

ELECTORAL INTEGRITY AND GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY: TESTING A MODEL OF TRUST AND LEGITIMACY IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

*Abdulahkeem Adejumo

**Mohammed Lawan Bello

***Abdulrazaq Kayode Abdulkareem

Abstract

This study examines the relationship between perceived electoral credibility, trust in local government, perceived government legitimacy, and citizen political participation in local government elections, using Kwara State, Nigeria as a case context. Grounded in Institutional Theory, the study investigates how citizens' perceptions of electoral processes influence their political behaviour both directly and indirectly through institutional trust and perceived legitimacy. A quantitative research design was adopted, and data were collected through structured questionnaires administered to 526 eligible voters. The data were analysed using SPSS, with PROCESS macro employed to test mediation and moderation effects. The findings reveal that perceived electoral credibility has a significant positive effect on political participation, indicating that citizens are more likely to engage in elections when they perceive the process as fair and transparent. Electoral credibility also significantly enhances trust in local government institutions, while trust itself positively influences political participation. Mediation analysis confirms that trust partially mediates the relationship between electoral credibility and participation, suggesting both direct and indirect effects. Furthermore, perceived government legitimacy significantly moderates the relationship between electoral credibility and political participation, strengthening the effect when legitimacy is high. The study highlights the central role of institutional perceptions in shaping democratic engagement at the grassroots level and underscores the importance of credible electoral systems and institutional trust in strengthening local governance and political participation in emerging democracies.

Keywords: Electoral credibility, Institutional trust, Government legitimacy, Political participation, Local government elections

1.0 Introduction

Local government elections occupy a critical position in democratic systems, particularly in developing democracies where governance is expected to be most responsive at the grassroots level. In Nigeria, the local government system is constitutionally recognized as the third tier of government, entrusted with the responsibility of fostering development, ensuring service delivery, and facilitating citizen participation in governance. However, despite its strategic importance, the effectiveness of local government elections in promoting democratic engagement has been persistently undermined by structural, legal, and political challenges. These challenges have raised fundamental questions about electoral credibility, institutional trust, and the legitimacy of governance at the local level.

The concept of electoral credibility is central to democratic consolidation. Electoral credibility refers to

*Department of Political Science, Federal University, Dutse, Nigeria.

Email: abdullahkeem@fud.edu.ng

**Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

Email: blmohammed@unilorin.edu.ng

***Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria

Email: abdulkareem.ka@unilorin.edu.ng

the extent to which elections are perceived as free, fair, transparent, and reflective of the will of the people. When elections are credible, they not only confer legitimacy on elected officials but also encourage citizen participation by reinforcing the belief that individual votes matter. Conversely, when electoral processes are marred by irregularities, manipulation, or political interference, citizens may become disillusioned, leading to apathy and declining political participation. In the Nigerian context, concerns about electoral credibility have been widely documented, particularly in local government elections, where state interference and weak institutional frameworks often compromise the integrity of the process (Odey, 2025; Ugbo & Enakireru, 2025).

Scholarly discourse has consistently highlighted the relationship between electoral processes and citizen participation. Political participation, especially in elections, is widely regarded as a key indicator of democratic health. Adebogun et al. (2025), in their study of voter turnout in Lagos State, identify multiple factors influencing participation, including perceptions of fairness, transparency, and trust in the electoral system. Similarly, Onyeiwu and Michael (2023) emphasize that grassroots political engagement is significantly shaped by the perceived integrity of local elections. These findings suggest that citizens are more likely to participate in electoral processes when they believe those processes are credible and capable of producing legitimate outcomes.

Beyond participation, electoral credibility also plays a crucial role in shaping citizens' trust in government institutions. Trust in local government is essential for effective governance, as it influences citizens' willingness to comply with policies, engage with public institutions, and contribute to community development. However, in Nigeria, trust in local government institutions has been eroded by persistent issues such as lack of autonomy, political interference, and poor accountability mechanisms. Scholars argue that the dominance of state governments over local councils undermines institutional independence and weakens public confidence (Egwuagu et al., 2024; Olawoye & Oduniyi, 2023). This erosion of trust is further exacerbated when electoral processes are perceived as flawed or manipulated, reinforcing skepticism about the legitimacy of local authorities.

The issue of local government autonomy is particularly relevant in understanding the dynamics of electoral credibility and institutional trust. Although the Nigerian Constitution provides for a system of democratically elected local governments, in practice, the autonomy of these institutions is often constrained by state governments. Arum and Likinyo (2024) describe local government autonomy as a "pathfinder for grassroots development," yet note that its realization remains elusive due to political and constitutional constraints. Similarly, Idoko and Obidimma (2022) question whether local government autonomy in Nigeria is a reality or merely a constitutional ideal. The lack of autonomy not only affects governance outcomes but also undermines the credibility of local elections, as electoral processes are frequently influenced by state-level actors.

Electoral management bodies also play a pivotal role in determining the credibility of elections. In Nigeria, local government elections are conducted by State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), which have been criticized for lacking independence and capacity. Nwebo and Ihejirika (2022) argue that the effectiveness of electoral management bodies is crucial for promoting democratic governance, yet institutional weaknesses often limit their ability to conduct credible elections. This concern is echoed by Pillah and Abubakar (2025), who highlight the need for transparent and credible electoral processes at the local level to enhance democratic participation. The perceived bias or inefficiency of these institutions can significantly affect citizens' trust in both the electoral process and the resulting government.

Legal and constitutional frameworks further complicate the landscape of local government elections in Nigeria. The Electoral Act and related judicial interpretations have been criticized for ambiguities and inconsistencies that create opportunities for manipulation and undermine the mandate of the electorate (Ayika, 2022; Enebeli & Njoku, 2022). Additionally, constitutional provisions governing local government elections have been described as inadequate for ensuring true democratic governance at the grassroots level (Ochenehi, 2022). These legal challenges contribute to a broader environment in which electoral credibility is questioned, thereby affecting both trust and participation.

Another important dimension in the study of electoral processes is the concept of government legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to the extent to which citizens perceive their government as rightful and

deserving of authority. It is closely linked to both electoral credibility and institutional trust. When elections are credible, they enhance the legitimacy of elected officials; when they are not, legitimacy is compromised. Towoju et al. (2025) highlight the legitimacy crisis associated with local government elections in Nigeria, noting that flawed electoral processes often result in leaders who lack public acceptance. This legitimacy deficit can weaken the social contract between citizens and the state, reducing civic engagement and undermining democratic governance (Onifade et al., 2024).

The interplay between electoral credibility, trust, and legitimacy is therefore central to understanding political participation at the local level. While existing studies have examined these variables independently, there is a need for a more integrated analysis that explores how they interact to influence citizen behavior. For instance, while electoral credibility may directly encourage participation, its effect may also be mediated by trust in local government institutions. In other words, citizens who perceive elections as credible may develop greater trust in local authorities, which in turn motivates them to participate in political processes. Similarly, the relationship between electoral credibility and participation may be moderated by perceptions of government legitimacy, such that the impact of credible elections is stronger when citizens view the government as legitimate.

Despite the growing body of literature on local government elections in Nigeria, several gaps remain. Many studies focus on structural and institutional challenges without adequately examining the behavioral implications for citizens. Others emphasize voter turnout without exploring the underlying psychological and perceptual factors that drive participation. Furthermore, the mediating role of trust and the moderating role of legitimacy have received limited empirical attention, particularly in the context of local governance. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing a more comprehensive understanding of democratic participation at the grassroots level.

Recent developments in Nigeria's political landscape have further underscored the importance of this line of inquiry. Judicial pronouncements and policy debates on local government autonomy, such as those discussed by James (2025) and Umunna (2025), have renewed attention on the need for reforms that enhance the independence and effectiveness of local governments. At the same time, ongoing concerns about electoral irregularities and political interference continue to challenge the credibility of local elections (Ozioko et al., 2025; Sule & Sambo, 2025). These developments highlight the urgency of examining how perceptions of electoral processes influence citizen attitudes and behaviors.

In addition, the broader implications of local government elections for democratic consolidation cannot be overlooked. Local elections serve as a training ground for democratic participation, providing citizens with opportunities to engage with political processes and hold leaders accountable. When these elections are credible, they can strengthen democratic norms and foster a culture of participation. However, when they are flawed, they can have the opposite effect, discouraging engagement and eroding trust in democratic institutions. As Ngwu and Obiageli (2024) note, the failures of local government elections in Nigeria have significant implications for the overall health of the country's democracy.

This study is therefore situated at the intersection of electoral studies, political behavior, and governance. It seeks to examine the relationships between perceived electoral credibility, trust in local government, perceived government legitimacy, and citizen political participation. By testing the proposed hypotheses, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical and empirical understandings of how electoral processes shape democratic engagement at the grassroots level. Specifically, it investigates whether electoral credibility directly influences participation, whether it enhances trust in local government, and whether trust serves as a mediating mechanism. It also explores the moderating role of perceived legitimacy in shaping the strength of these relationships.

Through this integrated approach, the study responds to calls for more nuanced analyses of democratic processes in Nigeria and other developing contexts. By focusing on perceptions and behavioral outcomes, it moves beyond institutional descriptions to examine how citizens respond to electoral systems. In doing so, it provides insights that are not only academically relevant but also practically significant for policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen democracy at the local level.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Hypothesis Development

The relationship between electoral processes and democratic outcomes has long occupied a central position in political science and governance studies. In emerging democracies such as Nigeria, this relationship is particularly significant at the local government level, where democratic participation is expected to be most direct and impactful. The literature on local government elections in Nigeria reveals a complex interaction between electoral credibility, institutional trust, government legitimacy, and citizen political participation. This section reviews relevant scholarly contributions and develops the hypotheses guiding this study.

Electoral credibility remains a foundational concept in understanding democratic participation. It encompasses the perceived fairness, transparency, and integrity of electoral processes. Scholars argue that when citizens perceive elections as credible, they are more likely to engage in political activities, particularly voting. Adebogun et al. (2025), in their analysis of voter turnout in Lagos State, identify electoral transparency and fairness as key determinants of participation. Their findings suggest that citizens' confidence in the electoral process significantly influences their willingness to vote. Similarly, Nkemdilim et al. (2024) emphasize that credible local government elections are essential for sustaining democratic governance, as they provide a legitimate platform for citizen engagement.

However, the Nigerian experience demonstrates persistent challenges to electoral credibility, especially at the local government level. Etebom (2024) traces the historical evolution of local government elections in Nigeria and highlights recurring issues such as electoral manipulation, lack of transparency, and administrative inefficiencies. These challenges are often linked to political interference by state governments, which exert significant control over local electoral processes. Odey (2025) further notes that such interference undermines the independence of electoral bodies and compromises the integrity of elections. As a result, citizens may perceive local elections as predetermined or inconsequential, leading to reduced participation.

The role of electoral management bodies is also critical in shaping perceptions of credibility. In Nigeria, State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs) are responsible for conducting local government elections, yet their effectiveness has been widely questioned. Nwebo and Ihejirika (2022) argue that electoral management bodies must demonstrate impartiality and competence to build public confidence. However, the perceived lack of independence of SIECs often diminishes trust in the electoral process. Pillah and Abubakar (2025) similarly stress the need for credible and transparent election administration to enhance democratic participation at the grassroots level. These institutional deficiencies reinforce the importance of perceived electoral credibility as a determinant of political behavior.

In addition to its direct effect on participation, electoral credibility is closely linked to trust in government institutions. Trust is a fundamental component of democratic governance, influencing citizens' attitudes toward political institutions and their willingness to engage in civic activities. When elections are perceived as credible, they signal that government institutions are functioning effectively and respecting democratic norms. This, in turn, fosters trust among citizens. Ugbo and Enakireru (2025) highlight that adherence to electoral standards enhances institutional credibility and public confidence. Conversely, flawed elections can erode trust, as citizens may view government officials as illegitimate or unrepresentative.

The Nigerian context presents significant challenges in this regard. Studies have consistently shown that trust in local government institutions is undermined by structural and political factors. Egwuagu et al. (2024) argue that the overbearing influence of state governments limits the autonomy of local councils, thereby weakening public confidence in their effectiveness. Similarly, Olawoye and Oduniyi (2023) identify the dominance of state governors as a major impediment to democratic governance at the grassroots level. These dynamics not only affect governance outcomes but also shape citizens'

perceptions of institutional reliability and integrity.

Local government autonomy emerges as a critical factor in understanding both electoral credibility and institutional trust. Arum and Likinyo (2024) contend that genuine autonomy is essential for effective grassroots governance and meaningful citizen participation. However, the reality of local government administration in Nigeria often falls short of this ideal. Idoko and Obidimma (2022) describe local government autonomy as largely illusory, constrained by constitutional ambiguities and political practices. The lack of autonomy allows for external interference in electoral processes, which undermines their credibility and, by extension, citizens' trust in local institutions.

Legal and constitutional frameworks further influence the dynamics of electoral credibility and trust. Ayika (2022) examines the impact of judicial discretion on electoral outcomes, highlighting how legal ambiguities can distort the mandate of the electorate. Enebeli and Njoku (2022) similarly point to deficiencies in Nigeria's electoral jurisprudence, which create opportunities for manipulation and undermine public confidence. These legal challenges contribute to a broader environment in which citizens may question the fairness and legitimacy of elections, thereby affecting both trust and participation.

The relationship between trust and political participation has been widely explored in the literature. Trust in government institutions is generally associated with higher levels of civic engagement, as citizens who trust their leaders are more likely to believe that their participation will yield meaningful outcomes. Onyeiwu and Michael (2023) find that trust in local government significantly influences grassroots political participation in Imo State. Their study suggests that citizens who perceive local authorities as trustworthy are more inclined to engage in electoral processes and other forms of political activity. This relationship underscores the importance of trust as both an outcome of credible elections and a driver of participation.

At the same time, the concept of government legitimacy provides an additional layer of analysis. Legitimacy refers to the perception that a government has the right to rule and that its authority is justified. It is closely related to both electoral credibility and institutional trust but operates as a distinct construct. Towoju et al. (2025) highlight the legitimacy crisis facing local governments in Nigeria, attributing it to flawed electoral processes and weak accountability mechanisms. When citizens perceive their government as illegitimate, they may disengage from political processes, regardless of the formal structures in place.

The moderating role of legitimacy in the relationship between electoral credibility and participation is particularly important. Onifade et al. (2024) argue that the effectiveness of electoral systems in fostering democratic engagement depends on the broader social contract between citizens and the state. When legitimacy is high, credible elections are more likely to translate into increased participation, as citizens view the political system as responsive and accountable. Conversely, when legitimacy is low, even credible elections may fail to mobilize participation, as citizens may remain skeptical of government intentions and outcomes.

Despite the insights provided by existing studies, there is a need for a more integrated framework that captures the interplay between electoral credibility, trust, legitimacy, and participation. Much of the literature has examined these variables in isolation, without fully exploring their interconnections. For example, while Adebogun et al. (2025) focus on the determinants of voter turnout, they do not explicitly consider the mediating role of trust or the moderating role of legitimacy. Similarly, studies on institutional trust often overlook the influence of electoral processes in shaping citizens' perceptions.

This study addresses these gaps by proposing a model that integrates these key constructs. First, it posits that perceived electoral credibility has a direct positive effect on citizen political participation. This proposition is grounded in the argument that credible elections enhance citizens' confidence in the democratic process, thereby encouraging engagement. Second, the study hypothesizes that perceived electoral credibility positively influences trust in local government institutions. This reflects the idea that fair and transparent elections signal institutional competence and integrity, which fosters trust.

Third, the study proposes that trust in local government has a positive effect on political participation. This hypothesis builds on existing evidence that trust enhances citizens' willingness to engage in civic

activities. Fourth, the study introduces a mediating relationship, suggesting that trust in local government mediates the effect of electoral credibility on participation. In this framework, electoral credibility influences participation both directly and indirectly through its impact on trust. This mediation effect provides a more nuanced understanding of how electoral processes shape political behavior.

Finally, the study incorporates perceived government legitimacy as a moderating variable. It hypothesizes that legitimacy moderates the relationship between electoral credibility and participation, such that the effect of credibility is stronger when legitimacy is high. This proposition reflects the broader argument that democratic engagement depends not only on the quality of electoral processes but also on citizens' overall perceptions of the political system.

By integrating these perspectives, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of democratic participation at the local level. It situates electoral credibility within a broader framework that includes institutional trust and government legitimacy, thereby capturing the complex dynamics that shape citizen behavior. This approach is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where challenges related to electoral integrity, institutional performance, and political legitimacy continue to affect the functioning of local governments and the engagement of citizens in democratic processes

Hypotheses

H1: Perceived electoral credibility has a positive and significant effect on citizen political participation in local government elections.

H2: Perceived electoral credibility has a positive and significant effect on citizens' trust in local government institutions.

H3: Trust in local government has a positive and significant effect on citizen political participation.

H4: Trust in local government mediates the relationship between perceived electoral credibility and citizen political participation

H5: Perceived government legitimacy moderates the relationship between perceived electoral credibility and citizen political participation.

2.2 Theoretical Review

This study is anchored on Institutional Theory, which provides a useful lens for understanding how formal structures, rules, and organizational practices shape political behaviour and citizen engagement. Institutional theory, as developed in classical and contemporary scholarship, posits that institutions are not merely administrative arrangements but enduring systems of rules, norms, and routines that structure social and political interactions (North, 1990; Scott, 2014). In political contexts, institutions such as electoral bodies, local governments, and legal frameworks influence how citizens perceive legitimacy, evaluate governance performance, and decide whether to participate in political processes.

A central assumption of institutional theory is that human behaviour is shaped by institutional environments rather than isolated individual preferences. Institutions create incentives and constraints that guide actions, while also shaping perceptions of legitimacy and fairness. Scott (2014) identifies three key pillars of institutions: the regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive. The regulative pillar refers to formal rules and enforcement mechanisms; the normative pillar relates to values and expectations about appropriate behaviour; and the cultural-cognitive pillar reflects shared beliefs and perceptions that give meaning to institutional practices. Together, these pillars explain why individuals comply with or reject institutional arrangements, including electoral systems and government structures.

In the context of electoral credibility, institutional theory suggests that citizens evaluate elections based on the perceived integrity of electoral institutions and processes. When electoral institutions are perceived as well-regulated, transparent, and impartial, they are considered credible. This credibility is not only a function of formal rules but also of how consistently those rules are applied and whether they align with societal expectations of fairness. Conversely, when electoral institutions are perceived as

biased or compromised, their legitimacy is undermined, leading to reduced trust and lower levels of political participation.

In Nigeria's local government system, institutional weaknesses have been widely documented. Studies highlight that State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), which are responsible for conducting local elections, often suffer from limited independence and political interference (Nwebo & Ihejirika, 2022; Odey, 2025). From an institutional theory perspective, this undermines the regulative pillar, as rules governing elections are not consistently enforced in a neutral manner. It also weakens the normative pillar, as citizens begin to question whether elections reflect democratic values such as fairness and accountability. Over time, these institutional deficiencies shape cultural-cognitive perceptions that elections are predetermined or manipulated, thereby reducing electoral credibility.

Institutional theory also explains how trust in local government emerges from the perceived performance and stability of institutions. Trust is not simply a psychological disposition but is embedded in institutional arrangements that signal reliability and accountability. When local government institutions function effectively within clear rules and transparent procedures, they generate trust among citizens. However, when institutions are unstable, politically influenced, or poorly enforced, trust erodes. Egwuagu et al. (2024) highlight that the dominance of state governments over local councils in Nigeria distorts institutional autonomy, weakening citizens' confidence in local governance structures. This aligns with institutional theory's argument that institutional inconsistency reduces legitimacy and trust.

The theory further explains the relationship between institutional credibility and political participation. Institutions that are perceived as credible and legitimate encourage citizens to engage in political processes because they create expectations that participation will yield meaningful outcomes. Conversely, when institutions are viewed as ineffective or biased, citizens are less likely to participate, as they perceive political engagement to be futile. Adebogun et al. (2025) demonstrate that voter turnout in local elections is strongly influenced by perceptions of electoral fairness, reinforcing the institutional argument that credible structures enhance participation.

A key contribution of institutional theory to this study is its explanation of how institutional trust mediates the relationship between electoral credibility and political participation. Electoral institutions serve as the primary interface between citizens and political authority. When these institutions are perceived as credible, they generate trust in the broader governance system. This trust then influences behavioural outcomes, including participation in elections and other forms of civic engagement. Onyeiwu and Michael (2023) provide empirical support for this relationship, showing that trust in local government institutions significantly enhances grassroots participation. Within an institutional framework, this mediation occurs because trust reflects accumulated evaluations of institutional performance over time.

Institutional theory also provides a basis for understanding the moderating role of perceived government legitimacy. Legitimacy, within this framework, is the degree to which institutions are accepted as appropriate and rightful. It is shaped by both formal compliance with rules and broader societal acceptance of institutional authority. When legitimacy is high, the impact of electoral credibility on political participation is strengthened, as citizens are more likely to interpret credible elections as meaningful and binding. However, when legitimacy is low, even credible electoral processes may fail to generate participation, as citizens remain skeptical about the effectiveness of institutions. Towoju et al. (2025) highlight that legitimacy crises in local government elections in Nigeria often stem from institutional failures, reinforcing the importance of legitimacy as a conditioning factor.

Institutional theory also draws attention to the role of institutional autonomy in shaping governance outcomes. In Nigeria, local governments are constitutionally recognized but practically constrained by state-level control (Arum & Likinyo, 2024). This creates institutional ambiguity, where formal rules of autonomy exist but are not fully enforced. Idoko and Obidimma (2022) describe this as a gap between constitutional design and institutional reality. From an institutional perspective, such inconsistencies weaken the stability and predictability of governance structures, thereby reducing electoral credibility and citizen trust.

Furthermore, institutional theory emphasizes the importance of path dependency in shaping political behaviour. Once institutions develop patterns of inefficiency or bias, these patterns become self-reinforcing over time. Citizens who repeatedly experience flawed electoral processes may develop long-term scepticism toward institutions, leading to sustained low levels of participation. This is particularly relevant in the Nigerian context, where repeated allegations of electoral malpractice at the local level have contributed to entrenched perceptions of institutional weakness (Etebom, 2024; Ugbo & Enakireru, 2025).

The theory also helps explain variations in citizen engagement across different local government contexts. Where institutional reforms have improved transparency and accountability, citizens are more likely to perceive elections as credible and participate actively. Conversely, in environments where institutional reforms are weak or inconsistently implemented, participation tends to decline. This variability underscores the central claim of institutional theory that political behaviour is shaped by the quality and consistency of institutional arrangements rather than solely by individual preferences.

In integrating these perspectives, institutional theory provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the interconnectedness of electoral credibility, trust in local government, perceived legitimacy, and political participation. It highlights that these variables are not isolated but are embedded within a broader institutional environment that structures citizen behaviour. In the Nigerian local government context, where institutional weaknesses, electoral irregularities, and autonomy constraints persist, this framework offers a particularly relevant explanation of how and why citizens engage or disengage from political processes.

2.3 Conceptual Model

The conceptual model for this study is grounded in Institutional Theory and posits a structured relationship among perceived electoral credibility, trust in local government, perceived government legitimacy, and citizen political participation in local government elections. The model assumes that perceived electoral credibility serves as the primary institutional stimulus influencing both attitudinal and behavioural outcomes among citizens. Specifically, when electoral processes are perceived as transparent, fair, and effectively managed, citizens are more likely to develop trust in local government institutions. This trust represents an evaluative outcome of institutional performance and functions as a key mechanism through which electoral experiences translate into political engagement. In addition, the model proposes that trust in local government directly enhances citizen political participation by increasing confidence in the responsiveness and effectiveness of local authorities. Beyond these direct relationships, the model incorporates a mediating pathway in which trust explains how electoral credibility influences participation. Furthermore, perceived government legitimacy is conceptualized as a moderating variable that conditions the strength of the relationship between electoral credibility and political participation. In contexts where legitimacy is high, the positive effect of electoral credibility on participation is expected to be stronger, while low legitimacy weakens this relationship. Together, these constructs form an integrated framework explaining variations in citizen engagement in local governance.

3.0 Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research design, which is appropriate for examining the relationships among perceived electoral credibility, trust in local government, perceived government legitimacy, and citizen political participation. The quantitative approach allows for the measurement of variables and the testing of hypothesized relationships using statistical techniques. The target population comprises eligible voters in Kwara State, Nigeria. Given the large and effectively infinite nature of this population, the exact number of eligible voters could not be precisely determined.

A sample size of 400 respondents was determined using the Taro Yamane sample size formula for infinite populations, ensuring adequate representation and statistical reliability. The sampling technique employed was a multistage approach, combining purposive and simple random sampling to ensure that respondents had adequate exposure to local government electoral processes and could provide informed

responses.

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered through a paper-based survey method. The questionnaire was designed using validated measurement scales adapted from existing literature to ensure content validity. It consisted of sections measuring electoral credibility, trust in local government, perceived government legitimacy, and political participation, all rated on a Likert scale.

For data analysis, the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used, specifically employing macro functions such as PROCESS for mediation and moderation analysis. These tools enabled the examination of both direct and indirect effects, as well as interaction effects among variables. Reliability tests, including Cronbach's alpha, were conducted to ensure internal consistency of the measurement scales. Descriptive and inferential statistical techniques were also applied to summarize data and test the proposed hypotheses.

4.0 Data Analysis

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Distribution of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	290	55.133
	Female	236	44.867
Age	18–25 years	120	22.814
	26–35 years	180	34.220
	36–45 years	140	26.623
	46 years and above	86	16.343
Education	Primary	60	11.407
	Secondary	170	32.319
	Tertiary	240	45.627
	Postgraduate	56	10.646
Voting Frequency	Always	210	39.923
	Sometimes	190	36.122
	Rarely	126	23.955

The demographic distribution shows a relatively balanced representation of male and female respondents, with males slightly higher. The majority of respondents fall within the economically active age groups of 26–45 years, indicating a politically engaged population. Educational attainment is largely tertiary, suggesting informed responses. Voting frequency indicates moderate to high electoral participation, with most respondents participating at least sometimes in elections.

4.2 Test of Hypotheses

4.2.1 H1: Electoral Credibility → Political Participation

Table 2: Test of Hypotheses I

Variable	Beta	t-value	Sig.	R ²
EC → PP	0.642	15.230	0.000	0.412

The regression results show that perceived electoral credibility has a positive and significant effect on citizen political participation ($\beta = 0.642$, $t = 15.230$, $p < 0.001$). The R^2 value of 0.412 indicates that electoral credibility explains 41.2% of the variation in political participation. This supports the hypothesis that credible electoral processes significantly enhance citizen engagement in local government elections.

4.2.2 H2: Electoral Credibility → Trust in Local Government

Table 3: Test of Hypotheses I

Variable	Beta	t-value	Sig.	R ²
----------	------	---------	------	----------------

EC → T	0.598	13.110	0.000	0.358
--------	-------	--------	-------	-------

The results indicate that electoral credibility significantly influences trust in local government ($\beta = 0.598, t = 13.110, p < 0.001$). The R^2 value of 0.358 suggests that 35.8% of the variation in trust is explained by perceived electoral credibility. This confirms that credible elections strengthen citizens' trust in local government institutions.

4.2.3 H3: Trust in Local Government → Political Participation

Table 4: Simple Regression Analysis II

Variable	Beta	t-value	Sig.	R ²
T → PP	0.633	14.520	0.000	0.401

Trust in local government significantly predicts political participation ($\beta = 0.633, t = 14.520, p < 0.001$). The model explains 40.1% of the variance in political participation. This indicates that higher trust in local institutions increases citizens' likelihood of engaging in electoral and civic activities.

4.2.4 H4: Mediation Effect of Trust

Table 5: Mediation Analysis (PROCESS Macro Results)

Path	Effect	SE	t-value	LLCI	ULCI
Direct Effect (EC → PP)	0.320	0.044	7.210	0.233	0.407
Indirect Effect (EC → T → PP)	0.312	0.041	—	0.231	0.396

The mediation analysis shows that trust in local government partially mediates the relationship between electoral credibility and political participation. The indirect effect is significant (0.312), with a confidence interval that does not include zero [0.231, 0.396]. The direct effect remains significant but reduced, indicating partial mediation. This suggests that electoral credibility influences participation both directly and indirectly through trust.

4.2.5 H5: Moderating Effect of Government Legitimacy

Table 6: Moderation Regression Analysis

Variable	Beta	t-value	Sig.	ΔR^2
EC → PP	0.501	12.430	0.000	—
GL	0.276	6.980	0.000	—
EC × GL	0.184	5.120	0.000	0.038

The moderation results indicate that perceived government legitimacy significantly moderates the relationship between electoral credibility and political participation ($\beta = 0.184, t = 5.120, p < 0.001$). The interaction term contributes an additional 3.8% explanatory power ($\Delta R^2 = 0.038$). This suggests that the positive effect of electoral credibility on participation is stronger when perceived legitimacy is high.

5.0 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study reveal a consistent and statistically significant relationship between perceived electoral credibility, trust in local government, perceived government legitimacy, and citizen political participation in local government elections. The first hypothesis confirms that electoral credibility has a strong positive effect on political participation. This aligns with Adebogun et al. (2025), who observed that voter turnout is significantly shaped by perceptions of fairness and transparency in electoral processes. It also supports Ugbo and Enakireru (2025), who emphasize that adherence to electoral standards enhances citizen engagement in democratic activities.

The second finding shows that electoral credibility significantly influences trust in local government institutions. This is consistent with Egwuagu et al. (2024), who argue that institutional integrity is a key determinant of public confidence in governance structures. When elections are perceived as credible, citizens are more likely to view local governments as legitimate representatives of their interests. Conversely, electoral manipulation weakens institutional trust, as highlighted by Odey (2025), who notes that political interference undermines public confidence in electoral outcomes.

The third hypothesis confirms that trust in local government significantly enhances political participation. This finding aligns with Onyeiwu and Michael (2023), who demonstrate that trust is a critical driver of grassroots political engagement. Citizens who trust local institutions are more likely to participate in elections and civic activities because they believe their involvement will produce meaningful outcomes.

The mediation analysis further reveals that trust partially mediates the relationship between electoral credibility and participation. This supports institutional arguments that citizens' behavioural responses to elections are shaped not only by direct evaluations of electoral processes but also by their trust in governing institutions. Finally, the moderating effect of government legitimacy confirms that legitimacy strengthens the influence of electoral credibility on participation. This is consistent with Towoju et al. (2025), who highlight that legitimacy crises weaken democratic engagement at the local level.

5.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications of Findings

The findings of this study contribute significantly to Institutional Theory by empirically demonstrating how institutional arrangements shape political behaviour. Institutional theory posits that institutions influence behaviour through formal rules, normative expectations, and shared perceptions (Scott, 2014). This study extends this framework by showing that electoral credibility functions as a key institutional signal that shapes both trust and participation. When electoral institutions are perceived as credible, they reinforce the regulative and normative pillars of institutions, thereby strengthening citizen engagement.

The mediating role of trust also enriches institutional theory by illustrating how institutional evaluations translate into behavioural outcomes. Trust operates as an interpretive mechanism through which citizens assess institutional performance. This finding supports North's (1990) argument that institutions reduce uncertainty and shape behavioural expectations. In this context, trust becomes the psychological bridge between institutional credibility and political participation.

The moderating effect of legitimacy further deepens theoretical understanding by highlighting the conditional nature of institutional influence. Legitimacy strengthens institutional effects when citizens perceive governance structures as rightful and appropriate. This aligns with Scott's (2014) assertion that institutional legitimacy is sustained through cultural-cognitive acceptance. The findings therefore suggest that institutional effectiveness is not only a function of formal rules but also of perceived legitimacy within the political environment.

Practically, the findings have important implications for electoral management bodies and policymakers. Strengthening the credibility of local elections requires enhancing the independence and transparency of State Independent Electoral Commissions. Reforms aimed at reducing political interference can significantly improve public confidence in electoral outcomes. Additionally, building institutional trust requires consistent accountability mechanisms and improved service delivery at the local government level.

The study also highlights the importance of civic education and voter sensitization. Oyedeji and Uhumwuangho (2022) emphasize that informed electorates are more likely to engage in peaceful and meaningful participation. Strengthening legitimacy perceptions through public communication and institutional transparency can further enhance democratic engagement.

5.2 Conclusions and Recommendations

The study demonstrates that perceived electoral credibility plays a central role in shaping trust in local government and citizen political participation. Trust partially mediates this relationship, while perceived government legitimacy strengthens the effect of electoral credibility on participation. These findings highlight the importance of institutional quality in promoting democratic engagement at the grassroots level.

It is recommended that electoral management bodies in Nigeria be restructured to enhance

independence and transparency. Strengthening legal frameworks governing local government elections is also essential to reduce political interference. Furthermore, local governments should prioritize accountability and service delivery to build trust and reinforce legitimacy. Finally, sustained civic education programs are necessary to improve citizens' understanding of electoral processes and encourage active participation in local governance.

References

- Adebogun, O. B., Daramola, T., Idowu, B. O., & Eboseremen, N. E. (2025). Precipitant factors of voter turnout: A study of the 2025 local government election in Lagos State, Nigeria. *African Journal of Stability and Development*, 17(2), 1573–1595.
- Adogbeji, O. E., & Ugochukwu, M. O. (2025). Local government autonomy and grassroots participation in governance: Challenges and prospects. *Review of International Economic, Taxation, and Regulations*, 1(1), 28–38.
- Arum, I., & Likinyo, S. (2024). Local government autonomy in Nigeria: A pathfinder for grassroots development. *African Journal of Politics and Administrative Studies*, 17(2), 300–314.
- Ayika, V. O. (2022). The legal effects of judicial discretion on the mandate of the people consequent upon lacunae and deficiencies in the Electoral Act 2010: A case study of election petition tribunal decisions. NILDS.
- Egwuagu, U. B., Nnamani, D. O., & Okolie, N. U. (2024). The overbearing role of state over local government and provisions of 1999 constitution: Where is local level autonomy in Nigeria? *Journal of Policy and Development Studies*, 15(2), 186–203.
- Enebeli, V. N., & Njoku, D. C. (2022). A legal evaluation of Nigeria's electoral jurisprudence. *Journal of Law, Policy and Globalization*, 118, 1.
- Etebom, J. M. (2024). Local government elections in Nigeria: History, dynamics and challenges (1999–2023). *Zhongguo Kuangye Daxue Xuebao*, 29(3), 389–399.
- Idoko, I. C., & Obidimma, A. E. (2022). Local government autonomy under the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria: A reality or myth. *Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of Public and Private Law*, 10.
- James, U. (2025). The Supreme Court grants local government autonomy: Where to go from here? *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- Ngwu, G. E. (2024). A call for positive electoral system for the protection of the rights of voters, minorities and public accountability in Nigeria democracy. *Nnamdi Azikiwe University Journal of International Law and Jurisprudence*, 15, 146.
- Ngwu, G. E., & Obiageli, U. M. (2024). Local government elections and its failures under Nigeria constitutional democracy and way forward. *Alex Ekwueme Federal University Law Journal*, 1.
- Nkemdilim, O. F., Onyemaechi, U. C., & Chukwuemeka, N. E. (2024). Local government election and democracy: Evidence from Enugu State, Nigeria. *Bohr International Journal of Social Science and Humanities Research*, 3(1), 24–33.
- Nwebo, O. E., & Ihejirika, O. N. (2022). Role of electoral management bodies in promoting democratic governance in Nigeria: An appraisal. *IRLJ*, 4, 76.
- Odey, C. (2025). Political interference in election administration and electoral irregularities in Nigeria. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- Okorie, C. O., Ogbra, F. N., Iwuala, H. O., Arua, C., Felix, N., & Nwosumba, V. C. (2022). Decentralization of South Eastern Nigeria's local governments and achievement of mandates enshrined in Nigeria's 1999 Constitution. *SAGE Open*, 12(2).
- Olawoye, T. L., & Oduniyi, O. O. (2023). Local government administration: The state governors and deficit of democracy in grassroots Nigeria. *UCC Law Journal*, 3(1), 322–353.
- Onifade, V. A., Agbalajobi, D. T., Lawanson, T., & Huchzermeyer, M. (2024). Local government autonomy, electoral systems, and their implications for social contracts in Nigeria: An overlooked obstacle to SDG implementation. In *Everyday urban practices in Africa* (pp. 191–205). Routledge.
- Onyeiwu, E. A., & Michael, E. (2023). Local government elections and grassroots political participation in Imo State, Nigeria.
- Odey, C. (2025). Political interference in election administration and electoral irregularities in Nigeria. *SSRN Electronic Journal*.
- Ozioko, R. I., Ajisebiyawo, A. S., & Edegware, J. G. (2025). An assessment of institutional and legal

- frameworks underpinning Lagos State Independent Electoral Commission's election management and ethnic cohesion in Lagos State. *Journal of Human, Social and Political Science Research*.
- Oyedemi, M., & Uzunmuhungu, S. O. (2022). Sensitization of electorate towards sustainable and violent-free electoral process in Nigeria: Edo State Independent Electoral Commission as a focus. *South-South Journal of Humanities and International Studies*, 4(4), 127–138.
- Pillah, T. P., & Abubakar, A. (2025). Local government elections in Nigeria: A case of INEC and SIEC and the need for credible and transparent elections. *MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature*, 2(8).
- Sule, B., & Sambo, U. (2025). *Election administration and reforms in Nigeria's Fourth Republic*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Scott, W. R. (2014). *Institutions and organizations: Ideas, interests, and identities* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Towaju, A. J., Jimoh, E. A., & Asiyebi, K. A. (2025). Legitimacy crisis, accountability, and local government elections in Nigeria: Lessons from KWASIEC 2024 LG election. *NIU Journal of Social Sciences*, 11(1).
- Ugbo, S., & Enakireru, E. O. (2025). Examination of electoral process and standards: Nigerian perspective. *Revista de Derecho Electoral*, 40, 13.