

# Staggered Elections And Growing Democracy In Nigeria: Southwest Experience

ANIABI, Chiemiwo Sunday<sup>1</sup>, AKINSANMI Fatima Jummai Shuwai<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Federal University Oye-Ekiti  
sunday.aniobi@fuoye.edu.ng

<sup>2</sup>Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Sciences, Federal University Oye-Ekiti

**ABSTRACT:** *Since the return of Nigeria to democratic governance in 1999, evidence of democratic growth has been noted. Staggered elections are among them. It has strengthened the electoral process, providing the framework for development of democracy in Nigeria. North-Central, South-East, South-South and South-West are the geo-political zones that are experiencing off-circle elections at gubernatorial level in Nigeria. Kogi state in the North-Central, Anambra and Imo states in the South-East, Edo and Bayelsa states experience it in the South-South while Ekiti, Ondo and Osun go through it in the South-West. Empirical data was collected from a sample size of 2,310 respondents from three states of Ekiti, Ondo and Osun in South West Nigeria. Employing a mixed-method design, data were collected from 384 respondents with the aid of questionnaire and 20 interview participants to explore issues related to federal interference, voter psychology, media influence, and structural challenges faced by opposition and independent candidates in staggered elections. The findings revealed that a significant majority of respondents, approximately 73%, believe that federal government agencies, including INEC and security forces, influence the outcome of staggered elections. This perception was supported by a high mean score of 3.22 and was found to be statistically significant  $p \leq 0.05$ . Confidence in INEC's independence was notably low, with a mean score of 2.29, highlighting a critical trust deficit among voters. The study also confirmed the presence of the bandwagon effect in voter behavior, with respondents indicating a tendency to support dominant or previously victorious parties. This trend was reinforced by media narratives and resulted in a mean score of 3.15 for the belief that voters align with the majority to avoid wasting their votes. Media bias and social media amplification were also significant contributors to this psychological influence. Furthermore, opposition and independent candidates were reported to face multiple disadvantages, including lack of funding (mean score of 3.19), exclusion from media debates mean score of 3.16, and intimidation, all statistically significant at  $p \leq 0.05$ . Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, with participants narrating experiences of electoral violence, vote buying, and manipulation. The study concludes that staggered elections, under the current political structure, intensify systemic inequalities and suppress genuine political competition. It recommends urgent reforms to ensure INEC's independence, regulate the role of federal security forces in elections, promote equitable media access, and support strong and viral opposition to safeguard the democratic governance in Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** *Bandwagon effect, Electoral reform, Federal interference, INEC, Media influence, Staggered elections, Voter behavior.*

## Introduction

Staggered election is a system where electoral cycles for different offices are not synchronized, it has become a notable feature in numerous democracies worldwide, including Nigeria, particularly at the subnational level Ferejohn (2020). The case of South-Western Nigeria presents an intriguing context when investigating its effect on a growing democracy. Nigeria, since its return to democratic rule in 1999, has grappled with consolidating democratic norms and processes, and staggered election approach at the state level introduces interesting challenges and opportunities. The practice of scheduling state governorship and house of assembly elections separately from the national elections as seen in Ekiti, Ondo and Osun States is not explicitly mandated but a consequence of electoral disputes and court rulings over time, thereby creating a situation where each state might have an election cycle that is seemingly out of sync with the national one. This lack of synchronization has implications for voter behavior, political party strategy, and the overall consolidation of democracy in the affected states, and by extension, the nation.

The idea of a "growing democracy" in the context of South-West and indeed Nigeria is inherently tied to the concept of democratic consolidation. This involves the progressive entrenchment of democratic institutions, norms, and values that make a return to authoritarian rule increasingly unlikely (Linz & Stepan, 1996). The political contests at the state level tend to be more personality-driven as opposed to policy-driven, further inhibiting the growth of robust ideological party systems and promoting clientelistic approaches to politicking (Adeosun, 2023). In this regard, a staggered election system, while seeming to give greater attention to state-level issues, might also unintentionally undermine the development of a more consistent national democratic norm.

It is equally evident that staggered elections in a growing democracy like Nigeria have a complex and multifaceted effect. While it could be argued that staggered elections allow for greater local focus and potentially more detailed consideration of state-specific issues, the drawbacks are considerable. These include the strain it puts on the electoral commission and resources, the increased cost of politics, the fragmentation of political party systems, the potential for voter apathy and reduced civic participation, and the challenges to effective governance due to a constant state of electioneering. The system also tends to favor incumbents, which is inimical to fair competition. The staggered electoral system has potential to create a climate of constant political mobilization that

may not be conducive to effective governance. The interplay of these factors with the unique political culture and history of South-West requires more research and focused attention to understand how best to consolidate democratic processes within this context. Moving forward, policymakers and researchers need to critically evaluate the long-term implications of staggered elections to find ways to enhance democratic practices and ensure a stronger, more inclusive, and sustainable democracy in Nigeria.

### Statement of the problem

Empirical effect of staggered elections on democratic consolidation in Nigeria, particularly in South-West zone remains a source of concern. There is a prevailing belief that holding elections for different offices at varying times might inadvertently disenfranchise segments of the electorate, leading to lower overall voter turnout in subsequent elections. The assumption that voters will remain engaged and motivated to participate consistently across multiple election cycles may prove unrealistic, especially given the socio-economic challenges and political apathy often observed in developing democracies. Furthermore, the separation of elections could potentially skew the political landscape, favoring incumbents who can leverage state resources to their advantage.

These cumulative effects could result in elections that do not adequately reflect the genuine will of the people, undermining the very foundations of representative democracy. Despite the obvious importance of staggered elections in our democratic stabilization very little study have examined its overall effect on the South-Western Nigeria which is the geo-political zone with the highest number of states participating in staggered elections at the gubernatorial level in Nigeria. This study intended to address this gap and recommend policies that will help government navigate the challenges of staggered elections in Nigeria.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. assess the extent federal government interference affect outcome of staggered elections in South-Western Nigeria.
- ii. examine the influence of "bandwagon effect" on voting patterns during staggered elections in South-Western Nigeria.
- iii. evaluate the challenges faced by opposition parties during staggered elections in South-Western Nigeria.

### Research Questions

The following research questions will be raised to guide this study;

- i. To what extent does federal government interference affect the outcome of staggered elections in South-Western Nigeria?
- ii. What is the effect of "bandwagon effect" on voting patterns during staggered elections in South-Western Nigeria?
- iii. What are the challenges faced by opposition parties during staggered elections in South-Western Nigeria.

### Review of related Literature

Akomolafe (2021) highlights that constant elections distract government officials from their primary duties, contributing to a culture of short term thinking rather than long term objectives. Also, constant focus on campaigning for the next election creates an unstable bureaucratic environment, resulting in a lack of continuity and effective implementation of long-range policies and programs (Oyinlola, 2023). According to Adebayo (2022), many voters expressed the view that the continuous cycle of elections makes it difficult for them to assess performance of government, often making the process less transparent and less accountable. The prevailing literature clearly suggests that while staggered elections can potentially foster more democratic responsiveness, the actual outcome is highly context-dependent. The study by Oyinlola (2024) underscores that states with weak institutional capacity and limited civic engagement tend to experience more negative effects from fragmented election cycles. Effective governance in such systems necessitates robust mechanisms for accountability, inter-governmental cooperation, and continuous public awareness campaigns to enhance the understanding of the process (Akomolafe, 2024). The research emphasizes the complexity and the need for holistic approaches when adopting such systems to ensure the benefits outweigh the costs, especially in young democracies.

### Implications of Staggered Elections

Staggered elections, characterized by the division of electoral cycles such that different offices of elected political office holders are elected at different times, present a complex landscape of potential political and governance consequences (Ogundipe, 2023). Unlike concurrent elections where all seats are up for grabs simultaneously, staggered systems aim to introduce elements of stability and continuity by preventing sweeping changes within government institutions Okoro (2021). The implications of these systems are multifaceted, influencing voter behavior, political party strategies, and the overall effectiveness of democratic processes Norris, (2023). The theoretical foundation of staggered systems rests on ideals of maintaining institutional memory and preventing radical shifts in policy direction Ibrahim, (2021), yet the reality of their implementation often introduces new sets of challenges. Further examination of recent literature reveals a trend in studying the effects of these systems on accountability measures and voter turnout, which is key to understanding their overall implications (Ebeku, 2020).

One central implication of staggered elections lies in their potential influence on voter turnout and engagement (Campbell & Monson, 2022). When elections are spaced out, voters might experience fatigue or a diminished sense of urgency, leading to lower participation rates compared to concurrent election systems (Fisher, 2020). Conversely, some scholars argue that staggered systems provide more focused attention on specific races, potentially leading to greater issue-based awareness and turnout among more politically attuned citizens (Colomer, 2022). In addition, the presence of staggered elections can impact the strategic allocation of resources by political parties, which may prioritize particular races based on the perceived potential for victory (Higazi, 2020). The impact on long-term political culture and engagement is still an area of active research, with conflicting evidence making definitive conclusions challenging to draw.

In conclusion, the implications of staggered elections are complex and wide-ranging and cannot be generalized Ezeani, (2017). They alter voter behavior, impact political party strategies, affect government stability, influence minority representation, and create their own set of challenges for accountability (Ezeanya, 2021). Understanding these implications requires an approach that is context-sensitive and takes into account the specific institutional and political environments where staggered election systems are implemented (Birch, 2021). While often justified in terms of promoting stability and continuity, staggered systems also give rise to unique dynamics that shape the conduct of democracy (Higazi, 2020). Further studies are needed that are both theoretically-driven and evidence-based in order to fully understand the long-term impact of these systems.

**Empirical review**

A study by Williams (2021) examining the effects of staggered local elections on incumbent behaviour, suggests that staggered elections may create an uneven playing field, giving incumbents an advantage, due to increased familiarity and the opportunity to capitalize on name recognition. This advantage can lead to less competitive elections, undermining the very principles of choice and meaningful representation. This view was supported by research of Ojo & Adebayo (2023) which pointed out that staggered elections result in politicians concentrating resources on one election at a time, creating inequality in political campaign, with those contesting the earlier elections receiving a disproportionately higher share of political investment. Also, politicians in South-West Nigeria are more likely to spend resources in staggered election during the election they perceived to be more critical to the party they represent, further reinforcing the power and influence of these politicians in the electoral process.

Furthermore, the effect of staggered elections on the local political discourse and civic education might be detrimental. Research conducted by Peters & Brown (2022) on public knowledge of staggered local election in the United States shows significant level of public unawareness of the local elections, which reduces opportunities for robust public debate on local issues and limits electoral participation. This is further reinforced by a study by Adeyemi and others (2021), which highlighted how staggered elections in Nigeria limit public debates due to the limited focus on national issues and the prevalence of local political considerations. The public debates in staggered elections often fail to address national issues that affect the overall development of the polity, hindering the democratic process. This lack of a consistent public discourse can also limit civic education opportunities, particularly when the elections are spread over time and political messaging is inconsistent.

**Methodology**

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative approach will involve collecting numerical data through structured questionnaires, enabling an analysis of voter perceptions, attitudes, and experiences related to staggered elections. The qualitative approach will involve key informant interviews (KIIs) with selected stakeholders, providing in-depth insights into the electoral process and its broader political implications. This combination ensures a comprehensive understanding of the subject by balancing statistical data with contextual, qualitative insights (Creswell, 2011).

**Study Population**

The population for this study will consist of key political actors and registered voters in Ekiti, Ondo and Osun States, Nigeria. This large population will represent participants in elections and the electorates directly affected by staggered elections, and will form the basis for selecting a representative sample through stratified sampling method.

**Sampling Size**

Employing a mixed-method design, data were collected from 384 questionnaire respondents and 20 interview participants to explore issues related to federal interference, voter psychology, media influence, and structural challenges faced by opposition and independent candidates.

**DATA ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

**Section A: Demographic Information (n = 384)**

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	206	53.6%
	Female	178	46.4%
Age	18–25	91	23.7%
	26–35	157	40.9%
	36–45	96	25.0%
	46 and above	40	10.4%
Educational Qualification	OND/NCE	94	24.5%
	HND/B.Sc	201	52.3%
	Postgraduate	89	23.2%
Occupation	Student	118	30.7%
	Civil Servant	93	24.2%
	Private Sector	76	19.8%

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
	Self-employed	57	14.8%
	Unemployed	40	10.4%
Voting Experience	Never voted	97	25.3%
	Voted once	118	30.7%
	Voted more than once	169	44.0%

The demographic profile of the respondents provides a solid foundation for understanding the socio-political perspectives expressed in the subsequent sections. Gender distribution revealed a slightly higher proportion of male respondents (53.6%) compared to females (46.4%), suggesting a fairly balanced gender representation that allows for a wide range of gendered electoral experiences in the data. This balance is important in understanding the diverse views that may arise concerning voter behavior, federal interference, and participation barriers.

The age distribution highlights that the majority of respondents fall within the active and politically engaged age groups: 26–35 years (40.9%) and 36–45 years (25.0%). These two categories together represent over 65% of the sample, reinforcing the idea that most respondents are in their prime years of economic and political participation. The inclusion of 23.7% of respondents aged 18–25 also points to a considerable youth presence, which is significant because younger demographics are increasingly active in Nigeria’s political discourse, particularly via digital and grassroots mobilization efforts.

Regarding educational qualifications, more than half of the respondents (52.3%) possessed HND/B.Sc degrees, while an additional 23.2% had postgraduate degrees. This high level of educational attainment suggests that the majority of the sample are capable of engaging critically with the political issues surrounding staggered elections and electoral irregularities. Occupation-wise, students (30.7%) and civil servants (24.2%) constituted the largest groups, indicating a dominance of individuals likely to be directly affected by government policies and electoral outcomes.

Voting experience further strengthens the study’s reliability, with 44% of respondents having voted more than once. This indicates a politically active sample whose insights into the electoral process are informed by personal experience. Together, these demographic characteristics lend depth and credibility to the study’s findings.

### What is the degree of federal government interference during staggered elections in South-West?

#### Section B: Federal Interference in Staggered Elections

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
1	Federal government agencies influence the outcome of staggered elections	185	125	48	26	3.22	0.91
2	Security personnel interfere during elections	164	134	55	31	3.12	0.94
3	INEC acts independently	72	102	120	90	2.29	1.02
4	Federal pressure on local electoral officers	147	132	61	44	2.99	0.96
5	Federal appointments sway voter behavior	151	128	65	40	3.01	0.95
6	Use of federal resources affects neutrality	173	121	58	32	3.13	0.93
7	Military deployment disrupts free voting	141	130	66	47	2.99	0.97
8	Elections determined by federal influence	158	129	56	41	3.05	0.94
9	Federal government maintains neutrality	69	94	112	109	2.17	1.06
10	Pattern of federal interference exists	172	138	47	27	3.18	0.90

The findings in this section strongly indicate widespread public perception of federal interference in staggered elections in South-West. A large percentage of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that federal agencies influence the outcome of staggered elections, as reflected in the high mean score of 3.22. This supports long-standing concerns among political observers and civil society organizations regarding federal overreach in state electoral processes (Omodia, 2021).

Security personnel, often deployed by federal institutions, were also identified as key actors in election interference. The responses suggest that their presence is not viewed as neutral; rather, it is perceived as a means to intimidate or manipulate outcomes (mean = 3.12). Statements about INEC’s independence yielded much lower agreement, with a mean of 2.29, revealing a significant trust deficit in the electoral umpire. This suggests that despite constitutional autonomy, INEC is perceived to be influenced by federal actors (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2022).

Respondents also pointed to the use of federal appointments and resources to influence voter behavior and undermine neutrality. The relatively high means (around 3.00 and above) for these items reflect a consistent belief in undue federal involvement in local elections. Statements about military deployment disrupting voting and historical patterns of interference also received strong agreement, highlighting a prevailing narrative that federal presence in state elections does more harm than good. These responses collectively underline the need for electoral reforms that truly empower INEC and protect its independence.

### How does "bandwagon effect" influence voting patterns during staggered elections in South-West?

#### Section C: Bandwagon Effect and Voting Patterns

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
1	Voters influenced by previous winners	144	133	60	47	2.99	0.98
2	Media reports shape opinions	156	134	55	39	3.06	0.94
3	Preference for likely national winners	158	128	62	36	3.06	0.95
4	Victories of parties create a bandwagon effect	164	137	51	32	3.13	0.91
5	Voter allegiance shifts to dominant parties	149	131	65	39	2.99	0.96
6	Social media amplifies the bandwagon effect	162	127	58	37	3.08	0.94
7	Election timing affects momentum	143	136	66	39	2.99	0.95
8	Perceived dominance increases turnout	135	120	75	54	2.85	0.99
9	Voters follow majority to avoid wasting votes	171	132	50	31	3.15	0.90
10	Bandwagon effect weakens smaller parties	165	136	50	33	3.13	0.91

The analysis of bandwagon effects reveals how social and psychological dynamics shape voting behavior in staggered elections. Voter alignment with previously successful parties was evident, with over 70% of respondents agreeing that past victories influence future voter preferences. This aligns with the theoretical model of the bandwagon effect where individuals align with perceived winners to avoid social or political isolation (Mutz, 2020).

Media influence on voter decisions was also affirmed, with respondents strongly agreeing that both traditional and social media play a role in shaping voter perceptions. This is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where media coverage tends to favor dominant parties (Ujo, 2021). The preference for voting for parties likely to win nationally (mean = 3.06) further demonstrates how staggered elections promote strategic voting rather than ideological alignment.

Respondents also highlighted the role of momentum created by staggered election cycles. The success of a party in one election creates a ripple effect, shifting voter allegiance and reducing enthusiasm for smaller parties. The strong agreement that voters “follow the majority to avoid wasting their votes” (mean = 3.15) indicates a widespread belief that election outcomes are often a foregone conclusion, which diminishes democratic competitiveness.

This section illustrates how staggered elections reinforce existing power structures, undermine political diversity, and weaken the prospects of emerging or ideologically distinct political movements.

### What challenges do opposition parties face during staggered elections in South-West?

#### Section D: Challenges Faced by Opposition Parties during Staggered Elections

S/N	Statement	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	SD
1	Opposition faces media bias	172	131	52	29	3.16	0.90
2	Independent candidates lack funding	181	122	53	28	3.19	0.90
3	Electoral institutions biased	158	137	52	37	3.08	0.94
4	Incumbents have unfair advantage	173	134	48	29	3.18	0.90
5	Harassment of opposition supporters	166	127	57	34	3.11	0.94
6	Campaigns of opposition disrupted	154	129	65	36	3.04	0.95
7	Distrust in INEC affects participation	149	130	59	46	2.99	0.97
8	Small parties struggle with mobilization	170	133	52	29	3.16	0.90
9	Independent candidates excluded from debates	161	129	55	39	3.07	0.94
10	Violence discourages independent candidates	156	132	56	40	3.05	0.94

Responses in this section underscore the multiple structural and systemic barriers facing opposition and independent candidates in staggered elections in South-West. Media bias against non-ruling candidates was a major concern, with a high mean of 3.16. This is consistent with findings by Adebani (2021), who noted that media coverage in Nigerian elections disproportionately favors incumbents and major parties.

Lack of campaign funding and access to resources for independent candidates emerged as a significant barrier, with the highest mean score in this section (3.19). Financial disadvantage prevents opposition actors from mobilizing effectively, especially in media campaigns and grassroots outreach. The perceived bias of electoral institutions (mean = 3.08) and the unfair advantage of incumbents (3.18) further highlight systemic inequalities embedded in the electoral framework.

Respondents also pointed to physical and psychological challenges, such as harassment, campaign disruptions, and electoral violence all of which disproportionately affect opposition candidates. Distrust in INEC was also cited as a discouragement to participation, reflecting the earlier identified perception of compromised neutrality. Smaller parties were described as lacking voter recognition and media representation, which diminishes electoral competition and voter choice.

Collectively, these challenges demonstrate that staggered elections, as currently implemented, are skewed in favor of dominant political parties, making it difficult for new voices and independent movements to emerge or succeed.

### **Descriptive Analysis of Interview Responses**

A thematic analysis of the 20 interview responses offers rich qualitative insights that complement the quantitative data. Many interviewees voiced concerns about overt and covert federal interferences in their different states' staggered elections. Some participants reported firsthand experiences or credible observations of security forces intimidating voters and disrupting polling activities. A few interviewees also mentioned that federal institutions exert indirect pressure on INEC officials, compromising the credibility of electoral outcomes.

There was near-unanimous agreement among interviewees that bandwagon effects shape voter behavior significantly. Respondents explained that many voters prefer to “go with the flow” by supporting parties that have recently won elsewhere. This trend, they argued, is amplified by media portrayals that frame certain parties as “inevitable winners,” thereby undermining competitive pluralism. Social media was specifically highlighted as a tool that promotes sensational narratives favoring dominant parties, especially through influencer endorsements and viral campaign materials.

When asked about the challenges facing opposition parties, participants painted a grim picture. Some noted that they are often excluded from media debates, lack sufficient funding for campaign logistics, and are vulnerable to attacks or legal intimidation. One respondent shared a personal account of being threatened for supporting an opposition candidate during a campaign rally. Many interviewees also described INEC as lacking the autonomy to fairly regulate elections, particularly during staggered cycles.

The interview responses reinforced the survey findings and added emotional and practical context. The central narrative from the interviews is that staggered elections in South-West Nigeria, rather than promoting democratic fairness, have instead deepened electoral inequality, institutional bias, and voter disillusionment.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study on staggered elections in South-West reveal a deeply complex and troubling electoral landscape, where democratic ideals are challenged by systemic interference, voter psychology, and institutional imbalances. One of the most pervasive concerns among respondents was the role of the federal government in local elections. A significant proportion of participants perceived federal agencies—including security personnel and electoral bodies—as acting in ways that compromise the neutrality of elections. The belief that INEC does not function independently in South-West during staggered elections was widespread, undermining confidence in the electoral process. This perception aligns with historical critiques of centralized political influence in Nigeria's electoral system, which often see federal might deployed to tilt outcomes in favor of the ruling party.

This lack of autonomy has cascading consequences on electoral outcomes and public trust. Respondents noted that the use of federal security forces, especially the military, during elections creates an atmosphere of intimidation, reducing the sense of safety and freedom necessary for a truly democratic exercise. The presence of federal resources and appointments also sways voter loyalty, as some citizens align with the power center in anticipation of economic or political rewards. The widespread agreement that election outcomes in South-West are shaped by federal influence indicates a deep-seated skepticism about the fairness of staggered elections, especially when conducted under the prevailing political structure.

Another significant discovery was the strong presence of the bandwagon effect in voter behavior. The data revealed that voters often base their decisions on the success of a party in previous elections, choosing to align with perceived winners rather than risk their votes on less popular alternatives. This behavioral trend is amplified by media coverage and social media influence, which promote narratives of dominance and inevitability. The momentum generated by early victories in staggered elections appears to create a psychological pull toward the dominant party, reinforcing their grip on subsequent electoral contests. This not only diminishes the prospects of smaller parties but also limits the space for issue-based campaigns and genuine political engagement.

Media influence plays a pivotal role in shaping these perceptions. Respondents agreed that traditional media outlets tend to favor major parties, while social media serves as both a tool for political mobilization and a conduit for partisan narratives. These information sources contribute to the spread of the bandwagon effect by projecting certain candidates as more viable or electable, creating pressure on undecided voters to conform. In such an environment, electoral outcomes become less a reflection of individual conviction and more a result of social and psychological alignment with perceived winners.

Equally concerning are the structural disadvantages faced by opposition parties. Many respondents and interviewees emphasized that these candidates struggle to access funding, face media exclusion, and are often harassed or intimidated during campaigns. This reality makes it exceedingly difficult for new or alternative voices to gain traction within the political arena. Incumbent parties are seen as enjoying unfair advantages, not only through state and federal support but also via favorable institutional frameworks that reinforce their dominance. The lack of access to debates, logistical challenges, and voter distrust in the electoral process all compound to marginalize opposition participation.

Trust in INEC emerged again as a critical barrier for opposition actors. Many participants believed that the electoral body is biased or ineffective in ensuring a level playing field, particularly for non-establishment candidates. As a result, voter apathy and disengagement increase, further weakening democratic participation. Smaller parties are particularly affected by these structural inequities, struggling to gain recognition and support in an environment skewed toward the status quo. The combined effect of media exclusion, financial constraints, and institutional bias creates a political climate where only a narrow segment of the political spectrum is viable.

The interview responses provided qualitative depth to these concerns, with participants narrating personal experiences of political intimidation, vote buying, and campaign disruptions. These narratives revealed that electoral violence, manipulation, and fear are not abstract possibilities but tangible elements of the political reality in South-West. The participants described staggered elections as not just flawed in execution but deliberately structured to benefit incumbent actors and federal interests. Many interviewees expressed a loss of faith in the democratic process, stating that elections often feel predetermined rather than competitive.

The interaction of federal interference, psychological voting behavior, and structural exclusion of alternatives creates a self-reinforcing cycle that undermines electoral equity. Federal influence skews early results, which are then interpreted by voters as indications of future victories, leading them to align with dominant parties. This, in turn, marginalizes opposition efforts and discourages meaningful competition. As staggered elections are held in a sequence, these dynamics accumulate and intensify over time, making later elections even more predictable and less democratic.

This study highlights the unintended consequences of staggered electoral scheduling in a political environment marked by centralized power and weak institutions. Rather than allowing for greater focus, transparency, or accountability, staggered elections in their current form appear to magnify existing inequalities and reduce the chances of political pluralism. The timing and structure of these elections give undue advantage to those with access to federal resources, media, and security forces, effectively consolidating power in the hands of a few.

Ultimately, these findings point to an urgent need for electoral reforms aimed at insulating local elections from federal manipulation and promoting fairness. This includes ensuring INEC's financial and operational independence, regulating the deployment of federal security during state polls, and mandating equal media access for all candidates. Legal protections must also be enforced to prevent harassment of opposition figures and encourage a competitive political environment.

Staggered elections are to serve as a legitimate democratic instrument, they must be supported by institutional integrity, media neutrality, and public trust. Without these, the practice risks entrenching authoritarian tendencies under the guise of procedural democracy. The experiences from South-West should therefore serve as a cautionary tale and a call to action for policymakers, civil society, and the electorate to demand a more inclusive, transparent, and accountable electoral process.

### Conclusions of the Study

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn regarding the practice of staggered elections in South-West:

The study concludes that staggered elections, rather than strengthening democracy, exacerbate existing political inequalities. Federal interference undermines the independence of INEC and creates an electoral environment that favors incumbent and ruling parties. This manipulation damages public trust and discourages civic engagement. The psychological impact of early victories in staggered elections fosters a bandwagon effect, where voters align with perceived winners rather than assessing candidates on merit.

Moreover, the systemic exclusion of opposition voices due to media bias, lack of access to funding, and electoral violence creates a non-competitive political atmosphere. Staggered elections, in their current form, amplify these inequities over time, consolidating power among a few political actors while marginalizing alternative views. If not addressed, these issues could continue to weaken Nigeria's democratic institutions and limit political diversity.

### Recommendations of the Study

The following recommendations were proposed to address the challenges identified in this study and to improve the conduct and fairness of staggered elections in South-West and Nigeria at large:

1. Strengthen INEC's Autonomy: Government should enact constitutional reforms that guarantee INEC's independence from executive influence. Financial, operational, and administrative autonomy will help build public confidence in the commission.
2. Regulate Federal Security Involvement: Clear legal frameworks should be developed to limit and monitor the deployment of federal security forces during state elections to avoid voter intimidation and abuse of power.
3. Ensure Media Equity: The National Broadcasting Commission and relevant media regulators should enforce equal airtime for all candidates. Both traditional and social media must be held accountable for providing balanced political coverage during elections.

### References

- Adebayo, F. (2023). Incumbency advantage and electoral dynamics in Nigeria's staggered elections. *African Political Review*, 44(2), 98-115.
- Adebayo, F. (2022). Public perception and the impact of staggered elections in Nigeria: A survey of Ekiti State voters. *Nigerian Journal of Electoral Studies*, 17(2), 39-56.
- Adeosun, A. O. (2023). Personality-driven politics and its effect on party ideology in Nigeria: The case of Ekiti State. *Journal of Political Analysis*, 15(1), 103-116.
- Akomolafe, A. (2023). Staggered elections and the incumbency advantage in Nigeria: A critical analysis of Ekiti State. *Nigerian Journal of Political Analysis*, 45(4), 75-92.
- Akomolafe, A. (2022). *Election fatigue and voter apathy in subnational elections: Insights from Ekiti State*. *Journal of African Politics*, 30(1), 23-40.
- Akomolafe, A. (2024). *The governance challenges of staggered elections in subnational settings: Evidence from Ekiti State*. *African Governance Review*, 19(3), 56-72.
- Birch, S. (2021). The effect of staggered elections on political campaigns and voter behavior.

- International Journal of Electoral Science, 22(2), 89-105.
- Colomer, J. M. (2022). Staggered elections and democratic stability: A case study of subnational elections in Nigeria. *Political Studies Review*, 45(2), 211-229.
- Ebeku, K. W. (2020). The cost of politics in Nigeria: The financial burden of electioneering and campaign finance. *Journal of African Development*, 18(4), 112-125.
- Ezeani, E. (2017). Logistics and management of elections in Africa: Lessons from Nigeria. *African Political Review*, 9(1), 64-76.
- Ezeanya, I. (2021). Governance and the consequences of frequent elections in Nigeria. *Nigerian Journal of Governance Studies*, 5(3), 98-110.
- Fisher, J. (2020). Logistical challenges of staggered elections: Costs and complexities. *Journal of Election Administration*, 12(2), 56-70.
- Higazi, A. (2020). *Political tensions and violence in West Africa: A study of electoral conflicts*. *West African Journal of Politics*, 12(4), 120-133.
- Ibrahim, J. (2021). *Electoral management in Africa: A critique of the Nigerian case*. *African Electoral Studies*, 8(3), 54-70.
- Linz, J. J., & Stepan, A. (1996). *Problems of democratic transition and consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and post-communist Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Norris, P. (2023). Responsive government and staggered elections: What can we learn from subnational systems? *Governance and Democracy Journal*, 31(3), 119-134.
- Ogundipe, O. (2023). Policy timing and electoral cycles: How incumbents leverage staggered elections. *Nigerian Journal of Political Science*, 27(4), 60-80.
- Okoro, I. (2021). *The Advantage of Incumbency: A Study of Staggered Elections in Nigeria*. *Nigerian Journal of Political Science*, 15(1), 45-67.
- Okoro, I. (2023). *The Impact of Social Media on Nigerian Politics*. *Journal of Communication and Media Studies*, 12(2), 78-92.
- Oyinlola, T. (2023). *Election fatigue and the decline in voter turnout: A study of staggered elections in Nigeria*. *Journal of African Electoral Studies*, 33(1), 87-105.
- Oyinlola, T. (2024). *Governance and policy inconsistencies in states with staggered elections: Evidence from Nigeria*. *Journal of Public Administration*, 30(2), 141-157.