

The Independent National Electoral Commission, Political Party
Configurations and Credibility of the 2011 and 2015 Elections

By

Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, Aaron O. Ogundiwin
Department of Political Science and Public Administration,
Babcock University, Ogun State, Nigeria
Email: jumoyin@yahoo.co.uk ; olaaaron@yahoo.com
Mobile: 0802-306-5842, 0806-956-1628; 0803-767-9044

Abstract

The point of departure for this paper is Joseph Stalin's observation that "those who cast the votes decide nothing; those who count the votes decide everything." In a developing democracy like Nigeria, the power of the electoral management body to determine the outcome of elections cannot be controverted. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was hailed as the deciding factor in producing elections that were largely viewed as credible and fair in 2011. However, the 2015 elections produced elections that, though largely considered free and fair, have been more determinedly contested by political actors in the post-election era. This paper argues that the major shifts in political party configurations at the national level significantly affected the perception of the role of the INEC and therefore, of the credibility of the 2015 elections. Therefore, this study attempts a comparative analysis of the role of INEC in different political party landscapes in delivering elections adjudged as credible in 2011 and 2015. It relies on a combination of primary and secondary data collected during the 2011 and 2015 elections, elicited through more than 60 interviews with key officials and members of the electorate as well as published reports and media monitoring. It also adopts neo-institutionalism and neo-patrimonialism as frameworks for analysis. Drawing on extant literature which links electoral administration with electoral quality, credibility is measured in this paper in terms of electoral quality or defined as confidence in the electoral process and outcomes.

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Introduction

“...I want to say that conducting elections that are free, fair, peaceful and credible in a country such as Nigeria ... is a very difficult and challenging assignment even under normal circumstances. But under the far from normal circumstances which the new INEC had to conduct the 2011 registration of voters [and] elections, it seemed and felt like an impossible task but we have consistently said that it might be difficult but it was not impossible....” – Attahiru Jega (2012: 57)¹.

“Elections are the apex of the political cycle in Nigeria. They are so important in fact that political leaders have rarely allowed public preferences to get in the way of their preferred results.” – Darren Kew (2010: 499)²

“Those who cast the votes decide nothing; those who count the votes decide everything.” - Joseph Stalin³.

There is a perverseness to the energy and vigour with which political actors contest public office in Nigeria. In a perversion of Juan Linz’s (1990)⁴ definition of democratic consolidation as the establishment of a democratic system that is entrenched to such an extent that democracy becomes seen as “the only game in town”, in Nigeria, it is politics and political competition – even in undemocratic forms – that are seen and pursued as the only game in town. This aberration becomes even more so discernible in the arena of elections, creating thereby a historical tendency towards forms of electoral fraud and manipulation that have greatly hampered democratic consolidation. According to Ibrahim (2007: 3) the outcome of many elections have been so fiercely contested that the survival of the democratic order has been compromised, and the outcome of elections has been the subversion of the democratic process rather than its consolidation. This is what Darren Kew refers to in the quote above, by which political actors perceive elections

¹ Jega, Attahiru. 2012. 2011 General Elections and the Consolidation of the Democratic Process in Nigeria. Text of a Public Lecture delivered at the Centre for Social Research and Advocacy, University of Lagos, Nigeria.

² Kew, Darren. 2010. Nigerian Elections and the Neopatrimonial Paradox: In search of the social contract. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*. 28 (4): 499-521.

³ Cited in Jibrin Ibrahim and Dauda Garuba (2010) A Study of the Independent National Electoral Commission of Nigeria. *CODESRIA Research Reports: Governance and Institution Building, No 1*. Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA.

⁴ Linz, Juan J. 1990. Transitions to Democracy. *Washington Quarterly*, 13 (3): 143-164.

as “the ultimate contest” in do-or-die zero-sum terms, deploying brain and brawn to alter the outcome to suit their personal and selfish ends.

It is within this context that the electoral commission has always been an essential component of suggestions for democratic advancement in Nigeria, and indeed in other democratising African countries. In a landscape littered with desperately ailing and failed institutions, electoral commissions in Nigeria have usually faced dim prospects of performance that could be deemed sufficient to advancing democratic expectations of free, fair and credible elections. Coupled with the political brigandage of the political elites that accompanies electoral contest in Nigeria, the possibility of achieving elections that could be widely judged as fair has always been very slim. The statement above credited to the incumbent chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Professor Attahiru Jega, expresses an acknowledgement of the pervasive pessimism in the period leading up to the 2011 general elections. It is a well-known fact that the difficulties that faced the INEC in 2011 included the overbearing influence wielded by the dominant/ruling party and its incumbent and the propensity for this to be deployed adversarially to scuttle the electoral process, as had been done under the Obasanjo government. This is why the exceptional outcomes of the 2011 general elections in Nigeria with respect to perceptions of credibility are of interest to this paper. However, the 2015 general elections produced elections that though largely considered free and fair, have been more determinedly contested by political actors in the post-election era, especially in states like Rivers, Abia, and others. Unlike the one-party dominant system that produced the 2011 elections, the 2015 elections witnessed the coalescing of the major opposition parties, which had previously been fractured and fractious, into one “mega-party”, resulting in a mainly two-party contest. This paper argues that the major shifts in political party configurations at the national level significantly affected the perception of the role of the INEC and therefore, of the credibility of the 2015 elections. Therefore, this study attempts a comparative analysis of the role of INEC in different political party landscapes in delivering elections adjudged as credible in 2011 and 2015.

In order to achieve the stated objectives of this study, a descriptive and qualitative research was carried out. Four specific data collection techniques were combined which included in-depth interviews, participant and non-participant observation, media monitoring, and documentary review. Primary sources of data included (a) Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials (b) political party leaders (c) civil society organizations (CSOs) (d) local observers (e) traditional rulers (f) youth groups (g) women leaders (h) religious leaders (i) the judiciary (j) the media (k) members of professional associations (l) international observers (m) NYSC members who served as INEC ad hoc staff (n) Non-governmental organizations (o) the general electorate, and (p) field observations on election day and on field visits to all parts of the state. Secondary sources of data included (a) national and regional newspapers (b) the internet (c) websites of relevant agencies such as INEC (d) television and internet news reports and analysis on the elections (e) publications of various agencies and political parties (f) textbooks (g) reports of international and local observers, amongst others. The data collected were analysed using content analysis.

This paper is in three main parts. Following the introductory section, the first substantive section reviews the literature on elections, credibility of elections, electoral integrity and the role of electoral administration in all these. The second part of the paper analyses the historical role of political parties in Nigeria's fitful attempts at democratic consolidation. The third substantive section analyses the role of political party configuration in the perceptions of electoral credibility and INEC's role in the 2011 and 2015 elections compared.

Elections, Electoral Administration and Electoral Credibility: A Conceptual Note

While democracy must be more than free elections, it's also true... that it cannot be less. – Kofi Annan (27 June 2000)⁵

Democracy witnessed a global resurgence in the post-Cold War era described by Samuel P. Huntington (1991)⁶ as 'the third wave', during which many authoritarian

⁵ Annan, Kofi. Speech at the International Conference, "Towards a Community of Democracies," Warsaw, 27 June 2000. UN Press Release SG/SM/7467.

regimes around the world, experiencing pressures for change, turned towards democratic forms of government. It seems however that the democratic tide, described as Africa's second wave of democratisation, was somewhat moderated in many African states, as it soon became apparent that many of the regimes that emerged in this period did not fully appropriate democratic values while also retaining many features of the preceding autocratic regime. These 'hybrid regimes' are described by Diamond (2002)⁷ and van de Walle (2002)⁸ as "situations in which elements of democracy and liberal politics operate in contexts where neo-patrimonialism and authoritarian tendencies also remain." Adebani and Obadare (2011)⁹ have contended that such hybridity in the context of free, fair and competitive elections as a fundamental principle of democratic practice, and as *the* foundational ethos of democracy, is a contradiction in terms.

In the first place, this argument situates elections at the core of any enterprise to value democracy, positing a procedural pre-condition for the substantive aspects of democracy. This is the underlying assumption of Kofi Annan's quote above. Indeed, according to Joseph Schumpeter (1947)¹⁰, democracy is "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (cf. Dahl 1971; Diamond, Linz & Lipset 1989)¹¹. In the Schumpeterian tradition, thus, democracy is equated with competitive elections, a predominant tendency in the literature which might be altogether misleading in light of the experience of many African states where elections have continued, but substantive democracy has stagnated, if not regressed.

⁶ Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

⁷ Diamond, Larry. 2002. Elections Without Democracy: Thinking About Hybrid Regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2) April: 21–35.

⁸ Van de Walle, Nicolas. 2002. Africa's Range of Regimes. *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2): 66–80.

⁹ Adebani, Wale and Ebenezer Obadare. 2011. The Abrogation of the Electorate: An Emergent African Phenomenon. *Democratization*, 18 (2): 311–335.

¹⁰ Schumpeter, Joseph. 1947. *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, second ed. New York: Harper.

¹¹ Dahl, Robert. 1971. *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press; Diamond, Larry, Juan J. Linz and Seymour M. Lipset. 1989. *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia, Africa and Latin America*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Whilst acknowledging the foregoing caveat, we maintain that elections remain cardinal to any assessment of democracy and democratic consolidation. Agbaje and Adejumobi (2006: 26)¹² assert that “an election is a viable mechanism for consummating representative government” in the sense that it facilitates leadership succession, promotes political accountability and citizen participation, and gives voice and power to the people, a la J. S. Mill. Bratton (1998: 52)¹³ posits in this vein that while “elections do not, in and of themselves, constitute a consolidated democracy,” they, however, “remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments, but as a necessary requisite, for broader democratic consolidation.”

More importantly though, and proceeding from the above, we aver here that it is the *quality* of elections that foreshadows outcomes that enable the advancement of democracy. Election quality has been described as “the extent to which political actors see the entire political process as legitimate and binding” (Elklit and Reynolds 2002: 86-7)¹⁴. In a review of the relevant literature, Omotola (2009)¹⁵ identifies three core issues that have been advanced as central to determining the democratic quality of elections, namely, competition, participation and legitimacy. These indicators are further operationalised to clarify relevant measures that go into identifying free, fair, competitive and credible elections (cf. Lijpart 1997; Bratton 1998; Schedler 2002a; Schedler 2002b; Lindberg 2004)¹⁶.

In recent times, there has been considerable attention by scholars and practitioners to the question of how the conduct and administration of elections affects the quality of elections, especially as defined in terms of confidence in the electoral process and

¹² Agbaje, Adigun and Said Adejumobi. 2006. Do Votes Count? The Travails of Electoral Politics in Nigeria. *Africa Development*, XXXI (3): 25-44.

¹³ Bratton, Michael. 1998. Second Elections in Africa. *Journal of Democracy*, 7 (1): 51 – 66.

¹⁴ Elklit, Jorgen and Andrew Reynolds. 2002. The Impact of Election Administration on the Legitimacy of Emerging Democracies: A New Comparative Politics Research Agenda. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 40 (2): 86 – 119.

¹⁵ Omotola, J. Shola. 2009. Electoral Administration and Democratic Consolidation in Africa: Ghana and Nigeria in Comparative Perspective. Paper presented at the 4th Global South Workshop, the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, Switzerland, 19-23 October.

¹⁶ Lijphart, Arend A. 1997. Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma. *American Political Science Review*, 91(1): 1-14; Schedler, Andreas. 2002a. The Nested Game of Democratization by Election. *International Political Science Review*, 23 (2): 103-122; Schedler, Andreas. 2002b. The Menu of Manipulation. *Journal of Democracy*, 13 (2): 36-50; Lindberg, Staffan. 2004. The Democratic Qualities of Competitive Elections: Participation, Competition and legitimacy in Africa. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 42 (1): 61-105.

outcomes (Elklit 1999; Elklit and Reynolds 2002; Mozaffar 2002; Mozaffar and Schedler 2002; Schedler 2002a; Schedler 2002b)¹⁷. This has not exactly been of interest to scholars who study established democracies where elections have been routinized to such an extent that a small margin of error is expected, generally accepted and does not generally affect perceptions of electoral credibility or confidence in the elections. In most of the newer democracies of Africa though, the conduct of elections remains highly variable and unpredictable, such that the pervasive atmosphere is one in which the generality of the electorate have minimum confidence in the freeness, fairness and credibility of the elections so conducted. Thus, it would be correct to claim that quality electoral administration (as a specific aspect of the broader range of activities referred to as 'electoral governance') would result in quality elections that engender high confidence in the electoral process with implications for democratic legitimacy and consolidation (Elklit and Reynolds 2005)¹⁸.

In the African context comparatively, election administration has become central to assessments of election quality. The notion of credibility has become intimately associated with the manner in which the designated authority for administration, conduct and supervision of elections, that is, the electoral management body (EMB), executes its functions both during and between elections. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) defines EMBs thus with reference to their performance of core electoral functions:

An EMB is an organization or body which has the sole purpose of, and is legally responsible for, managing some or all of the elements that are essential for the conduct of elections ... These essential (or core) elements include: a. determining who is eligible to vote; b. receiving and validating the nominations of electoral participants (for elections, political parties and/or candidates); c.

¹⁷ Elklit, Jørgen. 1999. Electoral Institutional Change and Democratization: You Can Lead a Horse to Water, But You Can't Make it Drink. *Democratization*, 6 (4): 28-51; Mozaffar, Shaheen. 2002. Patterns of Electoral Governance in Africa's Emerging Democracies. *International Political Science Review* 23 (1): 85-101; Mozaffar, Shaheen and Andreas Schedler. 2002. The Comparative Study of Electoral Governance – Introduction. *International Political Science Review*, 23 (1): 5-27.

¹⁸ Elklit, Jorgen and Andrew Reynolds. 2005. A Framework for the Systematic Study of Election Quality. *Democratization*, 12 (2): 147- 162.

conducting polling; d. counting the votes; and e. tabulating the votes (International IDEA 2006: 5)¹⁹.

In furtherance of the objectives of democratic sustainability, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance adopted in 2001 stipulates among the principles to ‘be declared as constitutional principles to be shared by all Member States’ that:

- (a) “Every accession to power must be made through free, fair and transparent elections” [Article 1(b)];
- (b) “The bodies responsible for organising the elections shall be independent or neutral and shall have the confidence of all the political actors” (Article 3).

Although International IDEA (2006) identifies three models of electoral management – the independent, the governmental and the mixed models – it would appear from the above and from empirical evidence that the African preference is for the independent model, by which the EMB is institutionally and financially autonomous and independent of the executive branch of government. Nigeria, Liberia and South Africa operate this model. Some other African countries, especially the Francophone, adopt a mixed model, allowing governmental implementation of part of the electoral process. Mali, Senegal and Togo are in this category.

More importantly, however, Fall et al (2011) observe in a comparative study of EMBs in West Africa that the institutional reforms towards independence and neutrality of EMBS in the six cases studied had significantly varying effects on the credibility of elections and the quality of citizen participation at elections. These authors note instructively that:

the reasons for these differences are often located in historical factors and the general political context, rather than the institutional form of the EMB or the legal status of its members – even though these factors are not without consequences for electoral governance (Fall et al 2011: 2).

¹⁹ International IDEA. 2006. Electoral Management Design: The International IDEA Handbook. Stockholm: International IDEA.

This is the point of departure for the present paper which argues that, particularly with reference to the last two general elections in Nigeria (2011 and 2015) which were moderated under the same INEC structure, leadership and legal framework, the credibility of each election was significantly influenced by the political context, in particular, that provided by widely different political party configurations. Thus while many studies focus on the role of the EMB – INEC – as well as social factors such as ethnicity, religion and region in the study of Nigeria elections, this paper attempts to fill a lacuna by its examination of the political party configurations and their implication for the perceptions of INEC’s role, the credibility of the elections and the perception of the quality of the elections. In the next section, we survey briefly Nigeria’s political parties and their relation to the democratic project over the years.

How do we measure Electoral Integrity or Electoral Credibility?

The comparative literature on elections has increasingly examined the question of confidence in the electoral process or electoral credibility (Elklit, 1999; Elklit and Reynolds, 2002; Goodwin-Gill, 1998: 56-8; Lehoucq, 2003: 252; López-Pintor, 2000: 104-17; Lyons, 2004; Pastor, 1999a; Mozaffar, 2002; Mozaffar and Schedler, 2002; Schedler, 2002a; 2002b)²⁰. Indeed, electoral credibility is seen as a measure of electoral integrity, yet there is little research into the specific factors that correlate with electoral credibility, or those factors that indicate how perceptions of electoral integrity are shaped²¹. In fact, the indices of electoral integrity itself are not agreed in the literature (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2013)²². Jorgen Elklit (2012)²³ argues for the need to provide an accurate definition and operationalisation of the term “electoral integrity” which would comfortably embrace the elements of “free and fair” “good” and “acceptable” elections. Pippa Norris (2012, cited in Elklit 2012:

²⁰ Sarah Birch 2005, p. 2

²¹ Birch, Sarah. 2005. Explaining Confidence in the Conduct of Elections. Paper presented at the Elections, Public Opinion and Political Parties Conference, University of Essex, 9-11 September, 2005.

²² ACE Electoral Knowledge Network. 2013. The Ace Encyclopedia: Electoral Integrity. 3rd revision. Accessed from <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/pdf/ei/view> on 20 July 2015.

²³ Elklit 2012

5)²⁴ advances the opinion that “the core notion of ‘electoral integrity’ refers to agreed international principles and standards of elections, applying universally to all countries worldwide throughout the electoral cycle, including during the pre-electoral period, the campaign, and on polling day and its aftermath” (Norris, 2012: 4). By this, electoral integrity is understood “as a kind of benchmark” (Elklit (2012: 5) and Norris goes on to state that “conversely, electoral malpractice refers to violations of electoral integrity” (Norris, 2012: 4); therefore, “to her the antonym of electoral integrity is electoral malpractice” (Elklit 2012: 5).

In clarifying this subject, we find useful the submission of the Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security (2012: 13)²⁵ that:

an election with integrity [is] any election that is based on the democratic principles of universal suffrage and political equality as reflected in international standards and agreements, and is professional, impartial, and transparent in its preparation and administration throughout the electoral cycle.

The report of the Global Commission (2012) goes on to highlight and underscore five key challenges that every democratic system must address to achieve electoral integrity. These are, building rule of law, creating professional electoral management bodies (EMBs), building democracy as a mutual security system, removing barriers to political participation and controlling political finance. Similarly, Elklit (2012) identifies eight “attributes” of electoral integrity, which he admits are interrelated and even overlap. These eight attributes include the electoral system broadly defined, political climate, electoral administration, (absence of) fraudulent behaviour, transparency, political finance regulation, election security and the existence of legal and institutional systems providing for oversight and enforcement of rules.

²⁴ Norris, Cited in Elklit 2012

²⁵ The Global Commission on Elections, Democracy and Security. 2012. Deepening Democracy: A Strategy for Improving the Integrity of Elections Worldwide. Accessed from http://www.ycsg.yale.edu/assets/downloads/deepening_democracy.pdf on 20 July 2015

Obviously then, electoral integrity and credibility are key to the attainment of substantive democratic gains including expansion of human rights and other liberal democratic mores, and consolidation of democratic process. Citizens also benefit tangibly because their ability to hold their elected officials accountable is directly proportional to electoral quality. In sum, “the overall legitimacy of an election and, by extension, public confidence in democratic governance around the globe, largely depends on the actual and perceived integrity of the electoral process” (Vickery and Shein 2012: 13)²⁶.

In order to assess electoral credibility, discussed above as a direct progeny of electoral integrity, and even being synonymous, Sarah Birch (2005) informs that determinants of perceptions of electoral fairness will include individual-level factors, as well as aggregate or institutional aspects of the election which may vary from contest to contest. Individual level factors that affect perceptions of electoral credibility could include age, education, socio-economic status, gender, religiosity, political knowledge/interest, left-right self-placement, and support for a particular party or candidate. (Birch, 2005: 5). However, at the institutional or aggregate level for which scant data exists, Sarah Birch (2005: 6) posits that “with regard to political institutions...factors that even the playing field and those that increase transparency will enhance confidence in the electoral process” and these broadly may include electoral system design, regulations governing political finance, and the structure of electoral administration, amongst other variables that may be controlled during empirical testing such as the closeness of the outcome, and election type (whether presidential, parliamentary, and so on).

In assessing the credibility of the electoral process in Nigeria’s most recent elections, this paper will disproportionately focus on the perceptions of citizens and other stakeholders about the extent to which the electoral umpire, INEC, fulfils its statutory mandate and either contributes to or subtracts from the mandate of delivering on quality elections. While acknowledging the relevance of the several

²⁶ Chad Vickery and Erica Shein. 2012. Assessing Electoral Fraud in New Democracies: Refining the Vocabulary. IFES White Paper. Washington: International Foundation for Electoral Systems

variables reviewed above in moulding these perceptions, we limit our explanation to the relative effects of political climate (specifically, electoral system design and political party configuration), closeness of the elections, and election type (presidential election). We hypothesise that political party configuration significantly affected perceptions of electoral credibility during the 2015 elections compared to the 2011 elections when the other factors enumerated are held constant across both elections.

INEC, Political Party Configurations and Credibility of the 2011 and 2015 Elections

This section elaborates on the argument that the emergence of a two-party dominant system prior to the 2015 elections significantly altered the socio-political context within which the 2015 elections were conducted, and that this had implications for perceptions of the credibility of the most recent elections.

Previous general elections in Nigeria, from 1959 up until 2007, have witnessed increasingly sophisticated and blatant modes of electoral fraud. Given Nigeria's experience with electoral fraud, malpractice and systemic manipulation of the process, the pre-2011 INEC needed to radically alter the electoral process in order to be seen as truly invested in improving Nigeria's elections. However, we take the position that the first game-changer in enhancing perceptions of the credibility of the electoral process in 2011 was actually introduced by President Goodluck Jonathan: the appointment of Professor Attahiru Muhammadu Jega as INEC Chairman. A respected academic and activist, Professor Attahiru Jega was widely perceived to be the right person for the job given his experience and his record of integrity in service. Following broad-based consultations with Nigerians from all walks of life, the National Democratic Institute in its pre-election assessment mission to Nigeria in October 2010 noted as early as that, that the appointment of Jega had "raised expectations that the coming elections would be more credible than previous electoral exercises...[and was] seen by many as a tangible commitment of President Jonathan's promise that the 2011 elections would be conducted in a transparent manner."

Figure 1. Cartoonist's depiction of Jonathan's critical choice of INEC Chair



Source: *The Top 10 Funniest Nigerian Political Cartoons of 2010*²⁷.

Additionally, the legislative framework for the 2011 elections was essentially the Act to Repeal the Electoral Act 2006 and Re-enact the Independent National Electoral Commission, Regulate the Conduct of Federal, State and Area Council Elections and for Related Matters 2010, otherwise simply referred to as The Electoral Act 2010. This important piece of legislation passed by the National Assembly in July 2010 sought to address some of the contradictions and anomalies in the Electoral Act 2006 that impeded the conduct of the last elections, and to pave the way for more credible elections in 2011. The adoption of the Electoral Act, though still an imperfect document was perceived by many Nigerians as an indication of the presence of sufficient political will to conduct better elections in 2011.

²⁷ Available at: <http://www.nairaland.com/584268/top-10-funniest-nigerian-political>. Accessed 21 September 2012.

By the statutory deadline for the registration of political parties in 2011, sixty three political parties were registered and recognised by INEC to participate in that election at various levels, to contest various offices. Expectedly, not all these parties were impactful in the elections and many did not secure a single seat at either presidential, gubernatorial, national assembly or state assembly elections. Consequently, INEC moved to deregister some of these political parties under Section 78 (7) (ii) of the Electoral Act 2010 as amended which empowers the Commission to deregister parties which breach any of the requirements for registration and also due to their failure to make any impact in the 2011 elections. By the 2015 elections, only 29 political parties were registered (INEC 2015)²⁸.

During the preparations for the 2011 elections, whilst the ruling PDP had its internal divisions on the candidacy of President Goodluck Jonathan, this did not take away from the widespread influence of the party. The truth was, the other fifty nine opposition parties might have fielded candidates for various elections, they might have campaigned just as vigorously as the PDP, but nobody really expected any single one of them to upset the power of the PDP's incumbency by winning the presidential election. The 10 million votes garnered by Muhammadu Buhari under the banner of the Congress for Progressive Change was quite a surprise to many analysts who knew that the CPC did not campaign vigorously in the southern parts of the country. Thus, the political party system that the 2011 elections bequeathed was a one-party dominant system, with the PDP remaining the lord of the manor.

At the end of the 2011 elections, both ruling and opposition parties hailed the conduct of the elections as free, fair and credible to a large extent. Prominent in assessments of the credibility of that election were references to the role of INEC.

The game-changer in the political party configuration prior to the 2015 general elections, though, was the emergence of a new opposition party borne out of the divisions within the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) and out of the desire of previously puny opposition parties to provide a formidable competition for the ruling party in the face of widespread dissatisfaction with the Jonathan government.

²⁸ INEC Nigeria, 2015. Political Parties. www.inecnigeria.org/?page_id=18 Accessed 21 July 2015.

However, this was not the first time that political parties and politicians would re-align to create election spoilers. Particularly within states, politicians have felt free to build or break their party to achieve their personal ambitions. We find the case of Ogun State in the 2011 elections instructive to illustrate this particular point and make a brief detour to examine the issue. Three main parties emerged as relevant at the gubernatorial and house of assembly elections in Ogun at the time: the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the People’s Party of Nigeria (PPN). The latter was the chosen home of the incumbent governor at the time, Gbenga Daniel, after he had fought an epic battle with the PDP chieftains and succeeded in splitting that party on which platform he had been elected in 2003. Relatedly, his nemesis, Ibikunle Amosun had wandered from party to party in the previous elections seeking the magic formula that would get him elected as governor of Ogun State. On a broader plane, the ACN was also looking to wrest the state from the PDP and re-establish its control of the south-western states.

It is interesting to note that it was the re-configuration of the political party landscapes in that state that proved potent for Amosun and the ACN realising their goal. The results from the national assembly elections in 2011 in Ogun State illustrates this well.

Table 1: Comparison of combined votes of PDP and PPN with CAN votes at five election in Ogun State in 2011

Election	Constituency/ District	PDP votes	PPN votes	Combined PDP + PPN votes	ACN votes
Senatorial	Ogun East	52, 613	46, 148	98, 761	76, 543
	Ogun West	59, 949	45, 246	105, 195	61, 362
House of Reps.	Ado-Odo/Ota	12, 797	11, 885	24, 682	19, 890
	Ijebu North/ Ijebu East/ Ogun Waterside	24, 992	21, 294	46, 286	32, 790
	Ikenne/ Sagamu/ Remo North	27, 553	18, 268	45, 821	34, 144

Source: Researcher generated analysis from INEC results

Apparently, it was the de-camping from the PDP to the PPN that was the significant spoiler at the 2011 elections in Ogun State. A careful scrutiny of the election results shows clearly, that although the ACN won a simple majority in those elections, the combined number of votes of the PDP and PPN (those who broke away from the PDP) in many cases outstripped the ACN's winning number of votes.

In 2013, following the breakaway of a faction of the PDP by seven sitting governors (two later returned to the PDP), leaders of three other parties announced that they were coalescing into a new political party, to be called the All Progressives Congress (APC). The political parties that merged into the APC included the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN), the Congress for Progressive Change (CPC), and a faction of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA). The ACN had hitherto successfully wrested south-western Nigeria from the PDP in the period between 2007 and 2011. Its home base was considered to be the six Yoruba-speaking states that made up this geo-political area of the country. The CPC had the record of delivering an impressive 12 million votes for its presidential candidate in the 2011 elections, drawing its support base from the states of the North-West, North East, and some in the North-central region. The APGA was a party that had only enjoyed limited electoral success in the South Eastern part of the country. Merging these hitherto separate entities into a single organisation was a feat of gargantuan proportions – but which was achieved nonetheless. Thus emerged the two-party dominant system that shaped the 2015 elections.

From the moment of the APC's emergence, the ruling party, the PDP, derided it, scoffed at it, attempted to create legal hurdles for its registration and recognition by INEC, and constantly sought to discredit the party and its most prominent leaders. The result of this was an electioneering period that mirrored previous other pre-election moments in Nigeria's tainted history of chaotic elections in which both the process and outcomes were in no way credible and were rejected by major contestants. Other political parties outside these two – the PDP and the CAN – faded into near invisibility in this time. The pre-election period resembled a major battle

between two giants. In a campaign period that showcased the failure of various regulatory agencies to curtail campaign spending, hate speech, vitriolic exchanges, and other excesses, the 2015 elections were very bitterly fought.

It is important to note here that the significance of this political imbroglio for electoral credibility of the 2015 elections lay in the fact that the bifurcation of political space spread into every other area of national life. One of the first reactions of the incumbent president to the splintering of the PDP and the formation of the APC was the firing of several members of his cabinet who suddenly could not be trusted to be loyal. The Governor of the Central Bank of Nigeria was fired for making statements querying the financial prudence of the national oil company, the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), and which were perceived to be oppositional to the ruling party. Media organisations suddenly appeared to overtly bear either shades of the PDP or of the APC in their content and analysis; nearly none remained neutral. Citizens on social media were very sharply, unbelievably viciously, aligned along the lines of the two major parties. And, inevitably, INEC was thrown into the fray as both parties over the course of the preparations for the elections made a point of expressing their doubts about its competence, independence and impartiality every step of the way.

When the elections were postponed from 14 and 28 February to March 28 and April 11, 2015, there was new fodder for the heightened suspicions and tensions that pervaded the land. The PDP maintained that INEC was not ready for the elections, while the APC insisted that the delay was to give the PDP an opportunity to cover grounds it was yet to cover in its preparations towards the elections. Our interviews with many citizens indicated the perception that the PDP was the main beneficiary of that postponement. Indeed, the reason given by INEC for the postponement - that the security agencies were not ready for the elections in the face of new threats - was rejected by many Nigerians.

It may be recalled that the April 2, 2011 elections were postponed due to INEC's realisation on the day that severe logistical difficulties would seriously diminish the integrity of the elections. Monitoring media reports that day, this researcher was able

to record the relatively bland immediate reactions of two of the key players, President Jonathan and Professor Jega, as well as the more critical view of a respected media personality, Dr Reuben Abati. Appearing at various times during the day to express their views on what came to be referred to as the “botched” election, they opined thus:

Jega: “Man proposes, God disposes”

Abati: “The failures we have seen today are man-made, not made by God”

Jonathan: “We thank God that it was the NASS elections, not the others.”

Abati: “But all elections are important.”

[On Channels Television, 02 April 2011]

This certainly is a far cry from the days and days of opposition bellyaching that accompanied the postponement of the 2015 elections which was announced just a few days to the first elections. According to certain APC politicians, Jega had been “bought over” by the PDP. Others wishing to be kinder surmised that the INEC chairman had been arm-twisted by the ruling PDP, with the collusion of the military. Still others concluded that the postponement was the final proof that the PDP would now win the elections as they had ample time to “perfect their rigging strategy”. Generally speaking, this pattern of interaction marked by accusations and counter accusations between the major political parties, as well as intense suspicion of the integrity of INEC, was the hallmark of the pre-election period in 2015. Similar issues that elicited such partisan consideration of the facts included the proposal by INEC to create 30,000 more polling units. The PDP killed the idea promptly stating that it was to give their opponent greater advantage in the North.

The presidential elections and national assembly elections were held first and on the same day, March 28, 2015. We posit here with reference to Birch (2012)’s review that one of the important factors that had import for with electoral credibility in the 2015 elections is the type of election, that is, whether presidential, parliamentary or some other kind. Without a doubt, in both the 2011 and 2015 general elections, the presidential elections were the most closely watched and recorded higher levels of interest and analysis across the polity.

Whereas Jonathan was dismissive of the false start of the 2011 election, his party was vicious when it was learnt that the card-readers which INEC had deployed for accreditation in 2015 had failed to accredit President Jonathan himself in his polling unit in Bayelsa State. Early reports on voting day indicated that the card readers which had been introduced to curb rigging, was malfunctioning in various polling units across the country. Given that the PDP was the loudest opponent of the new addition to Nigeria's electoral process, it was not surprising that the party took pleasure in magnifying the news of failures, calling for an immediate setting aside of the equipment to allow for manual accreditation of voters. INEC later clarified that from reports that reached it from all over the country, only 374 of the 150,000 machines had malfunctioned on Election Day, accounting for just about 0.25 percent of the total machines used for the election. Thus, except for partisan considerations, the low percentage of technical failures was such that there was no need for anyone to call for a cancellation of the votes, or a change in the long-approved process.

However, it was in the collation of the presidential votes that the partisan fever reached its zenith. For some inexplicable reason, it took about three full days for the presidential vote count to be collated for announcement at the INEC National Collation Centre in Abuja. As the announcement of results by states continued on March 31, the process was disrupted by an outburst from Mr Godsdan Orubebe, a former Minister of the Niger Delta, and PDP representative at the collation centre. Mr Orubebe's tirade was to the effect that the INEC chairman no longer seemed credible to the PDP. In his words to Jega:

You have refused to listen to our protest. We have lost confidence in you and we don't believe in you anymore. We have complained against the election results from Kano, Kaduna and Katsina²⁹. You are partial and tribalistic. We won't take it anymore until something is done. We complained against Kaduna and he hurriedly went to set up a committee for Rivers³⁰. Let him set up a committee to go to Kano, Kaduna and Katsina. He is playing a script, we won't allow it. This country belongs

²⁹ States where the PDP lost and the APC won with landslide votes.

³⁰ Rivers was an APC state that had just been declared to have been won by the PDP.

to everybody.... I am a Nigerian. Jega cannot be treating people selectively.... Jega is not empowered by the constitution to be selective.... (ThisDayLive, 31 March 2015)

This denunciation of the credibility of the INEC chair was the first of its kind, done to his face, and on the national stage. The accusations made were weighty and in ordinary times might have perhaps necessitated an inquiry into the complaint. However, this incident demonstrated more than any other during the 2015 elections the extent to which the political parties involved were willing to go in querying the credibility of the elections and of INEC once the election results were seen to not be in their favour.

Conclusions

In Nigeria's still-fledgling democracy, political parties are important for performing system maintenance functions such as interest articulation and interest aggregation. Beyond these, they are important tools for managing diversity in a divided society like Nigeria, and play crucial roles in the sustenance of democracy in the face of centrifugal forces from the larger society. In the midst of individual level and aggregate or institutional factors affecting the credibility of Nigerian elections, we aver here that the altered political party configuration since the 2011 elections was a signal factor in assessments of the credibility or otherwise of the 2015 elections, and of the role of INEC in this process. Therefore, going forward, this propensity for the dominant political parties to make or mar the credibility of INEC and the electoral process must be systematically addressed by maintaining an active inter-party advisory council which works with INEC throughout the electoral cycle, and by better monitoring and closer regulation of media organisations which exploit the party differences to the detriment of citizens' positive perceptions of electoral integrity in Nigeria.