



# Local Government Elections in Nigeria: History, Dynamics and Challenges (1999-2023)

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## Abstract

Nigeria is a federal state with three distinct constitutionally recognized tiers of government, the federal government, state government, and local government. While the federal and state governments are functioning according to the letters and spirit of the Constitution (1999 as amended 2011) regarding consistent and periodic elections; the same cannot be said of the local government across the country. The study traced the history of local government elections in the country, delved into the dynamics of local government elections within the period under study, revealed the challenges of conducting local government elections, and made policy recommendations to reposition local government as an independent tier of government for effective service delivery in the country.

The study utilized qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data were generated from questionnaire administration and in-depth interviews with purposively selected respondents in Southwest, Nigeria. The quantitative data were gathered from relevant materials to complement the qualitative data. Data collected were analyzed using percentage, t-test, and relative impact index as well as context analysis methods. The study concluded that there was a high level of inconsistency in the conduct of local government elections in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023.

## Keywords

Local Government, Development, Election, Grassroots, Tiers of Government

## 1. Introduction

The effort to reform local government for improved service delivery in Nigeria has been a consistent topic among scholars, politicians, and practitioners since the pre-independence era. The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1979 and 1999 (2011 as amended) acknowledges three distinct tiers of government: Federal, State, and Local. During the period under review (1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023), there have been seven cycles of general elections at the federal and state levels nationwide. However, the same cannot be said for local governments across the country. While some states have conducted regular local government elections, others have relied on appointees for local government administration.

In the General Obasanjo-led military government's quest to return the country to democratic rule and enhance good governance in 1976, local government was defined in the 1976 Reform Guidelines as:

*government at the local level is exercised through representative councils established by law to exercise specific powers within defined areas. These powers should give the council substantial control over local affairs as well as the staff, and institutional and financial powers to initiate and direct the provision of services and to determine and implement projects to complement the activities of the state and federal governments in the areas, and to ensure, through the active participation of the people and their traditional institutions, that local initiative and response to local needs and conditions are maximized.*

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It is safe to assert that local government is the bedrock of democracy, and it provides the platform for grassroots and citizens' participation in the process of governance. An essential part of the Federal Government of Nigeria's definition of local government in the 1976 Reform Guidelines is its representative and participative criteria. One way through which the people of the grassroots can participate and be represented in government is through elections. Elections have been hailed by many as the hallmark of democracy, and the expectations of what it can accomplish in terms of development, and citizens' participation in the governmental process are high ( Omar, 2012; Lingberg, 2006).

Local governments between 1960 and 1978 were not constitutionally recognized as a tier of government in Nigeria. The various regional and later state governments conducted the affairs of local governments as best suited them. The 1976 Local Government Reform, which has been described by scholars (Adeyeye, 2016; Omar, 2012; Agagu, 2011; Ideh, 2004; & Gboyaga, 2003;) as a watershed in the history of local government administration in Nigeria, was incorporated into the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. The Constitution did not only recognize local government as a tier of government but also provided for democratically elected local councils across the country. Section 7 (1), of the 1979 Constitution stated that:

*the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this Constitution guaranteed; and accordingly, the Government of every State shall subject to section 8 of this Constitution, ensure their existence under a law which provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance, and functions of such councils.*

The 1976 local government reform brought a new democratic life into the local government in Nigeria. The reform recognized local government as the third tier of government in Nigeria and sought to enhance grassroots participation in governance by bringing government closer to the citizens at the local levels. The reform granted some measure of autonomy to the local government and provided for a uniform democratic elected local government system in the country. This reform was consolidated in the 1979 Constitution (Adeyeye, 2016). Unfortunately, these reforms could not be realized as caretaker committees, instead of elected officials were in charge of local government administration throughout the second republic (1979 - 1983) before the military intervened and seized power early in the second term of the regime in December 1983 (Aborishade & Mundit, 2002). Subsequently, all attempts made at reforming and repositioning local government as a distinct autonomous tier of government for effective service delivery and citizens' participation in the governmental process at the grassroots by the various military governments did not materialize.

With the return of the country to democratic rule in 1999, expectations were high that local government would regain its lost constitutional position as an independent tier of government and deliver on its mandate. Unfortunately, the trend of elections and democratic experience at the grassroots has so far not justified the expectations of Nigerians at the start of the fourth republic. Local government elections have not been conducted consistently across the country. The study traced the history of the conduct of local government elections in the country, it empirically identified the major challenges of conducting local government elections, further delved into the dynamics of local government elections within the period under study, and concluded by making policy recommendations to reposition local government as an independent tier of government for effective service delivery in the country.

## **2. The History of Local Government Elections in Nigeria**

Elections into local councils were first organized in Nigeria during the latter colonial period. The elections were held in a bid to contain the growing tide of anti-colonial nationalism after the Second World War (Agagu 2011, Ola & Tonwe, 2009). There was broad consensus among the educated elite on the need to democratize the system of local government. This forced the colonial administration in both the Eastern and Western regions to begin steps leading to a representative system in the early 1950s. However, elections were first held in some local government councils in the Eastern Region before they were introduced in the Western Region (ibid).

Several commissions were established during the era by the colonial government to effect reforms that would increase local community representation in the overall administration of local affairs. According to Omar (2012), the first step in this regard was taken in 1948 with the constitution of a selected committee of members of the Eastern House of Assembly to study a memorandum on the subject prepared by Brigadier E.J. Gibbons, a Senior Resident in the Eastern Province. This led to the promulgation of the Local Government Law of 1950 was intended to remedy a major defeat of native administration, namely, that the local councils were not sufficiently represented, especially the educated elite. Therefore, a significant feature of this law was the legal requirement that the instrument establishing a council should be specified, the time of election to the council and the size of elective seats. It provided for the three basic types of authority-county, district and local councils, each autonomous of another. If the reform however, did not produce any change in term of representation. It was not until after 1955 that the premier of the Eastern region, Dr. Azikwe, could promise the introduction of universal adult suffrage in one urban as a pilot scheme (Gboyega, 1987). The reform made it legally obligatory that elections be the means of selecting councilors.

Local Government Reform in the Western Region followed the example set for three basic types of councils: the divisional, district, and local councils. The councils had three years of tenure and the instrument establishing each council specified its composition and fixed the time for its elections. The divisional council was headed by a President who was the paramount chief of the area, where there was none; the office was filled in rotation by the recognized traditional members, some of who were permanent, and others elected for a three-year period. It became five years after the introduction of this reform in 1957, the expectation of operating a liberal representative local government system was not being realized due to political interference by the regional government controlled by the Action Group (AG).

Similarly, the Native Authority Law of 1954 introduced in the Northern Region did not produce any major change in the local administration. Traditional rulers became even more prominent in the region, the Northern People's

Congress (NPC) was essentially made up of nobility, and the Executive Councils at the regional government included a powerful group of traditional rulers.

The Native Authority Law of 1954 therefore did not attempt to make a sweeping re-organization of local administration based on popular participation. Thus, by the time the military took over power in January 1966, the local government in Nigeria was not representative. It is important to note at independence in 1960 through 1966, the Eastern and Western Regions enacted the Local Government Law of 1960 which spelt out district structure for the system. In the North, the Native Authority Law of No. 4 of 1954 continued to be in operation until 1966 when the military took over power.

In 1967, the administrative structure of Nigeria changed with the creation of twelve states from the existing four regions. Military Governors dissolved every existing local administration while some large divisions and districts were created from the old arrangement. In 1972, the council-manager model of the United States and Canada was adopted by abolishing Advisory Committee System, replacing them with standing management committee with an administrative executive (Alao, Osekede&Omolabi, 2015).

Attempts were made to democratize local government system before the military returned power to civilian regime in 1979. The most fundamental reform was the Local Government Reform of 1976 embarked upon by the Muritala/Obasanjo regime. The 1976 Local Government Reform accorded local government the third-tier status for the first time in Nigeria. The reforms also released guidelines for local government service commission for effective service delivery and traditional rulers were assigned advisory roles throughout the country.

The 1976 Local Government Reform was incorporated into the 1979 Constitution which recognized Local Government as the third tier of government in Nigeria with constitution assigned and defined roles and democratically elected councils. Section 7(1) of the 1979 Constitution states:

*the system of local government by democratically elected local government councils is under this constitution guaranteed; accordingly, the government of every state shall ensure their existence under a law that provides for the establishment, structure, composition, finance, and functions of local councils.*

The negative consequences of the 1979 constitution placing local councils under the direct control of the state governments have hindered democratic local government in the country under civilian rule both in the second and fourth Republic as currently witnessed.

## 2.1 Local Government Elections from 1979 - 1998

According to Ola & Tonwe (2009), appropriate steps were taken by the military regime to operationalize the constituent elements of the local government reforms of 1976. Elections were held at the local government level throughout the country on a non-party basis in December 1976. There were elective representatives at the local council between December 1976 and October 1979 when the country returned to democratic rule.

The civilian regime of the Second Republic at inception dissolved all the elective local council on flimsy excuses and replaced it with management committee in the country. Elections were not held in local councils across the country from October 1979 to December 1983 when the military took over power again. Thus, the constitutional guarantee of a democratic system of local councils could not be realized.

Under the General Babangida-led federal military government, elections for local councils were held across the country on two-party basis in December 1990 and the elected officials were in office till November 1993. This marked the end of the abortive "Third Republic" when the then military President stepped aside due to pressure and protests occasioned by the annulment of the June 12, 1993, Presidential Election (opt cit).

**Table 1** Shows the number of times elections were held from 1976 to 1998 after the introduction of the 1976 Local Government Reform which introduced democratic local government councils in the country as stated in the 1979 Constitution.

S/No.	Year	Elections
I.	1976-1979	Elected local government councils on a non-party basis.
II.	October 1979-December 1983	Management Committee with selected Chairman and Councilors.
III.	January 1984-August 1985	Sole Administrators/ Management Committee
IV.	September 1985-November 1987	Sole Administrators.
V.	December 1987-July 1989	Elected local councils on a non-party basis.
VI.	August 1989-November 1990	Management Committee with Sole Administrators.
VII.	December 1990-November 1993	Elected Local Councils on a party basis.
VIII.	December 1993-April 1994	Secretaries (Directors of personnel) were in charge at the order of state military administrators.
IX.	April 1994- March 1997	Appointed chairmen with 4 supervisors.
X.	March 1997- June 1998	Elected council on a party basis.
XI.	June 1998- May 1999	Sole Administrators with 4 supervisors.

Source: Etebom, 2019

## 2.2 The Dynamics of Local Government Elections in the Fourth Republic: 1999 – 2023

As part of the Federal Military Government transition program to return the country to civil rule in 1999, local government elections were conducted on a party basis throughout the country in 1998 for a three-year term. At the dawn of the Fourth Republic on May 29, 1999, hopes were high that local government administration would be repositioned to ensure democratic participation at the grassroots level across the country. On the contrary, several scholars like Adeyeye (2016), Ola & Tonwe (2009), Agagu (2011), Aghayere (2010), Omar (2010), and Aluko (2010) have argued that: the reverse is the case, infrequent credible elections have bedeviled local government since 1999. Sadly, regular periodic free and fair elections have eluded the third tier of government and the government closest to the people in Nigeria.

**Table 2** Shows the inconsistency in the conduct of elections at the local government level in the country from the inception of the Fourth Republic in 1999 to 2023.

S/No.	State	Years of Elections were conducted	Number of Times Elections were conducted
1	Abia	2004, 2008, 2023	3
2	Adamawa	2004, 2008, 2012, 2022	4
3	Akwa-Ibom	2004, 2008, 2012, 2017	4
4	Anambra	2013	1
5	Bauchi	2004, 2008	2
6	Bayelsa	2004, 2010, 2013, 2019	4
7	Benue	2004, 2007, 2012, 2017, 2022	5
8	Bornu	2004, 2007, 2020	3
9	Cross-River	2004, 2010, 2013, 2020	4
10	Delta	2004, 2008, 2014, 2021	4
11	Ebonyi	2004, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2022	5
12	Edo	2004, 2007, 2013	3
13	Ekiti	2004, 2009, 2015, 2021	4
14	Enugu	2004, 2007, 2011, 2013, 2017, 2021	6
15	Gombe	2004, 2013, 2017, 2020	4
16	Imo	2004, 2008, 2018	3
17	Jigawa	2004, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2021	5
18	Kaduna	2004, 2012, 2021	3
19	Kano	2004, 2007, 2009, 2014, 2021	5
20	Kastina	2004, 2010, 2022	3
21	Kebbi	2004, 2008, 2012, 2017, 2022	5
22	Kogi	2004, 2008, 2013	3
23	Kwara	2004, 2010, 2013, 2017	4
24	Lagos	2004, 2008, 2012, 2017, 2021	5
25	Nassarawa	2004, 2008, 2014, 2021	4
26	Niger	2004, 2008, 2014	3
27	Ogun	2004, 2007, 2012, 2016, 2019, 2021	6
28	Ondo	2004, 2007, 2016,	3
29	Osun	2004, 2007, 2022	3
30	Oyo	2004, 2007, 2021	3
31	Plateau	2004, 2008, 2014, 2021	4
32	Rivers	2004, 2011, 2015, 2023	4
33	Sokoto	2004, 2008, 2011, 2016, 2021	5
34	Taraba	2004, 2007, 2012, 2017, 2023	5
35	Yobe	2004, 2007, 2013, 2017, 2021	5
36	Zamafara	2004, 2012, 2016, 2019	4
37	FCT/Abuja	2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2022	5

*Source: Adeyeye, 2016 updated by Etebom, 2023*

**Table 2** laid credence to the inconsistency in the local councils' electoral system. From the above table, only two states (Ogun and Enugu) have been consistent in the conduct of local government elections in the country. Anambra State once while Bauchi had conducted two times. It is on record that apart from Nassarawa State Local Councils polls in 2014 and Kaduna in 2021, where the opposition party, PDP won some seats, the trend in other States since the return of democratic rule in 1999 has been the party of incumbent Governors winning all the seats for both chairman and councilors in the States.

In most cases, the opposition parties boycott the elections (see The Nation, 6 December 2017). Outside 2004 when local council polls were held across the country except in Anambra State, the subsequent local councils' polls that have been conducted have been at the will of the State Governors, these scholars have argued from literature as one of the major reasons for the inconsistency in the conduct of local councils' elections in the country.

Adeyeye (2016), argued that the cause of this is not far-fetched. According to him, the state governments exerted undue control over the councils against the provision of sections 7 (1) and (8) of the constitution, authorizing states to run the council with unelected committees in the interview while putting in place appropriate arrangements for the conduct of fresh polls. He added, this control further reflected in states' intermitted dissolution of the council at will even before the three-year tenure recognized by Decree 36 of 1998 Electoral Law (The Basic Constitutional and Transitional Provisions) lapses.

### 3. Challenges of Conducting Local Council Elections in Nigeria between 1999 And 2023

The above subject matter was addressed through the analysis and discussion of data gathered through the administration of questionnaires and the conduct of in-depth interviews in purposively selected LGAs in Southwestern, Nigeria. The justification for choosing the Southwest was informed by of the homogeneous nature of local government areas in the country, its proximity to the researcher, and the constitutional provision for a democratic and uniform structure of local councils across the country. Among the selected respondents were local government senior and junior officers, traditional rulers, members of the State House of Assembly, officials of political parties, officials of the Ministry of Local Government Affairs, executives of NULGE, adult electorates, and members of civil society. A total of 532 copies of questionnaires were administered to the above-mentioned category of respondents. However, 401 copies of the questionnaires were retrieved from the field, thus representing 75.2% of the total questionnaires that were administered. In addition, the data analysis was complemented with qualitative responses gathered through interview sessions conducted with key selected stakeholders on the discourse of the challenges of local government elections.

**Table 3** Distribution of Respondents' Characteristics

Sex	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	210	52.4	52.4
Female	191	47.6	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Age			
21 – 30	90	22.4	22.4
31 - 40	129	32.2	54.6
41 - 50	142	35.4	90.0
51 & above	40	10.0	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Marital Status			
Single	103	25.7	25.7
Married	293	73.1	98.8
Divorced	3	0.7	99.5
Widow	2	0.5	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Religion			
Christianity	303	75.6	75.6
Islam	96	23.9	99.5
Traditional	2	0.5	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100.0</b>	
Educational Qualification			
School Leaving Certificate	20	5.0	5.0
WASSCE/SSCE/GCE	46	11.5	16.5
OND/DIP	70	17.5	33.9
B.Sc/HND	214	53.4	87.3
M.Sc/MPA/M.A	41	10.2	97.5
Ph.D	3	0.7	98.3
Others	7	1.7	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>100.0</b>	

*SOURCE: Field Survey, 2019*

To achieve this objective, respondents were asked to either agree or disagree with statements about challenges in conducting local council elections in Nigeria. Tables 4a and 4b display the frequency and percentage distribution of responses, using a Likert scale: Strongly Agree, Undecided, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The mean value ( $\bar{X}$ ) summarizes respondents' opinions, with ( $\bar{X} > 3.0$ ) indicating agreement and ( $\bar{X} < 3.0$ ) indicating disagreement.

In Table 4a, 103 (25.7%) strongly disagreed and 117 (36.2%) disagreed that local council elections are free and Fair ( $\bar{X} = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 1.498$ ), suggesting a 62% perception of unfair elections. On the second statement, 54.1% disagreed that elections are consistently conducted ( $\bar{X} = 2.52$ ,  $SD = 1.400$ ). For the third statement, 60.6% agreed that a lack of understanding and interest in local council affairs is a major challenge ( $\bar{X} = 3.37$ ,  $SD = 1.380$ ). The fourth statement showed that 60.6% agreed that lack of competitiveness and poor campaigns affect voter turnout ( $\bar{X} = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 1.326$ ). For the fifth statement, 61.8% agreed that lack of grassroots political involvement is a challenge ( $\bar{X} = 3.42$ ,  $SD = 1.362$ ).

Responding to the sixth statement, 63.6% agreed that poor voter education is a major challenge ( $\bar{X} = 3.48$ ,  $SD = 1.357$ ). For the seventh statement, 68.6% agreed that poverty leads to low voter turnout ( $\bar{X} = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 1.119$ ). On the eighth statement, 80% agreed that state governor interference negatively impacts local elections ( $\bar{X} = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.049$ ). The ninth statement showed 81.6% agreement that incumbency hinders free elections ( $\bar{X} = 3.70$ ,  $SD = 1.249$ ). On the tenth assertion, 61.6% agreed that the partisan attitude of some traditional rulers adversely affects elections ( $\bar{\chi} = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.289$ ).

**Table 4a** Challenges of conducting Local Council elections in Nigeria between 1999 and 2023

S/No.	Assertions	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Response	Descriptive Statistics	
		f (%)	f (%)		f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
i.	Local council elections are free and fair in your state	59 (14.7)	90 (22.4)	26 (6.5)	103 (25.7)	117 (36.2)	6 (1.5)	2.63	1.498
ii.	Local council elections have been consistent in my state	33 (8.2)	100 (24.9)	39 (9.7)	110 (27.4)	107 (26.7)	12 (3.0)	2.52	1.400
iii.	Lack of citizens understanding and interest in local council affairs is one of the major challenges confronting the conduct of council elections	83 (20.7)	160 (39.9)	45 (11.2)	62 (15.5)	39 (9.7)	12 (3.0)	3.37	1.380
iv.	Lack of competitiveness and poor electoral campaign affect citizens participation and voters turnout in local council elections	82 (20.4)	161 (40.1)	38 (9.5)	78 (19.5)	36 (9.0)	6 (1.5)	3.39	1.326
v.	The lack of citizens involvement in the political process at the grassroots is a major challenge in the conduct of council poll	92 (22.9)	156 (38.9)	35 (8.7)	71 (17.7)	41 (10.2)	6 (1.5)	3.42	1.362
vi.	Poor voters education is one of the major challenges confronting the conduct of local council elections	102 (25.4)	150 (37.4)	39 (9.7)	66 (16.5)	38 (9.5)	6 (1.5)	3.48	1.357
vii.	The high level of poverty at the local levels is one of the reasons for the lack of interest and voters apathy (low turnout) in local council elections	122 (30.4)	153 (38.2)	39 (9.7)	61 (15.2)	23 (5.7)	3 (0.7)	3.70	1.249
viii.	The influence and interference of state governors in the running of local government affects the conduct of council elections negatively	205 (51.1)	116 (28.9)	41 (10.2)	24 (6.0)	10 (2.5)	5 (1.2)	4.16	1.119

ix.	The incumbency factor is a major challenge confronting the conduct of free and credible elections	184 (45.9)	143 (35.7)	39 (9.7)	22 (5.5)	10 (2.5)	3 (0.7)	4.15	1.049
X.	The partisan attitude of some traditional rulers has adverse effect on the conduct of local council elections	89 (22.2)	158 (39.4)	66 (16.5)	55 (13.7)	20 (5.0)	13 (3.2)	3.50	1.289

To further analyze the challenges facing local council elections in Southwestern Nigeria, Table 4b presents additional findings. On the eleventh assertion, 76.4% of respondents agreed that the political class's desire to control local government leads to inconsistencies in elections ( $\bar{X} = 3.93$ ,  $SD = 1.183$ ). Similarly, 75% agreed that political parties' desperation to retain power at all costs hinders credible elections ( $\bar{X} = 4.23$ ,  $SD = 1.022$ ). The twelfth assertion indicated that 76% of respondents acknowledged the bias of SIECs officials as a significant challenge ( $\bar{X} = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 1.126$ ). For the thirteenth assertion, 61.3% agreed that poor funding and understaffing of SIECs negatively affect election credibility ( $\bar{X} = 3.43$ ,  $SD = 1.304$ ).

Regarding the fourteenth assertion, 47.6% of respondents agreed that SIECs are capable of conducting fair elections, but a notable 36.2% disagreed ( $\bar{X} = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.459$ ). In the fifteenth assertion, 73.3% supported transferring the responsibility of local council elections to INEC, suggesting improved election conduct if managed by the national electoral body ( $\bar{X} = 3.88$ ,  $SD = 1.328$ ). On the sixteenth assertion, 66.5% agreed that the ambiguity of the 1999 Constitution affects local council elections ( $\bar{X} = 3.64$ ,  $SD = 1.267$ ). Additionally, 76.6% indicated that the lack of local government autonomy is a significant challenge ( $\bar{X} = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.328$ ). For the seventeenth assertion, 77.1% agreed that corruption is a major setback ( $\bar{X} = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.288$ ), and 78.3% confirmed that electoral violence hampers elections ( $\bar{X} = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.225$ ). Finally, 44.1% disagreed that using civil servants as ad hoc staff is a major challenge, contrary to public opinion ( $\bar{X} = 3.80$ ,  $SD = 1.265$ ).

**Table 4b** Challenges of Conducting Local Council Elections in Southwestern Nigeria

Xi	The interest of the political class to control the local government is responsible for the inconsistencies in the conduct of council poll in your state	149 (37.2)	157 (39.2)	38 (9.5)	36 (9.0)	15 (3.7)	6 (1.5)	3.93	1.183
Xii	The desperation of the political parties to hold onto power at all cost is a major challenge in the conduct of credible council elections	201 (50.1)	140 (34.9)	29 (7.2)	18 (4.5)	10 (2.5)	3 (0.7)	4.23	1.022
Xiii	The bias and partisan attitude of SIECs officials affect the discharge of its functions	148 (36.9)	157 (39.2)	50 (12.5)	25 (6.2)	18 (4.5)	3 (0.7)	3.96	1.126
xiv	SIECs are poorly funded and under staff, this has adversely affect the conduct of credible council poll	79 (19.7)	167 (41.6)	53 (13.2)	56 (14.0)	40 (10.0)	6 (1.5)	3.43	1.304
xv	SIECs are capable and logistically equipped to conduct free and fair council elections.	82 (20.4)	109 (27.2)	56 (14.0)	81 (20.2)	64 (16.0)	9 (2.2)	3.09	1.459
xvi	The responsibility of conducting local council elections should be transferred to INEC	170 (42.4)	124 (30.9)	37 (9.2)	42 (10.5)	16 (4.0)	12 (3.0)	3.88	1.328
xvii	The ambiguity of the 1999 constitution on local government is a major factor that is affecting the conduct of local council elections	104 (25.9)	163 (40.6)	68 (17.0)	30 (7.5)	25 (6.2)	11 (2.7)	3.64	1.267
xviii	Lack of local government autonomy is a major challenge confronting the conduct of council elections	198 (49.4)	109 (27.2)	35 (8.7)	23 (5.7)	28 (7.0)	8 (2.0)	4.00	1.328
xix	Corruption is a setback in the conduct of local council election	152 (37.9)	157 (39.2)	32 (8.0)	28 (7.0)	20 (5.0)	12 (3.0)	3.89	1.288
xx	Political violence and malpractices affect the conduct of local council elections	173 (43.1)	141 (35.2)	33 (8.2)	31 (7.7)	14 (3.5)	9 (2.2)	4.00	1.225
xxi	The use of civil servants as ad hoc staff in local council elections is a major challenge	59 (14.7)	96 (23.9)	60 (15.0)	86 (21.4)	91 (22.7)	9 (2.2)	3.80	1.265

To complement the quantitative data, an in-depth interview was conducted among key stakeholders. The interviewees provided an outline of challenges affecting the conduct of local council elections in the study area. From the interview response, all the respondents agreed that the major challenge of conducting local government elections amongst others is the issue of local government autonomy. A large number of the interviewees similarly had a common ground on the types of autonomy. They pointed out political autonomy, financial autonomy, and administrative autonomy. From a business viewpoint, a director in the Ministry of Local Government Affairs opined that:

*local government autonomy doesn't end with financial autonomy. The provisions of the Constitution are abused, and the duties of local government as enshrined in the Constitution are being hijacked by the state government. The land tenure system is abused as well. Local government has no discretion of its own. Everything is being decided for it. When the budget is being drawn, the planning should be bottomup and not top-down as we are experiencing. The lack of autonomy has not only affected credible local elections but has also made development impossible.*

A head of administration and general service in the local government in agreeing to the above, explained that "local government autonomy can only be said to be in place in a system where the people elect their leaders themselves and the funding of local government is not done by the state as against the provision of the Constitution". In other words, it comes directly from the source, that is, the federal government to the local governments. The chairperson of NULGE in one of the local governments in Osun state under the study area opined that local government being under the state government with an undefined autonomy affects local government elections. He posited until there is clear and defined local government autonomy; elections could not be credible and consistent. He further added that the state has always had control and influence over local government; that was why local government elections were not conducted in the state for about 10 years.

To this end, other notable challenges to the conduct of local government elections were observed. Firstly, lack of citizen involvement. A principal officer in a State House of Assembly argued that 'if full autonomy is granted to local government, the political leaders, traditional leaders, interest groups and other stakeholders at the grassroots will be more interested in the conduct of council elections, but as it is now, stakeholders are not interested because the control by the state government is too much.'

In addendum to the above views, a member of a civil society organization opined that the citizens will begin to get involved when there is democracy at the grassroots that is when the nomination and elections are via the support of the people at the grassroots and not the people at the top. Secondly is the issue of the Constitution. A cross-section of all the heads of administration interviewed called for the amendment of the Constitution, especially the area of financial autonomy for local councils. A head of administration pointed out that if the Constitution recognized local government as a full tier of government, there wouldn't be the issue of state government exploiting local government. He further queried the joint allocation account (JAAC) and posited that since the state government receives its monthly allocation directly from the federal government, while should the state government receive on behalf of the local government? To collaborate with his position, a staff of a local government opined that 'there must be an amendment to the Constitution to allow the administration of local government be done by local people; they should be allowed to take charge of their affairs as against the 'indirect rule' as practiced by the state government. The chairman of NULGE, in one of the local governments, posited that:

*the transition to democracy in 1999 is the source of the current issue because the Constitution is a bit silent on the system and manner a local government should fully operate. At the state and federal levels, we have the executive, legislature, and judiciary but that is not the same for local government where there is only the executive and legislature that are not even independent of the state government. The framers of the Constitution ought to have recognized and fashioned out how local government is to operate. I can say that the last credible local council elections were conducted in December 1998 by INEC across the country. Since then, all local government elections conducted after 1998 have been conducted by SIECs and won by the party of the state governors.*

A third challenge raised by the respondent was the issue of election boycotts by the main opposition party and voter apathy at the grassroots which have become a common trend. This is so because the people lack confidence in the credibility of the process. Fourthly is the influence and interference of the state government. Almost all the interviewees saw this as a major challenge confronting the conduct of local council elections in the study area. Most respondents asserted that the state governors prefer caretaker committees to elected council officials. They argued that the caretaker committee system though permitted by law is an illegal imposition that discourages democracy at the grassroots. The president of NULGE in one of the states explained that it is the caretaker committee that metamorphoses into elected government in most instances. He cited the example of the last local council elections held in Osun State. All the existing caretaker committee members were elected back into office at the poll to serve as elected local council officials.

The fifth challenge confronting the conduct of local government as identified by the respondents is the issue of tenure of office for elected local council office. Most members of the State House of Assembly identified this as a major challenge. An official of the Ondo State House of Assembly explained that "looking at the tenure, extension, and



dissolution of the local council, it is a tool in the hands of the executives. Whether you are a caretaker or elected council official, you are a decorative official as the state governor can remove, dissolve, or rubbish you anytime at will". He further agreed to what happened recently in the State. The tenure of the elected officers ended and there was no extension letter from the government for months. The House of Assembly has to dissolve the councils after much clamor from various quarters. The house announced its dissolution in line with the existing state laws.

The seventh challenge raised is the role of SIECs in the conduct of local council elections. A large number of the interviewees called for the scrapping of SIEC and its roles transferred to INEC. They posited that it is an appendage of the state government. A head of administration in local government observed that the reason why there seems not to be credible election and voter apathy is because the electoral umpire is not fair and independent. He further opined 'How independent is the SIEC? They (SIEC) are always under the influence of the state governors and their operations are also funded by the government. The tail cannot wag the dog''. He pointed out that, until we have a neutral umpire selected by a neutral body, nothing fruitful can come out of local council elections.

In Ogun State where local council elections have been regularly conducted within the study period, most respondents were of the view that SIEC is a tool in the hands of the various state governors in installing their cronies and party members into offices as local council officials. However, staff of SIECs in the states visited held different views. They argued that if the institution is empowered at the state level through proper funding and some measures of independence as it is at the national level; it is in the best position to conduct local council elections because of its proximity to the grassroots.

The eighth challenge observed is the issue of manipulation of the electoral process by the state government at the grassroots. An official of the state Ministry of Local Government Affairs pointed out that, another challenge confronting the council elections is the lack of internal party democracy rather than selection in the sense that the electorates do not, in most cases, could elect those they want to be in power. The state governor would have used his office to select those he wants in office during the party primary and the state independent electoral commission will declare them winners of the election either the people vote or do not vote for them.

Some interviewees noted that the bureaucratic bottleneck involved in securing finances for running of local council's affairs is a big challenge. A head of administration opined that, since the local government is not autonomous, they no longer control their finances. They go to the state government first for approval before funds are released for them to execute projects. Financial activities are often grounded in local government until the state governors or the secretary to state governments approve through the ministry before getting to the councils.

#### 4. Discussion of Findings and Conclusion

The study revealed that the lack of defined local government autonomy was the fundamental challenge affecting the conduct of local council elections. The quantitative and qualitative data established the fact that there cannot be credible elections at the council level until local government autonomy is constitutionally defined, especially its political structure and finance. Most respondents argued that the lack of defined local government autonomy is the major challenge confronting local government councils in the country. This is slightly different from the views of Aluko (2010) and Omar (2012) who posited that the incumbency factor is the major challenge affecting the conduct of local council elections. However, 80% of the respondents observed that the incumbency factor affects the conduct of the council poll. The qualitative outcome revealed that the incumbency factor was because of the lack of defined autonomy for local councils. Besides, the qualitative data revealed that local governments do not enjoy the same constitutionally defined level of autonomy as the other two tiers of government, that is, the federal and state governments. For example, at the local government level, there is no Judiciary arm, the Legislature only makes bylaws, its activities are regulated by the government, and they are not financially independent of the state government. Local government by the provision of the 1999 Constitution (Section 7&8) is an appendage of state government, which placed them under the control and ambiance of the state. An official of the Ondo State House of Assembly held the position that constitutionally, it is only the state parliament that can make laws for local government. This furthermore buttresses the fact that the interference of the state government in the affairs of local government affects the conduct of local council elections and calls the poll into question. This assertion was confirmed with 62% of respondents asserting that local council elections are not free and fair in their respective states.

Extant studies have identified the state Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) as a crucial institution in the conduct of local council elections. The study revealed that, until SIEC is removed from the control of the state governments and empowered to operate as INEC with some measures of independence, there may not be free and fair elections at the local councils. A cross-section of respondents revealed that SIECs as presently constituted are an appendage of state government and cannot deliver credible council elections. Also, the staff of the commission interviewed buttressed the position. They argued that the operations and activities of the commission are being coordinated by the state government. The commission is answerable directly to the office of the state governor. Its appointment, promotion, posting, schedule of activities, funding, and budgetary approval are done by the state government. This was part of the major challenges identified confronting the conduct of local council elections in Southwestern Nigeria.

Another challenge of conducting local council elections as revealed by the study is, the desperation of political

parties to hold on to power at all costs; 75% of the respondents affirmed the assertion. Further qualitative studies revealed that this accounts for the total victory of the ruling political party in local council elections across the states in the study area. Another closely related challenge is the issue of election boycotts by the main opposition parties and voter apathy during local council elections in the state. 60.8% of the respondents affirmed the above observation. A cross-section of respondents observed that the opposition political parties and the citizens do not have confidence in the credibility of the electoral process at the grassroots. Corruption, the ambiguity of the 1999 Constitution on local government, high level of poverty at the grassroots revealed by earlier studies were affirmed by this study.

The study concluded that the conduct of local council elections had been inconsistent and was confronted with several challenges between 1999 and 2023 in Nigeria. The study revealed that the most significant and fundamental challenge confronting the conduct of local council elections was the lack of defined local government autonomy.

## 5. Recommendations

1. **Empower and Independently Finance SIEC:** Based on the findings of the study, the State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) should not be scrapped; instead, it should be empowered and made independent of the state government. The staff of SIECs should be directly employed by the commission and allowed to serve within the commission till retirement. The composition and appointment of board members should be done by the federal government. The tenure of board members should be defined. The financing of SIECs should be done along side That of INEC by the federal government. The duties and responsibilities of SIECs should not be transferred to INEC because INEC as an institution is also not free from allegations of bias and partisan politics.
2. **Stakeholder Engagement and Voter Education:** Actively involve all local stakeholders in the electoral process and maintain continuous voter education. Strengthen civil society and labor unions at the grassroots to act as watchdogs over local government activities, ensuring transparency and accountability.
3. **Encourage Political Participation and Enhance Traditional Roles:** Discourage opposition parties from boycotting elections to enhance credibility and competitiveness. Grant traditional institutions constitutional powers to mobilize and guide local activities, ensuring they remain apolitical in their duties.
4. **Demand Transparency and Reject Imposition:** Citizens should demand transparency and accountability from elected officials and legally reject the imposition of officials by the state government. Voters should avoid money politics and violence, ensuring their votes count and the electoral process remains fair.
5. **Define and Protect Local Government Autonomy:** Constitutionally define local government autonomy, focusing on political structure and finance to mitigate the influence of the incumbency factor on elections. Remove local governments from state control, granting them the same level of autonomy as federal and state governments to ensure credible and fair local elections.

## Contribution to Knowledge

The study contributed to the existing studies on the challenges of conducting local council elections and how to strengthen the roles of the various stakeholders in the conduct of local council elections. It articulated the need for regular, free, and competitive elections for the enhancement of good governance at the local government level in Nigeria.

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## Declaration of Conflict

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper

## Authors Contribution

All authors contributed equally to this research output.

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