



# PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF ELECTION QUALITY AND SECURITY PROVISIONS IN THE NIGERIAN 2023 ELECTION

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## Key findings

- We conducted a post-election survey of more than 2,800 citizens in 5 Nigerian states after the 2023 general elections.
- Nigerians have significant experience with election violence and malpractices — with opposition party supporters and the well-educated reporting higher exposure.
- More than half of the people we talked to report low levels of trust in the election — this number is higher for opposition party supporters and individuals with tertiary education.
- Overall, Nigerians have more positive evaluations of electoral security provision by state security forces compared to non-state security providers — with a substantial proportion of respondents perceiving that both actors are biased and act on behalf of the regime in power.
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On February 25, 2023, Nigerians casted their vote to determine who would be governing the country for the next 4 years to come. The voter turnout was the lowest since the end of military rule in 1999, with merely 29% of the registered voters turning out to vote. Just as in previous elections, the 2023 election was marred by significant violence and irregularities. According to the EU observer mission's (EU EOM) report, there were 101 cases of campaign-related violence during its observer period, resulting in 74 fatalities. Most of these were related to the use of thugs employed by politicians to intimidate opponents and voters. As noted by the EU EOM, elections were also characterised by the use of poorly trained and, reportedly, partisan vigilantes, as well as by the lack of adequate responses to violence by security forces.

In light of this widespread electoral insecurity, how does the Nigerian public view the quality of the 2023 election? How does it perceive the effectiveness and performance of the state's security forces, and what does it think of the involvement of vigilantes in the electoral process? Do public evaluations of the elections and security



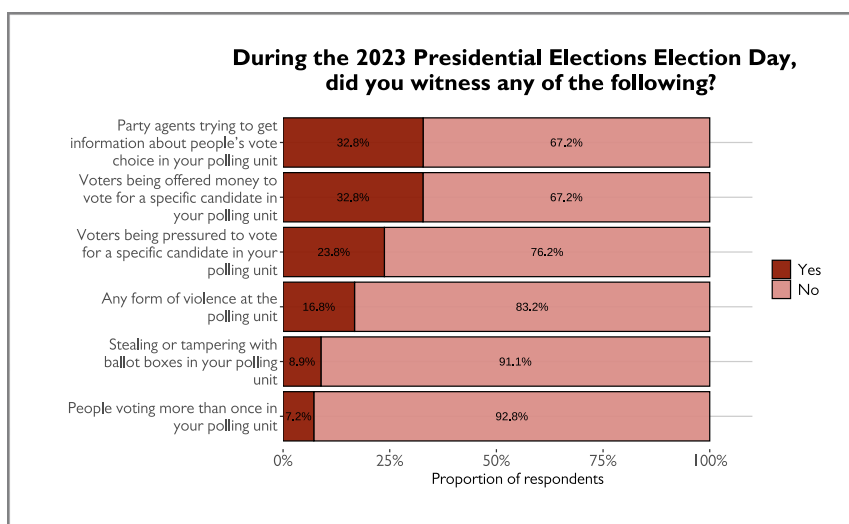
provisions vary by demographic and political groups? To shed light on these questions we, in collaboration with the survey firm Research Matrix, interviewed more than 2,800 citizens across five states – Anambra, Benue, Lagos, Kano, and Rivers. Spread across the country, our survey thus covers five of Nigeria’s six geopolitical zones, and our data thus speaks to Nigerians’ experiences with and views on the elections across these five states. In what follow, we descriptively map public perceptions of election violence and irregularities, trust in the elections, and perceptions of electoral security provisions.

## Background: Election violence and irregularities in the 2023 Election

As background to our analysis, we mapped Nigerians’ perception of and experiences with irregularities and violence during the 2023 elections. Our data show that, for the Presidential election, 16 percent of the respondents who went to the polls witnessed some form of violence on at their polling unit. About 6 out of 10 respondents reported that they feared personally, or for someone in their family or neighbourhood, to become a victim of political intimidation or violence either “a little bit” (29%), “somewhat” (17%) or “a lot” (12%).<sup>1</sup>

Respondents further reported experiencing various forms of electoral irregularities on election day. Approximately one-third (32%) witnessed party agents attempting to gather information about people’s vote choices in their polling unit, and an equal proportion saw voters being offered money in exchange for their votes. Additionally, nearly one in four (23%) reported that voters were pressured to support a specific candidate. While less common, 9 percent observed instances of ballot box tampering, and 7 percent reported cases of people voting more than once. These findings highlight significant electoral malpractice, raising concerns about the integrity of the election process.

Notably, supporters of opposition parties were more likely to report witnessing several of these irregularities compared to those who supported the incumbent party (APC). For example, 12 percent of opposition supporters witnessed ballot box tampering, compared to just 5 percent of incumbent supporters. Similarly, opposition supporters were more likely to witness vote-buying (44% vs. 26%), party agents attempting to gather information on voter choices (42% vs.



<sup>1</sup> All questions include the options “don’t know” and “refused to answer.” Percentages are calculated with these responses included.

30%), and voters being pressured to vote for a specific candidate (31% vs. 19%). These differences suggest that opposition supporters may have been disproportionately exposed to electoral malpractices.

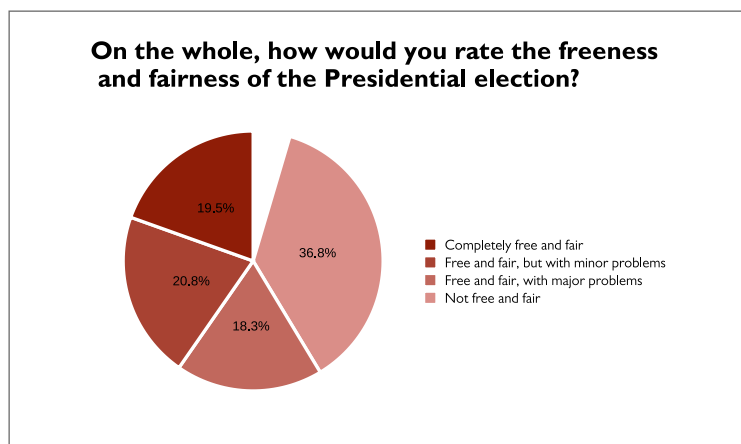
Our survey shows that perceptions of election violence and malpractices also vary somewhat across demographic groups. Compared to citizens with low educational attainment, highly educated respondents<sup>2</sup> were more likely to witness party agents trying to get information about vote choices (40% vs. 33%) and voters being pressured to vote for a specific candidate (30% vs. 26%). This indicates that higher education could shape citizens' capacity to detect certain irregularities and malpractices in the electoral process, which might have important implications for their ability to critically reflect on the integrity and quality of elections.

## Public Trust in the 2023 Election

In light of reported widespread experiences with election violence and irregularities, how much confidence and trust does the Nigerian public have in the 2023 election? How do citizens rate the performance of the state security force to safeguard the election and ensure that citizens cast their vote free from undue interference? What are citizens' views on the presence and involvement of vigilante groups in the electoral process?

Our data shows significant deficits in citizen perceptions of the quality of the 2023 election. More than half of all respondents (55%) considered the elections either “not free and fair” (37%) or “free and fair, but with major problems” (18%). When asked about the accuracy of the electoral outcome in terms of reflecting the will of the Nigerian people, 44 percent of the respondents answered that it was not at all accurate, while only 25 percent labeled it as accurate (18%) or completely accurate (7%). In this context, it might not be surprising that more than half of the people we talked to (52%) report that they are “not at all” (26%) or “not very satisfied” (26%) with how democracy in Nigeria works. There is, however, variation across the five states that we surveyed. For example, trust in the elections was highest in Benue, where 57 percent report that elections were “completely free and fair” (29%) or “free and fair, but with minor problems” (28%). Public confidence in the elections was lowest in Rivers, where 67% of the people we talked to reported that elections were “not free and fair”, and only 3% said they were “completely free and fair.”

Confidence in the elections also varies by political partisanship, and is significantly lower for supporters of opposition parties. 64 percent report to consider elections to be either “not free and fair” (45%) or “free and fair, but with major problems” (20%). Only



<sup>2</sup> We compare respondents with a tertiary educational attainment to those whose highest level of education is primary school.

8 percent of all opposition supporters felt that the election result completely accurately reflected the will of the Nigerian people. In contrast, merely one-fourth (25%) of incumbent party supporters perceive the quality of the election to be low, and only 7 percent thought that the election did “not at all accurately” reflect the will of the Nigerian people. Opposition supporters also express substantially greater concern about the way democracy works in Nigeria, with 66 percent being “not at all” or “not very” satisfied, while only one of three (34%) incumbent party supporters express such dissatisfaction.

Perceptions of election quality also vary by educational background, with highly educated citizens rating election quality to be lower. While 63 percent of citizens with a tertiary educational attainment report that elections were not free and fair (44%) or had major problems (19%), only 48% of those with low educational attainment did so. Well-educated citizens also perceive the election result to be less accurate, with 50 percent reporting to find it “not at all” accurate. This number is with 30% much lower for individuals with limited educational attainment. Perhaps not surprisingly, satisfaction with how democracy works is also much lower among the well-educated. While one third (35%) of respondents with little education report being dissatisfied, more than half (58%) of the well-educated do so.

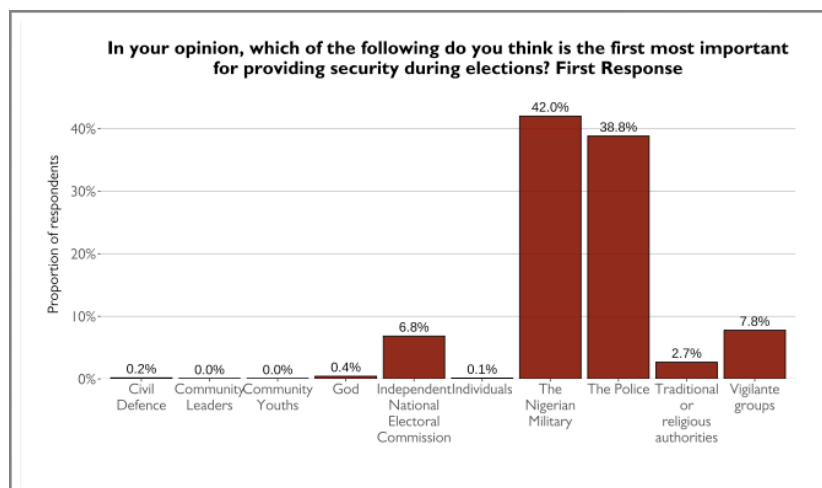
## Perceptions of Electoral Security Provisions

In light of widespread violence and irregularities, as well as low public trust in the election, we also wanted to understand how the public views the effectiveness and quality of electoral security provisions. Our survey maps citizens' ratings of both formal institutions of the state (police and armed forces) and informal security providers (vigilantes).

The Nigerian people's belief in the ability to provide electoral security varies for different actors. Citizens interviewed have more trust in the formal institutions of the state. 71 percent believe that the police help prevent violence during elections somewhat (35%) or a lot (36%). Further, for the Nigerian military, a majority (79%) think that they help a lot in violence prevention (51%), while 28 percent believe that they help somewhat. There are no differences in perceptions of the military's ability to prevent violence by citizens' political alignment, though incumbent supporters report somewhat more confidence in the police than opposition supporters.

While confidence in the Nigerian police and military is thus relatively high, particularly in light of widespread violence as described earlier in this report, there is also a significant proportion of respondents who believe that non-state actors play an important part in safeguarding elections. More than half of the people we talked to (57%) believe that vigilante groups help prevent violence during elections somewhat (29%) or a lot (28%). Nevertheless, Nigerians still seem to prefer the state to take primary responsibility for electoral security. This is even more evident when asked whom is seen as the first most important actor for providing security during elections; the Nigerian military (42%) and the police (39%) are generally selected over the vigilante groups (8 %).

However, trust in these actors is not without reservations. A significant share of respondents believe that security forces act with bias: 30% think the military helps the president win the election somewhat (17%) or a lot (13%), while 38% believe they abuse their power for personal interests. Similar concerns exist about the police, with 34% perceiving them as aiding the president's victory and 55% believing they misuse their authority. Neither are vigilante groups exempt from



skepticism, as 20% think they help the president win, and 33% suspect them of serving personal interests. These perceptions of bias may contribute to public distrust in these security actors, and thus highlight a critical challenge.

Skepticism toward security actors also varies between supporters of the incumbent party and the opposition. Opposition supporters are more critical of the police, with 39 percent believing they help the president win the election, compared to 28 percent of incumbent supporters. Similarly, 62 percent of opposition supporters think the police abuse their power for personal interest, whereas only 50 percent of incumbent supporters share this view. These differences suggest that while political alignments do not shape general perceptions of whether state security forces safeguard elections, they do impact citizens' perceptions of bias in the provision of electoral security.

Educational background also matters for how the Nigerian public views electoral security provisions. While there are no stark differences in perceptions of the ability of police and military to prevent violence during elections between citizens with high and low levels of education, citizens with tertiary education have a significantly worse assessment of vigilante groups in this regard. Just above half of the respondents (56%) with high levels of education think that vigilantes are able to prevent violence, whereas 67 percent of individuals with low levels of education report this. That preferences for the involvement of vigilantes in electoral security provisions differ across educational background is also evident in that more than twice as many people with low levels of education (14%) choose vigilante groups as the first most important provider for security during elections than those with tertiary education (6%). The highly educated are also more likely to perceive of police as biased. 38 percent believe that the police help the president win elections, and 58 percent believe that they abuse their powers for personal interest. This is (with 31 and 44 percent respectively), lower for those with limited educational attainment. Differences in view of the military are less pronounced, indicating that it is in particular perceptions of police bias that are dependent on citizens' educational background.

## Summary

The 2023 Nigerian elections were marred by widespread violence and fraud. Our data shows that this is also reflected in low popular trust in the elections, negative perceptions of security actors and bleak perceptions of electoral security. Talking to more than 2,800 Nigerians, we find that citizens had significant experience with election violence and malpractices. More than half of the people we talked to report low levels of trust regarding the freedom and fairness of the election, as well as the accuracy of election results. While many seem to prefer the police and military to provide electoral security over non-state actors, they also perceive security forces (police and military) and vigilante groups as biased and acting in favour of the regime in power. Notably, supporters of opposition parties are more likely to witness violence and malpractices, less likely to rate the quality of election as high, and more likely to see security forces as biased compared to incumbent party supporters. We also find that citizens with high levels of education are more likely to report experiencing certain types of violence and malpractices, less likely to trust elections, more wary of the involvement of vigilante groups in the electoral process, while also more likely to perceive the police as biased compared to those with a low educational background.

Our data thus not only reveals significant deficits in Nigerians' trust in one of the core elements of democracy—elections—but also shows that actors tasked to provide security and safeguard electoral integrity, particularly the police, are viewed by many as biased and acting to increase the electoral fortunes of the regime in power. In this light, it is not surprising that more than half of the respondents report being dissatisfied with the way democracy works in the country. It is also not surprising that such views are particularly pronounced among supporters of the opposition. Finally, there are important differences in perceptions of election quality and electoral security provision across educational background, highlighting the importance of higher education for cultivating critical citizens.

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