

Local Government Elections and Democratisation in Bayelsa State: A Study of the 2024 Local Election

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Abstract

This study examines the implications of local government elections for democratization in Nigeria by assessing 2024 local government elections in Bayelsa State. It specifically focuses on ascertaining if the electoral outcomes reflected the preferences of electorates, and if the performance of democratic institutions during the elections showed a commitment to democratization. These two core objectives were crafted following the premise that local government areas, being the closest to the grassroots, should bolster participation and expand democracy. Weber's theory of Patrimonialism was employed as a theoretical framework to explore the dynamics of political power and governance at the grassroots level. The study adopted a mixed-method approach, combining data from quantitative and qualitative sources, namely: questionnaires, interviews, and relevant publications. Thematic analysis was employed as the method of data analysis. Findings from the study indicated that the electoral outcomes did not reflect the choices of electorates and democratic institutions were complicit in actions that betrayed a lack of commitment to democratization. The study revealed that flaws in the election, indeed, impeded grassroots democracy, and the interference of state governments, along with poor performance of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC), political parties, and civil society organisations, among others, undermined the potency of the election as a democratizing instrument. Based on these insights, the study recommended, among others, that transparency measures be adopted to open up the electoral process, strengthening the independence of electoral management bodies, and enforcing penalties for malpractice by both individuals and institutional structures involved in the electoral process.

Keywords: *Democratisation, Democratic Institutions, Elections, Grassroots, Participation.*

Introduction

Elections are fundamental to democratic governance, serving as a mechanism through which the electorate expresses its political will and holds leaders accountable. However, in many developing democracies, including Nigeria, concerns persist regarding the extent to which electoral outcomes genuinely reflect the electorate's choice, and the role democratic institutions play in upholding democratic principles. The 2024 local government elections in Bayelsa State present a case for examining these issues, given historical challenges such as electoral malpractice, institutional inefficiencies, and questions surrounding the transparency and credibility of the electoral process.

Scholarly discussions on electoral outcomes have frequently highlighted the extent to which elections reflect the actual preferences of the electorate. Over the years, concerns have persisted regarding the credibility of electoral processes, with various studies pointing to persistent irregularities, ranging from vote suppression to outright manipulation (Nwanna, 2014). At the local government level, these issues are compounded by weak institutional safeguards, widespread voter apathy, and the long-standing dominance of caretaker committees in place of elected councils (Adeyemi, 2019). In Bayelsa State, where local government elections have been infrequent, the 2024 contest presents a rare opportunity to examine whether the electorate's choice was adequately reflected in the declared outcomes. While previous studies, such as Dibia (2003) and Nwanna (2014), have explored voter engagement and historical electoral trends, they have not accounted for recent dynamics, leaving a gap in understanding how local government elections currently unfold within the state.

Similarly, the role of democratic institutions in ensuring credible elections has remained a critical area of scholarly concern. Studies have extensively documented the failure of local government structures to function independently, citing financial and administrative control by state governments as a major impediment to democratic development (Achimugu, Stephen & Agboni, 2013; Uche, 2014). The State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC), which is responsible for conducting local government elections, has faced persistent criticism over challenges it faces in conducting credible elections (Oluwasuji & Okajare, 2021; Olawoye & Oduniyi, 2023). While existing research has examined the broader institutional challenges affecting local governance in Nigeria (Gambo, 2015; Onimisi, 2022), few studies have assessed how the actions of democratic institutions contribute to or impede democratization during elections.

Building on extant knowledge, this study takes a cursory look at the 2024 local government elections in Bayelsa State to ascertain how well the electoral outcome reflected the will of citizens and how the actions of democratic institutions in the state, specifically the election management body responsible for the conduct of local government elections (the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission – BYSIEC) and political parties contributed to the strengthening of democracy.

Research Questions

- i. How adequately did the outcome of the 2024 local government election in Bayelsa State reflect the choice of the electorates?
- ii. How well did the actions of democratic institutions during the local government elections in Bayelsa State reflect a commitment to democratization?

Research Methodology

This is a mixed-method study that draws from both primary and secondary sources for data. It, thus, combines qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods allowed for a sweeping picture of the issue under investigation through numerical patterns in responses, as well as gaining of deeper insights into the underlying motivations, beliefs, and cultural norms that shape human behavior and social interactions (Mulisa, 2022). The quantitative instrument employed was a structured questionnaire, while the qualitative tool was an interview guide. Measures were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of these instruments. The study further integrated documentary method or documented evidence (as contained in newspaper publications, reports and other relevant documents) with interview and questionnaire data. The study drew from a diverse array of reputable sources, including academic articles which contributed in-depth analyses and scholarly perspectives, offering a theoretical foundation and insights into the dynamics of local government elections, the performance of duty bearers and the impact on democratisation. By incorporating these sources, the study ensures a comprehensive and multi-faceted exploration of the subject matter, enhancing the depth and reliability of the findings. Further depth in understanding of the subject matter was pursued by complementing the data gathered from documented (secondary) evidence with primary data generated from questionnaires and interviews with key stakeholders drawn from across the state.

Thus, a total of 400 respondents are selected in this study for questionnaire administration, with an equal distribution of 50 respondents across each of the eight (8) local government areas. This distribution ensures fair representation across all LGAs while maintaining a manageable sample size. In addition to this broad sample size of 400, 30 key interviewees were conducted to gain further insight into the issues under investigation. This criterion for inclusion was to ensure that participants are aware of the intricacies and peculiarities of the issues under study. The sampling technique adopted for selecting participants was the purposive sampling technique. This allowed for the inclusion of persons or groups with in-depth knowledge on the issues under study, capable of providing enriching information. The purposive sampling technique allowed for the intentional selection of participants who were most relevant to the study's objectives. Data generated were analysed through a combination of quantitative (percentages) and qualitative (thematic analysis) techniques.

The Outcomes of the 2024 Local Government Election and the Choices of Electorates

Evidence assembled shows local government elections have, since 1999, been confronted with challenges to credibility which has undermined the will of electorates in Bayelsa State and across Nigeria. Despite the existence of the council and the constitutional provision for democratically elected administrators in the council as contained in Section 7(1) of the Constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria, local government councils in the state and beyond have almost always been under the control of the executives at the state level. The constitution clearly provides 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 (Section 7, Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria).

In addition to the preceding provision on the need for a democratically elected local government council, the constitution further provides for an electoral commission that should be responsible for the conduct of elections into local government councils. Like Section 15(a) of the Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution which empowers INEC to conduct elections into state and national level executive and legislative positions, the Schedule also provide for the establishment of SIECs and their powers. Section 3 Part II of the Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution provides for the establishment of SIECs while Section 4 of the same legal instrument define the powers of SIECs thus:

1. to organise, undertake and supervise all elections to local government councils within the state
2. to render such advice as it may consider necessary to the INEC on the compilation of and the register of voters in so far as that register is applicable to local government elections in the state (Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999:148).

Despite the clear provisions highlighted above, many states including Bayelsa State, have often resorted to the use of caretaker committees that are handpicked by state governors to do their bidding and strengthen their grip on power. This is evident in the table below by Adeyemi (2019) showing the years elections were held as well as periods when, despite elections being held, the council was later dissolved by the governor (in asterisk). From the table, it can be discerned that in Bayelsa (number 14 on the table), between 1999 and 2017, local government elections were held on only three occasions, in 2004, 2010 and 2017. In 2010, despite local government elections being held, the council was later dissolved and a caretaker committee constituted.

Table 1: Number of Times Local Government Elections Were Held in States Across Nigeria (1999-2018)

| S/N | State | Years Elections were conducted | No. of times Elections were conducted |
|-----|-------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 | Anambra | 2013,2017 | 2 |
| 2 | Ebonyi | 2004,2010,2013,2017 | 4 |
| 3 | Oyo | 2004,2007,2018 | 3 |
| 4 | Osun | 2004,2007,2018 | 3 |
| 5 | Ondo | 2004,2007,2016,2018 | 4 |
| 6 | Ekiti | 2004,2009,2015,2018 | 4 |
| 7 | Ogun | 2004,2007,2012,2016 | 4 |
| 8 | Kwara | 2004,2007,2012,2017 | 4 |
| 9 | Lagos | 2004,2008,2012,2017 | 4 |
| 10 | Akwa Ibom | 2004,2008,2012,2017 | 4 |
| 11 | Cross River | 2004,2010,2013,2017 | 4 |

| | | | |
|----|----------|--------------------------|---|
| 12 | Edo | 2004,2007,2013,2018 | 4 |
| 13 | Abia | 2004,2008,2016 | 3 |
| 14 | Bayelsa | 2004,2010,2017 | 3 |
| 15 | Rivers | 2004,2011,2015,2018 | 4 |
| 16 | Delta | 2004,2008,2014,2018 | 4 |
| 17 | Imo | 2004,2008,2018 | 3 |
| 18 | Benue | 2004,2007,2012,2017 | 4 |
| 19 | Enugu | 2004,2007,2011,2013,2017 | 5 |
| 20 | Nasarawa | 2004,2009,2014,2018 | 4 |
| 21 | Kano | 2004,2007,2009,2014,2018 | 5 |
| 22 | Katsina | 2004,2010,2018 | 3 |
| 23 | Sokoto | 2004,2008,2011,2016 | 4 |
| 24 | Kebbi | 2004,2008,2012,2017 | 4 |
| 25 | Kogi | 2004,2008,2013 | 3 |
| 26 | Taraba | 2004,2007,2012,2017 | 4 |
| 27 | Zamfara | 2004,2012 | 2 |
| 28 | Bauchi | 2004,2008,2018 | 3 |
| 29 | Yobe | 2004,2009,2013,2017 | 4 |
| 30 | Borno | 2004,2007 | 2 |
| 31 | Plateau | 2004,2008,2014,2018 | 4 |
| 32 | Kaduna | 2004,2012,2018 | 3 |
| 33 | Jigawa | 2004,2011,2014,2017 | 4 |
| 34 | Niger | 2004,2008,2011,2016 | 4 |
| 35 | Adamawa | 2004,2008,2012,2016 | 4 |
| 36 | Gombe | 2004,2013,2017 | 3 |
| 37 | Abuja | 2004,2007,2010,2013,2016 | 5 |

Source: Adeyemi (2019)

Although the data on Table 1 above is limited in time to the period between 1999 and 2018, it points to the precarity of the idea of citizens participation via local governments in Nigeria. Many scholars have further alluded that even where electoral contests are held, they are mere 'rituals' that do not really have bearing on citizens participation. This view is held by scholars

including Fatile and Okewale (2013), and Arowolo and Aluko (2012), among others. Scholarly views also point to a pervasive loss of interest on the part of citizens. We put this to a test in the recently concluded local government elections by assessing if the outcome of the election reflected the preferences of the electorates. The table below shows the response pattern from the field:

Table 2: Participants' Feedback on Symmetry Between Electoral Outcomes and Electorates' Choices During the 2024 Local Government Election in Bayelsa State

| Section B: Electoral Outcomes and the Choice of the Electorate | | | | | | |
|--|---------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Statements | SA | A | N | D | SD | Total |
| 7. The 2024 local government election outcome reflected the will of the people. | 30 (7.5%) | 40 (10%) | 50 (12.5%) | 120 (30%) | 160 (40%) | 400 |
| 8. The election was free and fair, without major irregularities. | 25 (6.25%) | 35 (8.75%) | 45 (11.25%) | 130 (32.5%) | 165 (41.25%) | 400 |
| 9. Voter turnout was high in my area. | 40 (10%) | 50 (12.5%) | 60 (15%) | 120 (30%) | 130 (32.5%) | 400 |
| 10. Political parties engaged in activities that encouraged voter participation. | 30 (7.5%) | 45 (11.25%) | 55 (13.75%) | 125 (31.25%) | 145 (36.25%) | 400 |
| 11. Vote-buying and voter intimidation were minimal or absent. | 20 (5%) | 30 (7.5%) | 40 (10%) | 140 (35%) | 170 (42.5%) | 400 |
| 12. The election results were credible and acceptable to most voters. | 25 (6.25%) | 40 (10%) | 50 (12.5%) | 135 (33.75%) | 150 (37.5%) | 400 |
| 13. Citizens were able to freely express their choice without external pressure. | 35 (8.75%) | 45 (11.25%) | 50 (12.5%) | 130 (32.5%) | 140 (35%) | 400 |

Source: Field Research, 2024

From the table above, it can be gleaned that the 2024 local government election in Bayelsa State did not adequately reflect the will of the people. A significant portion of respondents (70% and above) either disagreed or strongly disagreed that the election outcome aligned with the electorate's choice. Additionally, a majority of participants rejected the notion that the election was free and fair, highlighting concerns about widespread irregularities, voter suppression, and political interference. Voter turnout was reported to be low in many areas, suggesting either a lack of faith in the electoral process or barriers preventing full participation. Furthermore, political parties were not seen as actively encouraging voter engagement, and respondents overwhelmingly pointed to vote-buying and voter intimidation as major issues that undermined the credibility of the election. These findings reinforce the argument that the election did not truly reflect popular choice and was instead shaped by external manipulations and coercive practices. Voices from the field further supported this as participants decried low turnout, public mistrust, and a perception that the outcomes were predetermined by the political party in power in collusion with the electoral umpire. Pointing to the poor level of turnout, a participant noted thus:

To tell you the truth, it was very disappointing. Polling stations were empty. Many people did not come out to vote during the local government election. It was not like the other elections that were conducted last year; this time, it was not even like an election. Nobody was interested in the events that were going on.

Responses to other questions under this section showed a perception that votes would not count, inadequate measures to stimulate the interest of electorates, fear of electoral violence and low interest in the workings of local government and the need for participation in the governance process at that level. These views are summarised in the quotes below:

I think a lot of folks felt like their vote wouldn't really change anything. Plus, there wasn't much excitement about the candidates or the issues they were talking about. In fact, for many places, it seemed like only one party was dominant and the idea of voting seemed like a waste of time.

Commenting on the outcome of the election and if it reflected the choices of the electorates, interviewees asserted that the electorates did not even make a choice in the election. Many were mere passive observers as the ruling party, in collusion with the government of the day and the state independent electoral commission manipulated the system. This was aptly captured in the excerpt below:

At the end of the election, the fears of people who did not want to take part because they feared that their participation would not change anything were proven to be correct. The entire process was not transparent, election winners were announced but I doubt if anybody saw a result with number of votes published anywhere. And all the winners were from the ruling party in the state. What does this tell you about the will of the people being represented? For me, it just shows that the election was a mere charade to enthrone anointed candidates.

From the above, it can be gleaned, following the first hypothesis, that the outcome of the 2024 local government election did not reflect the will of the people. This points to a continuity of the trend in undemocratic practices at local government levels across Nigeria and in Bayelsa state since 1999, where even when elections are held, they serve as mere tools for providing citizens with an illusion of choice. Interestingly, as feedback from the questionnaire and

interviews shows, many respondents were not deceived as they recognize the election for its flawed and non-transparent character.

Institutional Performance During the 2024 Local Government Election in Bayelsa State and Democratization

In assessing the actions of institutions in the 2024 local government election in Bayelsa State and the implication for democratization, the study found a prevalence of non-democratic practices in supposedly democratic institutions, highlighting a non-commitment to democratization. Findings revealed a complicity of diverse institutions, with state governments' interference as a major factor undermining the credibility of the local government elections. We assessed the transparency, accountability and adherence to the rule of law by such crucial institutional structures of democratic elections at the local government level as, the EMB, political parties, and the state government through the governor. The focus on these three institutions is not to rule out the role of other institutions but to provide a window for understanding broader practices and implications for democratization in local government areas. The feedback from the field on this component of the research is presented in the table below:

Table 3: Democratic Institutions and Commitment to Democratization in Bayelsa State

| Section C: Democratic Institutions and Commitment to Democratization | | | | | | |
|--|------------|------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| Statements | SA | A | N | D | SD | Total |
| 14. The Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) was impartial and independent in conducting the elections. | 20 (5%) | 30 (7.5%) | 40 (10%) | 140 (35%) | 170 (42.5%) | 400 |
| 15. The election process was transparent and well-managed. | 25 (6.25%) | 35 (8.75%) | 45 (11.25%) | 135 (33.75%) | 160 (40%) | 400 |
| 16. Electoral officials performed their duties fairly and professionally. | 30 (7.5%) | 40 (10%) | 50 (12.5%) | 130 (32.5%) | 150 (37.5%) | 400 |
| 17. Security agencies played a neutral role and ensured peaceful elections. | 25 (6.25%) | 35 (8.75%) | 50 (12.5%) | 140 (35%) | 150 (37.5%) | 400 |
| 18. There were effective mechanisms to prevent and address electoral malpractice. | 20 (5%) | 30 (7.5%) | 45 (11.25%) | 135 (33.75%) | 170 (42.5%) | 400 |
| 19. Election observers and civil society groups were allowed to monitor the process freely. | 30 (7.5%) | 40 (10%) | 50 (12.5%) | 125 (31.25%) | 155 (38.75%) | 400 |
| 20. The election contributed to strengthening democracy at the local government level. | 25 (6.25%) | 35 (8.75%) | 45 (11.25%) | 130 (32.5%) | 165 (41.25%) | 400 |

Source: Field Research, 2024

The table above reveals deep skepticism regarding the role of electoral institutions in upholding democratic principles. The Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) was

widely perceived as lacking impartiality and independence, with over 75% of respondents disagreeing that it conducted the election fairly. Transparency was another major concern, as a majority of participants felt that electoral officials did not manage the process professionally and that security agencies failed to maintain neutrality. Respondents also pointed to the absence of effective mechanisms for preventing electoral malpractice, with reports suggesting that vote-rigging and undue influence were prevalent. Furthermore, election observers and civil society organizations were seen as being restricted in their monitoring efforts, limiting oversight and accountability. Most notably, over 74% of respondents rejected the idea that the election contributed to strengthening democracy at the local government level, emphasizing the broader implications of flawed electoral processes on democratic governance.

Interviewees further provided responses that support the perceived disconnect between actions of democratic institutions and democratization. When asked if they thought BYSIEC, political parties and the office of the governor were fair, open, non-partial and adhered to the principles of the rule of law, many interviewees expressed a perception that indicated that these duty-bearers did not uphold the core democratic principles in question. Some interviewees simply expressed apprehension about the process, by stating that: “I personally have strong reservations about BYSIEC and their conduct of elections o.” Others were more vocal, alluding to collusion between BYSIEC and the ruling party to thwart the process. A participant was emphatic of this point when he asserted that:

The whole talk about local government election is one big 419. In 2021 when the last local government election were held, people were out to vote for their choice candidates, but not much was happening. They did not know that INEC (I think he meant BYSIEC) and candidates of the PDP were already in the oven cooking results. In this 2024 local government election, many people have come to see the elections as a fraud and do not even bother to come out. INEC has not really taken measures to gain the trust of the people. Openness, zero! Impartiality, zero!

The excerpt above, though showing some level of knowledge gap as evident in the mix-up of between INEC and BYSIEC, reflects a strong sentiment that the electoral commission performs below par in ensuring the credibility of the process due to political interference. A similar perspective was expressed in a simple, yet articulate manner thus:

I do not think BYSIEC is impartial, and I do not think they take measures to ensure that the election is free and fair. Have you ever heard that BYSIEC pasted election results with a list of candidates and the votes they pulled? What they do is simply to announce a result. How about delay in payment of ad-hoc staff? BYSIEC has a history of not paying ad-hoc staff. In fact, on the 2024 local government elections, I know from credible sources that BYSIEC did election in a single polling unit per ward, without BVAS. There was also no advertisement for ad-hoc staff recruitment. There is no way an institution that is committed to ensuring credible election would act in this manner.

The weighty issues raised about BYSIEC above raises serious questions marks about their performance. It shows that the commission’s poor commitment to ensuring credible elections undermines the citizens’ right to participate in managing their affairs at the grassroots level.

The impact of perceived compromise within the ranks and even the institution of BYSIEC on participation has also been tacitly pointed to in the quotes above, showing that citizens are increasingly of the view that their perception will not matter because the EMB is compromised, and are thus, not partaking. This view, as found in the research, is supported by prior expressions by civil society actors. As Mbah (2024) reported for leadership newspaper, civil

society actors anticipated that the elections would only serve as a means of confirming government approved names. Mbah (2024) quoted David West, a Civil Liberty Organization (CLO) and Human Rights Advocate, thus:

The BYSIEC in my humble opinion is not living up to its expectation because if INEC as an institution or as an agency at the federal level, conducts or decides to act in this manner that BYSIEC is acting, I think there will be a lot cacophony from Nigerians all over (Comr. David West, quoted in Mbah 2024).

Beyond the EMB, political parties are crucial for functional democracies and credible elections. The extent to which they are able to aggregate and articulate the interest of their members, transform same into sellable policy proposals based on which they hold campaign to secure citizens' buy-in is a major indicator of a thriving electoral process. Also, political parties, especially opposition parties serve as watchdogs in democratic processes, including elections. Their continuous engagement of the process serve to ensure that the right thing is done. Their close monitoring of stakeholders and continuous engagement with the public serves to keep duty bearers, including the election management body and other public office holders committed to doing the right thing.

Paradoxically, as observations in the 2024 local government elections indicated, the contest was largely treated as a ruling-party-affair. Other political parties including the major opposition and the 15 other parties that partook in the November 11th governorship contest in the state merely watched, like uninterested observers and not key stakeholders. As media reports in the aftermath of the election indicated, the contest was characterized by voter apathy and boycott by political parties (including the major opposition party in the state, the APC) (Olusegun 2024). This perspective was widely reiterated by interviewees. One of such views was expressed thus:

I think the political parties also have a role to play in the way the local government elections were conducted. If opposition parties take the process seriously and they do not sell out, the process will improve. If you look at national elections, you see parties actively engaged but it is not so in local government elections. For national elections, political parties drag each other to court for violation of established rules. The news is everywhere, and they learn and try to improve but the situation in local government election is different. It is sad.

As the pieces of evidence laid out above indicates, political parties did not perform well in improving transparency, impartiality and adherence to the rule of law in the 2024 local government elections in Bayelsa State. This poses a serious concern for democracy and democratisation at the grassroots given the crucial role of political parties as crucial institutions of democracy.

Following the widely reiterated point in the literature about state interference and control of local governments, this study sought to ascertain, from the view of participants, if, and the extent to which the state government, specifically the Governor influenced the local government election and efforts that were exerted at ensuring the transparency and impartiality of the process as well as the adherence to the rule of law among stakeholders.

Responses from participants throughout the study area were widely laced with assertions that an absence of efforts on the part of the state executive to ensure the credibility of the process. In fact, participants even expressed views that suggested that there were candidates anointed by the chief executive across all local government areas of the state. With 'government candidates' in the race, it becomes counterintuitive to expect that the executives, or more

precisely, the governor, would enthrone measures to ensure a free, fair and participatory contest founded on the principles of transparency, impartiality and adherence to the rule of law. The analogy below likening the state executive to a team member who is also expected to act as an impartial party in a football match further buttresses this point.

I do not even understand why you are asking me if I think the governor played a role to ensure a impartial and transparent process. Have you heard that in a football match, even if one of the players is not a part of the team on the pitch, he stays neutral? The governor is a party member; in fact, he is the leader of his party in the state and he to support candidates from his party.

A poignant point from the excerpt above is that, the governor and other public office holders who double as party members should not be expected to be impartial. The implication is that democratic ideals of transparency, impartiality and adherence to the rule of law would most likely be sacrificed on the altar of party loyalty. The implication of this on citizens participation is not far-fetched. With stakeholders that are not neutral in the process, citizens' indignation is bound to follow, and democratic participation is bound to suffer.

The issues covered in this section, though already unsettling were further compounded by other issues which participants pointed to. Issues of limited civil society participation, pervasive malpractices and rigging, and tampering with election results all constitute causes for concern. See the excerpts below:

Honestly, I don't think democratic principles were upheld very well at all. It felt like the election was more about power struggles than listening to what the people really wanted.

...there were so many shady things going on. I heard rumors about votes being tampered with and people being intimidated at the polling stations. Elections were conducted in a few polling units and results were written in others. Even where elections were held, the required standards were not followed. The BVAS introduced to accredit voters and check fraud was not used at all!

Our electoral and political institutions were not effective at all during the just concluded local government elections. Political parties did not really get involved apart from the ruling party and a few other exceptional cases. Civil society actors and non-governmental organisations were nowhere to be found. The media did not adequately cover and report on occurrences in the process. I can go on and on.

As can be gleaned from preceding discourse, the implication of state governors' interference is the erosion of grassroots democracy. Following the issues identified and their implications for democratisation – increased citizens involvement and value for participation, the study proceeded to investigate possible pathways for enhancing the credibility of subsequent local government elections towards bolstering public confidence in the state. Participants suggested a complete overhaul of the system. The need for improved oversight and accountability to make sure everyone plays by the rules was highlighted as was the need for improved independence of the EMB. A participant articulated what he considered the challenge with the election thus:

Firstly, there's a lack of transparency and accountability in the electoral process. It feels like decisions are made behind closed doors, which breeds mistrust. Secondly, there's a lot of political interference and manipulation, which undermines the fairness of the elections. And finally, there's a general lack of awareness and education among voters about their rights and how the electoral process should work.

He proceeded to identify pathways for improvement thus:

We need to implement measures to increase transparency and accountability, such as ensuring all election-related decisions are made public and subject to scrutiny. We also need to strengthen the independence of electoral management bodies and enforce strict penalties for electoral malpractice. Additionally, investing in voter education programs to increase awareness and understanding of the electoral process could help improve credibility.

The proposed pathways for improvement identified above are crucial for ensuring that local government elections serve to strengthen citizens involvement in government. Without credible elections, citizens lose faith in the system, which can lead to apathy or even unrest. To rebuild trust, a participant noted a “need to demonstrate a commitment to fairness, transparency, and accountability in every aspect of the electoral process”. This would involve engaging with the public more directly, being more open about decision-making processes, and actively involving citizens in monitoring and oversight activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Evidence assembled in this study informs a conclusion that the 2024 local government election in Bayelsa State did not really contributed to improved democratisation. The investigation of the extent to which electoral outcomes reflected citizens’ preferences reveals that citizens did not really participate in determining their leaders and their preferences were, thus, not accounted for. The second factor assessed, the actions or inactions of democratic institutions in the state and their implications for democratization also revealed an unsettling pattern, with state governments’ interference undermining the credibility of other duty bearers including EMBs, political parties, and civil society organisations, among others. The impact of these on democratization at the grassroots is that the idea of democracy as the government by the majority through participatory processes, gets sacrificed on the altar of flawed electoral processes even persons who emerge from these electoral processes. These findings inform an acceptance of the two hypotheses proposed in this study, thus necessitating the following recommendations:

1. Public participation in local government elections should be improved by opening up the process, adopting measures to ensure transparency and assuring citizens that their participation is important for shaping the performance of their government at the grassroots level. Pathways to achieving this include the conduct of sensitisation campaigns for citizens on the need to be involved. An investment in voter education programs to increase awareness and understanding of the electoral process could help improve credibility.
2. Strengthening the performance of duty bearers require measures for ensuring the independence of the EMB as well as political will on the part of leaders of democratic institutions such as political parties, and the executive. The EMB, charged with electoral conduct, must show commitment to do the right thing and avoid serving as a puppet in between political contestant. Political parties should also act more concertedly towards getting involved in determining the course of local government leadership, articulating citizens interests and expressing same. Lastly, strict penalties should be implemented for duty bearers that collude to flout the credibility of the electoral process at the local government level.

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