusion, and sustainable governance outcomes (Ake, 1996; Hyden, 2006; Cheeseman, 2015).

Empirical studies deepen this understanding by demonstrating how electoral integrity directly shapes governance outcomes across democratic societies. Where the rule of law is respected, political pluralism is protected, and citizens are able to exercise political rights without intimidation, elections are more likely to produce governments that are accountable, responsive, and development oriented (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Przeworski, Stokes, & Manin, 1999; Norris, 2014). Conversely, where electoral processes are characterised by fraud, violence, voter suppression, or administrative manipulation, governance gradually becomes detached from public expectations, institutional trust declines, and democratic legitimacy is weakened (Birch, 2011; Collier & Vicente, 2012; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018). In such circumstances, elections cease to function as mechanisms of accountability and instead become instruments through which political elites reproduce power without genuine democratic consent (Schedler, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010).

The African experience provides a particularly compelling illustration of these dynamics. Regional instruments such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance reflect a continental recognition that democratic legitimacy depends upon credible elections and constitutional governance (African Union, 2007). Yet, this normative aspiration frequently collides with political realities characterised by weak institutions, electoral manipulation, clientelism, and authoritarian resilience. Levitsky and Way (2010) describe many such systems as competitive authoritarian regimes, where elections are regularly conducted but fail to meet the substantive standards necessary for genuine democratic competition. In these contexts, the outward form of democracy is preserved while its substantive foundations are hollowed out, leaving citizens politically alienated and governance outcomes deeply compromised (Cheeseman, 2015; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018).

Comparative experiences across African states further illuminate the conditional relationship between elections and good governance. In countries such as Ghana, Botswana, Mauritius, and Senegal, relatively credible elections have strengthened democratic resilience, enhanced accountability, reinforced institutional legitimacy, and facilitated peaceful transfers of power (Gyimah Boadi, 2009; Lindberg, 2006; Cheeseman, 2015). These cases demonstrate how electoral integrity can function as a stabilising force by compelling political leaders to remain responsive to citizen demands and constitutional norms. By contrast, countries characterised by persistent electoral irregularities and institutional fragility often experience weakened accountability and governance crises. In Nigeria, recurrent electoral malpractice, vote buying, violence, and judicial controversies have repeatedly undermined public trust and weakened democratic consolidation (Omotola, 2010; Jega, 2015; Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2006). Similarly, disputed elections in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Côte d'Ivoire demonstrate how flawed electoral processes can trigger violence, intensify ethnic tensions, and destabilise governance structures (Collier & Vicente, 2012; Mueller, 2011; Bratton, 2013).

From an institutional perspective, the quality of elections is inseparable from the strength and credibility of the institutions that administer them. North (1990) argues that institutions shape political and economic behaviour by establishing the formal and informal rules that regulate interaction. Electoral institutions therefore occupy a strategic position within democratic governance because they mediate competition, structure political participation, and determine the legitimacy of political outcomes. Effective electoral management bodies, impartial judicial systems, independent electoral commissions, and enforceable legal frameworks create the conditions necessary for elections to function credibly (Pastor, 1999; Hartlyn, McCoy, & Mustillo, 2008). Where these institutions are robust, elections reinforce constitutionalism and political stability. Where they are weak or compromised, elections become vulnerable to manipulation, thereby eroding public confidence, and weakening governance outcomes (Norris, 2014; Birch, 2011).

Equally important is the role of citizen participation in sustaining electoral legitimacy and democratic accountability. Democratic governance depends not merely on the existence of elections but on the active and meaningful participation of citizens within the electoral process. Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995) argue that political participation is shaped by civic resources, mobilisation, and political engagement, while Putnam (1993) links democratic effectiveness to levels of social capital and civic trust. Informed and politically engaged citizens are therefore more likely to participate meaningfully in elections, strengthening the relationship between governance and public expectation. However,

experiences of fraud, violence, unmet expectations, and institutional distrust often reduce voter confidence and participation, weakening the representative character of governance (Norris, 2011; Birch, 2011). This dynamic has become particularly visible in Nigeria, where declining voter turnout reflects not only logistical and security challenges but also deeper frustrations with electoral credibility and governance performance (INEC, 2023; Omotola, 2010).

Ultimately, the literature converges on a nuanced but compelling conclusion: elections remain indispensable to the realisation of good governance, yet their effectiveness is never automatic. Legitimacy, accountability, institutional strength, civic participation, and adherence to democratic norms emerge as interconnected conditions that determine whether elections fulfil their democratic promise (Diamond, 1999; Norris, 2014; Lindberg, 2006). Positive democratic experiences across parts of Africa demonstrate how credible elections can deepen democratic consolidation and strengthen governance outcomes, while less successful cases expose the dangers of electoral malpractice, institutional fragility, and political violence (Cheeseman, 2015; Levitsky & Way, 2010). In this broader sense, elections may indeed serve as the midwife of good governance, but only when they are embedded within strong institutions, democratic culture, constitutionalism, and genuine political commitment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The social contract tradition provides a profound philosophical foundation for understanding the indispensable role of elections in legitimising governance within democratic societies. Rooted in the classical writings of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, the theory advances the proposition that political authority derives not from coercion or inherited privilege, but from the consent of the governed (Locke, 1980; Rousseau, 1968). This consent is neither abstract nor perpetual; rather, it is continually expressed and renewed through institutional mechanisms that enable citizens to participate in determining who governs them. Elections therefore emerge as the most visible and concrete expression of the social contract, offering citizens the opportunity to confer, withdraw, or renegotiate political legitimacy. Through this process, the relationship between state and society is transformed from one of domination into one of reciprocal obligation, where rulers are expected to govern in accordance with the collective aspirations of the people. In contexts where elections are credible, inclusive, and transparent, the social contract is strengthened and democratic legitimacy is reinforced. Conversely, where electoral processes are manipulated or exclusionary, governance becomes vulnerable to crises of legitimacy, public distrust, and political instability (Diamond, 2008; Norris, 2014).

An institutional perspective further enriches this understanding by locating elections within the wider architecture of political order and governance. Institutions, understood as the formal and informal rules that structure political behaviour, shape the quality of governance by regulating competition, mediating representation, and constraining abuses of power (North, 1990). Electoral institutions occupy a particularly strategic position within this framework because they determine how political authority is contested, transferred, and legitimised. When electoral bodies are independent, credible, and guided by clear constitutional and legal frameworks, they reinforce the principles of constitutionalism and the rule of law, thereby fostering stability, predictability, and public confidence in governance (Lindberg, 2006). Strong electoral institutions also help embed democratic norms by ensuring that political actors operate within agreed procedural boundaries. However, where electoral institutions are weak, compromised, or subjected to political interference, the consequences extend far beyond elections themselves. Such weaknesses often produce flawed leadership recruitment, inconsistent policymaking, diminished accountability, and declining public trust in democratic governance (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Norris, 2014).

Closely linked to both the social contract and institutional perspectives is the accountability framework, which conceptualises elections as cyclical mechanisms through which citizens evaluate and discipline political leaders. Democratic governance depends not only on the selection of leaders but also on the capacity of citizens to periodically assess governmental performance and impose electoral consequences where necessary. Przeworski, Stokes, and Manin (1999) argue that elections create incentives for political office holders to align their conduct with public expectations because their continued tenure depends upon periodic judgment at the polls. Elections therefore function not merely as moments of leadership selection but as instruments of democratic restraint and responsiveness. Through the possibility of electoral sanction, leaders are encouraged to pursue policies that address societal needs and reflect collective aspirations rather than narrow elite interests. In this sense, elections strengthen

inclusivity and participation by ensuring that governance remains connected to the preferences of the governed (Dahl, 1971). Where citizens can freely choose and, when necessary, replace political leaders, democratic governance is more likely to remain responsive, representative, and accountable.

Taken together, these theoretical traditions converge around a common insight: elections are indispensable to the realisation and sustenance of good governance. Through the social contract, elections ground political authority in popular consent; through institutionalism, they reinforce norms of legality, competition, and constitutional order; and through accountability theory, they connect political survival to public approval and performance. In this integrated sense, elections may indeed be understood as the midwife of democratic governance, bringing into existence a political order that is both representative and responsive to the aspirations of citizens. Yet, the transformative promise of elections remains dependent upon the credibility of the electoral process and the commitment of political actors to democratic norms. Where these conditions are absent, elections risk degenerating into symbolic rituals that preserve the outward appearance of democracy while emptying it of substantive meaning (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018).

These theoretical foundations acquire even greater significance within the African context, where elections have become central arenas through which questions of legitimacy, governance, and democratic consolidation are negotiated. Across countries such as Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, and South Africa, the interaction between democratic ideals and institutional realities demonstrates how elections can either deepen democratic governance or expose its fragility. In some contexts, credible elections have strengthened legitimacy and facilitated peaceful political transitions, while in others, flawed electoral processes have generated violence, institutional distrust, and governance crises (Lindberg, 2006; Cheeseman, 2015). It is within these lived political realities that the true test of elections as instruments of good governance emerges, as their capacity to legitimize authority, strengthen institutions, and sustain accountability is either realized or constrained by the dynamics of political practice.

### **How Elections Engender Good Governance**

Elections are widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of democratic governance, serving as the institutional mechanism through which citizens confer legitimacy on leaders, demand accountability, and influence policy direction. Their role in fostering good governance can be analysed through several interrelated dimensions, including legitimacy, accountability, citizen participation, and institutional strengthening (Adejumobi, 2000).

#### **Legitimacy of Leadership**

Elections confer legitimacy on political leaders by ensuring that authority flows from the consent of the governed. When citizens participate in free and fair elections, the resulting government enjoys a mandate rooted in popular sovereignty (Dahl, 1971). This legitimacy reduces the likelihood of authoritarianism and political instability, as leaders derive their authority from the people rather than coercion (Idowu and Mimiko, 2020). In contexts such as Ghana, credible elections have strengthened democratic consolidation, enabling peaceful transfers of power and reinforcing public trust in governance (Gyimah Boadi, 2009; Idowu and Mimiko, 2020; KumahAbiwu and Darkwa, 2020).

#### **Accountability and Responsiveness**

Elections act as a feedback mechanism between citizens and policymakers. Leaders are incentivised to act in the public interest, knowing they will face electoral judgment (Ofosu, 2019). This cyclical process fosters accountability and responsiveness, as governments are compelled to address pressing socio-economic issues in order to secure reelection (Basiru and Osunkoya, 2019; Ofosu, 2019). In Nigeria, however, electoral malpractice has often weakened this accountability loop, with fraudulent elections undermining citizens' ability to sanction poor governance (Basiru and Osunkoya, 2019; Idowu et al., 2022).

#### **Citizen Participation and Empowerment**

Elections empower citizens by providing them with the opportunity to influence governance outcomes. Participation in elections fosters civic engagement, political awareness, and inclusivity, ensuring that governance reflects collective aspirations rather than elite interests (Beetseh, 2013). In Kenya, despite the challenges of electoral violence, reforms following the 2007 and 2008 crisis have sought to enhance

citizen confidence in the electoral process, thereby strengthening participatory governance (Aker and Mbiti, 2010; Cheeseman et al., 2014; Erlich and Kerr, 2016).

### **Institutional Strengthening**

Electoral processes reinforce democratic institutions such as electoral commissions, legislatures, and the judiciary (Cheeseman, 2018; Gazibo, 2006). North emphasises that institutions shape political and economic performance by providing rules and constraints that guide behaviour (Binns et al., 2018). Strong electoral institutions, as seen in South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission, promote adherence to constitutionalism and the rule of law, thereby ensuring stability and predictability in governance (Cheeseman, 2018; Lodge, 2002). Conversely, weak institutions, as evident in parts of Nigeria, compromise electoral integrity and weaken governance outcomes (Gazibo, 2006; Idowu et al., 2022).

### **Challenges to Elections as Drivers of Good Governance**

Despite their potential, elections in Africa often face significant challenges such as fraud, violence, and weak institutional frameworks (Adejumobi, 2000; Basedau et al., 2007; Ndulo, 2003). These challenges undermine the credibility of electoral processes and erode public trust (Erlich and Kerr, 2016). As Diamond observes, democracy cannot thrive without credible elections, and governance suffers when citizens perceive elections as hollow rituals rather than genuine contests of ideas (Adejumobi, 2000).

### **The African Case Studies**

The practical realities of elections across Africa offer compelling illustrations of how theoretical frameworks, including democratic theory, social contract theory, institutionalism, and accountability, manifest in governance outcomes. Case studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, and Senegal reveal the diverse ways in which elections can either nurture or undermine good governance.

Nigeria presents a cautionary tale of fragile institutions and legitimacy challenges. Although elections have facilitated transitions from military to civilian rule, persistent malpractices such as vote buying, ballot manipulation, and violence have eroded legitimacy (Idowu et al., 2022). The 2023 elections, marked by notable irregularities, further weakened public trust and strained the social contract, reinforcing the argument that genuine participation remains essential to democratic stability (Dahl, 1971).

Ghana, by contrast, exemplifies consolidation through credible elections. Since the 1990s, the country has conducted relatively free and fair elections, characterised by peaceful alternation of power between incumbents and opposition parties. The autonomy of the Electoral Commission has been central to this success, reflecting institutional strength and predictability (Binns et al., 2018). These developments have reinforced accountability, democratic consolidation, and citizen confidence (Gyimah Boadi, 2009; Idowu and Mimiko, 2020; KumahAbiwu and Darkwa, 2020).

Kenya's experience highlights the accountability function of elections. The flawed 2007 elections triggered widespread violence and exposed institutional weaknesses, yet subsequent reforms, including the 2010 Constitution and the strengthening of the electoral commission, have enhanced responsiveness and restored a measure of public confidence (Cheeseman et al., 2014; Erlich and Kerr, 2016). This trajectory aligns with the view that credible elections compel leaders to prioritise public interest (Ofosu, 2019).

South Africa demonstrates how strong institutions sustain democratic stability. Its Independent Electoral Commission has consistently delivered credible elections, upholding constitutionalism and the rule of law while ensuring peaceful transitions and inclusivity (Cheeseman, 2018; Lodge, 2002). In line with institutionalist thought, these structures provide the stability and predictability necessary for effective governance (Binns et al., 2018).

Senegal stands as a model of electoral legitimacy and democratic resilience. The 2000 elections, which peacefully ended decades of single party dominance, illustrate the power of elections to renew the social contract and reaffirm the centrality of citizen consent in governance.

Taken together, these cases affirm that elections possess the capacity to serve as the midwife of good governance, but only where they are credible, inclusive, and transparent. Nigeria highlights the dangers

of institutional weakness, Ghana and Senegal demonstrate the rewards of consolidation, Kenya reveals the transformative potential of reform, and South Africa underscores the stabilising power of strong institutions. Collectively, they validate the theoretical proposition that elections can nurture good governance, while also reminding us that their success is contingent upon context, credibility, and commitment to democratic norms.

### **Challenges to African Elections**

Despite their theoretical promise, elections within African contexts frequently encounter formidable challenges that constrain their ability to deliver good governance. These challenges, which span electoral malpractices, institutional fragility, political violence, and technological limitations, collectively erode credibility, weaken public trust, and undermine the mechanisms through which accountability is sustained (Adejumobi, 2000; Basedau et al., 2007; Ndulo, 2003).

#### ***Electoral Malpractices***

Electoral malpractices remain one of the most persistent distortions of democratic processes across the continent. Practices such as vote buying, ballot manipulation, and result falsification continue to compromise the integrity of elections, distorting the genuine will of the electorate and undermining the legitimacy of those who emerge as leaders (Idowu et al., 2022). In Nigeria, repeated experiences of electoral fraud, such as vote buying, ballot snatching and stuffing and result manipulations, have significantly weakened public confidence in both elections and governance, reinforcing the perception that outcomes are often predetermined rather than earned through credible competition (Basiru and Osunkoya, 2019; Olaniyan, 2020; Idowu et al., 2022). As has been widely observed, democracy loses its substance when elections devolve into hollow rituals rather than authentic contests of ideas (Adejumobi, 2000).

#### ***Weak Institutions***

The effectiveness of elections is deeply contingent upon the strength and independence of the institutions that administer them. Yet, in many African states, electoral management bodies remain under resourced, politically influenced, or structurally weak, thereby limiting their capacity to enforce rules and maintain credibility (Gazibo, 2006). Institutional theory underscores that weak institutions fail to impose the necessary constraints that guide political behaviour, resulting in governance outcomes that are inconsistent and often unstable (Binns et al., 2018). The experience of Kenya prior to its institutional reforms illustrates how fragile electoral bodies can trigger disputes and undermine democratic processes (Cheeseman et al., 2014; Erlich and Kerr, 2016).

#### ***Political Violence and Instability***

In several African democracies, elections have paradoxically become triggers of instability rather than instruments of order. Electoral contests are often accompanied by violence, intimidation, and clashes that threaten both lives and democratic integrity. Kenya's 2007 and 2008 post-election crisis, which resulted in significant loss of life, remains a stark illustration of how electoral disputes can escalate into national crises (Cheeseman et al., 2014). Nigeria has similarly witnessed recurring electoral violence, which continues to hinder democratic consolidation and discourage citizen participation (Basedau et al., 2007; Idowu et al., 2022, Olaniyan & Bello, 2022).

#### ***Low Voter Confidence and Participation***

A direct consequence of flawed electoral processes is the erosion of voter confidence. When citizens perceive elections as manipulated or predetermined, disengagement becomes a rational response. This withdrawal diminishes participation and weakens the legitimacy of governance, as elected leaders increasingly represent a narrow segment of the population rather than the broader citizenry. Declining confidence, therefore, does not merely affect turnout but strikes at the core of democratic representation, as outcomes lose their claim to collective consent (Beetsch, 2013).

#### ***Corruption and Elite Capture***

Elections, rather than serving as instruments of accountability, can in some contexts reinforce elite dominance. The control of financial and political resources allows powerful actors to shape electoral

outcomes in their favour, often at the expense of broader societal interests. This form of elite capture undermines the principles of accountability and inclusivity, perpetuating governance systems that prioritise narrow interests over public welfare (Gyimah Boadi, 2009; Ofosu, 2019). The persistence of such dynamics continues to impede the realisation of good governance across many African states (Gyimah Boadi, 2009).

### ***Technological and Logistical Challenges***

While technological innovations such as biometric voter registration and electronic transmission of results have been introduced to enhance electoral credibility, they have also introduced new vulnerabilities. Technical failures, infrastructural deficiencies, and concerns about cyber manipulation have, in some cases, undermined confidence rather than strengthened it (Idowu et al., 2022). Nigeria's 2023 elections, marked by challenges associated with the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System, illustrate how technological shortcomings can compromise transparency and erode public trust in the electoral process (Idowu et al., 2022).

### **Consequences of Flawed Elections on Democracy and Good Governance**

Flawed elections represent one of the most profound distortions of democratic governance, striking at the very core of popular sovereignty and eroding the moral architecture upon which democracy rests. At its foundation, democracy derives legitimacy from the capacity of citizens to select their leaders freely and meaningfully, thereby conferring authority through consent and ensuring accountability in governance. Elections serve as the institutional expression of this consent, transforming political authority from coercive imposition into a collectively sanctioned mandate (Siachiwena & Saunders, 2021). However, when electoral processes are compromised through practices such as vote buying, ballot manipulation, intimidation, administrative interference, and result falsification, this foundational principle is subverted. What should function as an arena of genuine competition is instead converted into a managed process that privileges entrenched elites, thereby hollowing out the substance of democracy while preserving its outward rituals (Birch, 2011; van Ham & Lindberg, 2015).

The immediate consequence of such distortion is a crisis of legitimacy. Where electoral integrity is absent, the authority of those who emerge from the process becomes deeply contested, not necessarily in formal terms but in the realm of public perception. Citizens begin to question not only the outcome of elections but the credibility of the institutions that produce them. As Norris (2014) persuasively argues, electoral integrity is central to sustaining public confidence, and its erosion generates distrust, disengagement, and institutional fragility. In Nigeria, repeated experiences of flawed electoral administration during the Fourth Republic have contributed to declining public confidence in democratic processes, thereby weakening the foundations of democratic consolidation (Omotola, 2010). In such contexts, participation becomes increasingly symbolic, and abstention emerges not as apathy but as a rational response to perceived futility.

Flawed elections also generate conditions conducive to political violence and instability. When political actors and citizens perceive that electoral outcomes do not reflect the genuine will of the electorate, the contest for power often shifts beyond institutional channels into extra electoral arenas. Empirical evidence from Sub Saharan Africa demonstrates that weak constraints on political actors create opportunities for intimidation, coercion, and electoral fraud, thereby heightening the risk of conflict (Collier & Vicente, 2012). In Nigeria, electoral violence has repeatedly shaped the dynamics of political competition, discouraged participation, and enabled the imposition of preferred candidates (Nwolise, 2007). Similarly, Bratton (2008) shows that the combination of vote buying and intimidation alters voter behaviour, reducing the autonomy of electoral choice while reinforcing patronage networks. In this way, flawed elections transform what should be peaceful mechanisms of political contestation into potential flashpoints of instability.

Beyond violence, flawed elections entrench systems of elite capture and patronage politics. When electoral success is secured through manipulation rather than persuasion, political actors become accountable not to the electorate but to the networks that sustain their hold on power. This reconfiguration of accountability distorts governance outcomes, as leaders prioritise the interests of financiers, party elites, and coercive actors over the broader public good. Over time, this dynamic reinforces a self-perpetuating cycle in which poor governance deepens socio economic vulnerability,

vulnerability increases susceptibility to electoral inducement, and inducement sustains the very governance failures that produced the vulnerability. The democratic ideal of representation is thus replaced by a transactional logic in which citizenship is commodified and political participation reduced to exchange.

More fundamentally, flawed elections accelerate processes of democratic backsliding. Rather than abrupt breakdowns, contemporary democratic erosion often occurs gradually, through the systematic weakening of institutions and the manipulation of formal rules. Bermeo (2016) observes that modern forms of democratic backsliding frequently operate within the framework of elections themselves, allowing incumbents to maintain a veneer of legitimacy while undermining substantive competition. This aligns with the concept of competitive authoritarianism, where elections persist but are structured in ways that consistently advantage those in power (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) further demonstrate that electoral manipulation has evolved into a sophisticated repertoire of strategies, including disinformation, administrative bias, and procedural distortion, all designed to maintain control while preserving democratic appearances. Under such conditions, elections no longer function as instruments of accountability but as mechanisms for legitimizing pre-determined outcomes.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the weakening of democratic consolidation. While repeated elections can, under favourable conditions, contribute to the gradual deepening of democratic norms, this process is contingent upon the credibility of those elections. Lindberg (2006) argues that elections can serve as a learning mechanism for democratic behaviour, but only when they retain a meaningful connection to participation, competition, and accountability. Where electoral processes are consistently flawed, they instead produce the opposite effect, teaching citizens that power is captured rather than earned, that institutions are pliable rather than impartial, and that accountability is selective rather than universal. This erosion of democratic norms is particularly dangerous in contexts marked by social fragmentation and economic inequality, where the absence of credible political channels increases the risk of instability.

Ultimately, flawed elections do far more than distort isolated electoral outcomes; they gradually reconfigure the very essence of the political system. While the visible architecture of democracy may endure, reflected in periodic elections, party competition, and the existence of formal institutions, its substantive core becomes increasingly hollow. As the voice of the electorate is persistently diluted through manipulation, coercion, or exclusion, governance is stripped of its legitimacy, accountability is eroded, and the foundations of political stability are weakened. In such a climate, democracy risks devolving into a performative spectacle, where the outward rituals of participation obscure the absence of authentic choice and meaningful representation. The imperative of safeguarding electoral integrity therefore extends beyond procedural necessity; it lies at the heart of sustaining credible governance and preserving democratic order. This reality is further underscored by empirical evidence of judicial interventions in Nigeria, where several elections have been nullified by the courts from 1999 to date, as presented in the Table below.

**Table: Governorship Elections Overturned by Courts in Nigeria (1999–Date)**

S/N	Year	State	Initially Declared Winner	Court Decision/Outcome	Final Beneficiary
1	2003	Anambra	Chris Ngige	Election nullified; new winner declared	Peter Obi
2	2007	Rivers	Celestine Omehia	Removed by Supreme Court; not valid candidate	Rotimi Amaechi
3	2007	Edo	Oserheimen Osunbor	Election overturned; tribunal declared winner	Adams Oshiomhole
4	2007	Ondo	Olusegun Agagu	Election nullified by Court of Appeal	Olusegun Mimiko
5	2007	Ekiti	Segun Oni	Election nullified	Kayode

				after rerun by Appeal Court	Fayemi
6	2007	Osun	Olagunsoye Oyinlola	Election overturned by Appeal Court	Rauf Aregbesola
7	2007	Delta	Emmanuel Uduaghan	Election annulled; rerun ordered	Uduaghan after rerun
8	2007	Sokoto	Aliyu Wamakko	Election nullified; rerun ordered	Wamakko after rerun
9	2007	Bayelsa	Timipre Sylva	Election nullified; rerun ordered	Sylva after rerun
10	2007	Cross River	Liyellmoke	Election annulled; rerun ordered	Imoke after rerun
11	2007	Kogi	Ibrahim Idris	Election nullified; rerun ordered	Idris after rerun
12	2007	Adamawa	Murtala Nyako	Election annulled; rerun ordered	Nyako after rerun
13	2019	Zamfara	APC Candidate	All APC wins nullified	PDP Candidate
14	2019	Imo	Emeka Ihedioha	Result nullified; votes added	Hope Uzodinma
15	2019	Bayelsa	David Lyon	Election nullified before swearing in	DouyeDiri

*Note. Compiled by the authors from verified judicial and media reports on Nigerian governorship election disputes since 1999 as indicated on the table.*

## **Recommendations**

### ***Strengthening Electoral Institutions***

Electoral management bodies must be empowered to operate with genuine independence, supported by adequate funding and protected from political interference. Strong institutions provide the stability and predictability required for credible elections and effective governance (Binns et al., 2018). Ghana's experience demonstrates how autonomous electoral bodies can foster democratic consolidation and enhance governance outcomes (Gyimah Boadi, 2009).

### ***Enhancing Electoral Integrity***

Governments should prioritize the deployment of transparent and reliable electoral technologies, including biometric systems and electronic result transmission, while ensuring robust safeguards against manipulation. The experience of Nigeria's 2023 elections highlights the importance of dependable innovation in maintaining electoral credibility (Idowu et al., 2022).

### ***Promoting Civic Education and Voter Engagement***

Comprehensive civic education initiatives are essential for equipping citizens with the knowledge required to participate meaningfully in elections. An informed electorate is more likely to engage actively, thereby strengthening accountability and legitimacy (Beetseh, 2013).

### ***Mitigating Electoral Violence***

Preventive measures such as early warning systems, inter party agreements, and community-based conflict resolution mechanisms should be institutionalized to reduce the incidence of electoral violence. Kenya's post crisis reforms provide evidence of how such strategies can restore confidence and stabilize the electoral environment (Cheeseman et al., 2014).

### ***Enforcing Transparency and Accountability***

Political actors must be held to strict standards of transparency, particularly in campaign financing and adherence to codes of conduct. Effective accountability mechanisms help to curb elite capture and ensure that leadership remains aligned with public interests (Ofosu, 2019).

### ***Harnessing Regional and International Support***

Regional and international organizations should continue to provide election observation, technical assistance, and, where necessary, sanctions against electoral malpractice. Such support strengthens domestic institutions and reinforces adherence to democratic norms (Diamond, 2008).

### ***Leveraging Digital Platforms for Inclusivity***

Digital technologies should be strategically utilized to engage young people and marginalized groups, expanding participation, and ensuring that governance reflects the diversity of societal interests.

### **Conclusion**

Elections remain indispensable to the attainment of good governance, serving as the principal mechanism through which legitimacy is conferred, accountability is enforced, and citizens are empowered to shape the direction of public affairs. They establish the institutional framework through which authority is transferred, leaders are evaluated, and governance is aligned with societal expectations. The varied experiences of African states underscore the dual potential of elections. While countries such as Ghana and Senegal illustrate how credible electoral processes can consolidate democracy and strengthen governance others such as Nigeria and Kenya reveal the dangers posed by electoral malpractice, institutional weakness, and political violence.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of elections as instruments of good governance depends on their credibility, inclusivity, and transparency. Where these qualities are upheld, elections serve as the midwife of democratic governance, delivering legitimacy, accountability, and responsiveness. Where they are compromised, they risk becoming hollow rituals, unable to fulfil their democratic promise. The imperative, therefore, is clear: African democracies must prioritize credible electoral processes as the foundation upon which transparent, inclusive, and people-centered governance can be built.

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