# 'SUN' NEWSPAPERS REPORTAGE OF PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF INDEPENDENT NATIONAL ELECTORAL COMMISSION BEFORE AND AFTER THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

Before the February 2023 general elections in Nigeria, the outcome of the previous elections namely:1959,1964,1977, 1983,2019 have been disputed and contested through litigations and protests. More importantly, the credibility of the Electoral Umpires to conduct free and fair elections has always been called to question. The expected 2023 general elections, therefore was no exception. This study sought to find out the Perception of Nigerians of Independent National Electoral Commission [INEC] before and after the February 2023 general elections. Using content analysis as the Research Design, it analysed the contents of the Sun Newspaper [a national daily] to gauge this perception. A sample of thirty-one (31) January editions of the paper-a month before the election and 31 editions of March, a month after the results were announced were analysed. The results revealed among other things; That Nigerians were lukewarm about the capacity of INEC to conduct a credible election; That majority of Nigerians disputed he outcome of the election; and that people have lost faith in INEC, s ability to conduct future credible elections. It recommended, among other things, that INEC should commission/engage a consortium of Public Relations firms, technical consultants and relevant stakeholders on how to restore this credibility gap.

**Keywords:** Independent National Electoral Commission, Perception, 2023 General Elections, Content Analysis, Sun Newspaper.

## Introduction

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) of Nigeria plays a crucial role in Nigeria's democratic process. Established to oversee elections, INEC's performance and public perception have been subjects of intense scrutiny, especially surrounding the 2023 general elections. These elections, often viewed as a critical moment for Nigeria's democratic evolution, placed INEC under significant pressure to deliver credible outcomes (Ameh, 2023).

Before the 2023 elections, public opinion on INEC was mixed. Concerns about the Commission's ability to conduct free, fair, and credible elections were prevalent. Issues such as electoral malpractice, rigging, and violence were frequently cited by stakeholders, leading to skepticism about INEC's effectiveness (Okonkwo, 2022). These concerns were not unfounded, as previous elections in Nigeria had been marked by allegations of irregularities, logistical failures, and political interference, which diminished trust in the electoral process (Olowolagba, 2023).

In response to these concerns, INEC implemented several reforms aimed at enhancing transparency and credibility. One notable initiative was the introduction of the INEC Election Result Viewing Portal (IReV), designed to allow real-time viewing of election results. This portal, coupled with the use of the

Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), aimed to ensure the authenticity of voters identities and minimize opportunities for manipulation (INEC, 2023). These technological advancements were intended to rebuild public trust and establish a more transparent electoral process.

Despite these efforts, the aftermath of the 2023 general elections revealed mixed perceptions. While some praised INEC for its reforms, particularly the use of IReV and BVAS, others remained critical, pointing to instances of alleged irregularities and logistical challenges during the elections (Nwankwo, 2023). Delays in result uploads, technical glitches, and allegations of vote manipulation in certain areas further complicated the public's assessment of INEC's performance.

Surveys and focus group discussions conducted across various states reflected this diversity of opinions. In urban centres, where the use of technology was more prominent, many citizens expressed optimism about the future of electoral reforms. Conversely, in rural areas, logistical difficulties and reports of electoral violence were frequently cited as major challenges, contributing to ongoing scepticism about INEC's ability to deliver fully credible elections (Olowolagba, 2023). This study was undertaken to explore the public perception of INEC before and after the 2023 general elections by analysing the contents of the "Sun newspaper before and after the elections.

### Statement of the Problem

In recent elections, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and INEC Election Result Viewing Portal (IReV) have been lauded for strengthening the openness of election results and promoting public confidence in electoral outcomes. INEC asserts that those technology are addressing the 10 maximum pervasive weaknesses in Nigeria's election end result control process, which include falsification of votes at polling units, forgery of the number of accredited voters, collation of false results, mutilation of results and computational errors, swapping of results sheets, forgery of results sheets, snatching and destruction of results sheets, obtaining declaration and return involuntarily, and making declarants and returnees sign a declaration and return form (Kayode, 2023).

In elections, the roles of both instruments are interdependent and complementary. Before voting, the BVAS is used to identify and authenticate the fingerprints and face recognition of voters. The gadget is also used to capture and submit photographs of the polling unit result sheet (Form EC8A) online. IReV is an internet gateway via which polling unit-level results are submitted, transferred, and made public. Members of the public may register personal accounts on the homepage of the web portal to obtain access to all submitted results preserved as PDF files (Ogunleye,2022).

This accessibility of results at the level of the polling unit promotes process openness and public confidence. The adoption of BVAS and IReV is anathema to political players intent on subverting the will of the people at any cost, despite boosting public trust in election results. So, it is not unexpected to hear about purported efforts to sabotage INEC's measures to defend the election's integrity by using the BVAS and IReV. Despite these assurances and steps taken by INEC, did the public have confidence in the commission to conduct a free and fair election in February, 2023. What was the public perception of INEC few months to the election and still some months after the elections were conducted and the results were declared. This was what the researcher, intended to find out through the content of the 'Sun' newspaper.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To find the opinion of Nigerians on the ability of INEC to conduct a credible February, 2023 general elections.

2. To find out the factors that might hamper the conduct of credible February 2023 elections.

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3. To find out if the outcome of the 2023 elections was accepted by Nigerians

4. To find if people still have faith in INEC to conduct future elections in Nigeria

## Literature Review

## Public Perception Before the 2023 Elections

Before the 2023 elections, public perception of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) was mixed. Many Nigerians expressed scepticism about the commission's ability to conduct free, fair, and credible elections. Historical issues such as electoral malpractice, rigging, and violence had eroded public trust in the electoral process.

Reports indicated that citizens had lost confidence in INEC's leadership and its capacity to manage elections transparently. The introduction of new technologies like the BVAS and IReV portals was initially met with optimism, as they were expected to enhance the credibility of the electoral process. However, there were concerns about the implementation and effectiveness of these technologies in addressing longstanding electoral issues.(Olowolagba, 2023).

## Hope and Trust in Electoral Reforms

Many Nigerians were optimistic that due to new electoral reforms, such as the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced the IREV and Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and electronic transmission of results, this would increase the confidence of the electorate, improve transparency and reduce election rigging. Some Nigerians were however sceptical about the 2023 elections, recalling past elections which were hindered by irregularities. (Okonkwo, 2022)

Opposition parties and civil society organizations warned that INEC might not implement the reforms effectively.

Government-controlled and mainstream media often projected INEC as a prepared electoral body which was committed to conduct a free and fair election. Opposition parties and independent analysts also raised concerns about INEC's independence and neutrality in conducting a free and fair election (Ameh,2023).

## Court Cases and Disputed Results

Several political parties challenged the election results in court, further affecting INEC's credibility even though the courts upheld many of the results especially at Presidential Election Tribunal and up to the Supreme Court, many Nigerians remained dissatisfied about the outcome of the election. INEC defended its conduct, citing technical glitches and logistical challenges but however, this response did little or nothing to rebuild trust, the people had in INEC as the opposition and some observers believed the election was manipulated (Ameh,2023).

## Impact on Future Elections

The decline in trust may lead to lower voter turnout in future elections. Many Nigerians now believe electoral reforms alone are not enough and that stronger measures, such as greater INEC independence and judicial transparency were needed. People interpreted INEC's actions based on their political leanings. Supporters of ruling parties saw the election as free and fair election, while opposition supporters viewed

it as rigged. Different media outlets framed INEC's performance differently, shaping public opinion. Nigerians who believed in INEC's credibility before the elections struggled to accept the perceived irregularities afterward. Public perception shifted from hope to doubt which affected the legitimacy of INEC and the government (Okonkwo, 2022).

**Theoretical Framework**

**Agenda-Setting Theory**

Agenda-Setting describes a very powerful influence of the media-the ability to tell us what issues are important. The proponents of this theory included; Walter Lipman (1922) and Max McCombs and Donald Shaw (1968,1972). As far back as 1922, the newspaper columnist, Walter Lipman observed that the media had the power to present to present images to the public.

McCombs and Shaw (1993) investigated presidential campaigns in the United States of America in 1968, 1972 and 1976. In the research done in 1968, they focused on two elements: awareness and information. Investigating the agenda-setting function of the mass media, they attempted to assess the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual of the media messages used during the campaign. They concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be major issues of the campaign.

The core assumptions of the agenda-setting theory are: (a) That the press and the media do not reflect reality, rather they filter and shape it. (b) That the media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues (c) That different media have different agenda-setting potential.

Agenda-Setting theory therefore describes the ability of the news media to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda.

The theory has many uses. First, it gives the media the power to establish news we see or hear. Secondly, in the political arena, agenda setting is important because the public agenda influences the policy agenda which means that candidates will try to focus on issues that the public wants to hear. Agenda-setting therefore involves not only active role of media organizations, but also participation of the public as well as policy makers**.**

This theory is particularly useful in understanding how the media influenced public perception of INEC before and after the 2023 elections. In the months leading to the election, various media outlets spotlighted INEC's preparations, innovations like the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), and assurances of transparency. This consistent media coverage heightened public expectations and trust in the commission.

**Gregory's (1970) Constructivist Theory of Perception**

Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception argues that sensory information alone is not enough to account for perception. According to Gregory, perception is an active process involving making inferences and interpretations based on previous knowledge, experience and context. Gregory proposed a constructivist approach to perception. Perception does not objectively reflect sensory stimuli; perception constructs a model of reality based on both sensations and inferences. Gregory's indirect theory of perception is an example of a top-down approach which stresses the role of what we already know and expect on perception. What we perceive is not always the objective truth rather an interpretation. The role of interpretation in perception explains why people can perceive the same sensory information differently

depending on them. motivations or emotions. Making inferences is a crucial aspect of the constructivist theory of perception. We can make inferences to construct a complete model of an object based on an incomplete sensory information. Inferences are based on past knowledge, past experiences and perspectives. According to Gregory, the model of reality constructed from perception is biased by our perceptual set, rather than being objective. Perceptual set refers to the tendency to select certain information that is deemed important, focus on it and ignore less 'relevant ' aspects of what we see.

The perceptual set is influenced by culture, motivation, emotion and expectations. Example, when competing with others, our motivation to win can make us perceive our competitors negatively only because they're our rivals in that contest. For instance, if you support one sports team, you are likely to view supporters of competing teams negatively.

Key takeaways from Gregory's Constructivist Theory

(a) Perception doesn't objectively reflect sensory stimuli, perception is an active process that constructs a model of reality based on both sensations and inferences.

(b) inferences allow us to construct a model of reality from incomplete sensory information based on our stored knowledge and context.

(c) The model of reality constructed from perception is biased by our perceptual set rather than being objective

(d) The perceptual set is influenced by culture, motivation, and expectations.

In summary, according to Gregory, stimulus information from our environment is frequently ambiguous, so to interpret it, we require higher cognitive information either from past experiences or stored knowledge in order to make meaningful inferences about what we perceive.

The relevance of Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception can therefore be aptly describes as follows: As it is always common with general elections, the Nigerian electorate is always apprehensive about the conduct of such elections. In Nigeria, the INEC is the sole body under the constitution that is charged with the conduct of such elections. Many factors come into play especially the credibility and integrity of the umpire charged with the conduct of the elections. As the election approaches, the Nigerian electorate usually voice out their opinion, harping on the umpire's neutrality or otherwise, its capacity, credibility, etc. Such apprehension is heightened as the election approaches. The 2023 general elections in Nigeria remains one of such where the credibility of INEC was called to question.

**Methodology**

**Research Design**

The researchers adopted content analysis for the study. Content Analysis is a technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specific characteristics of texts, messages and information. It is a social science research method by which texts are studied as to authorship, authenticity or meaning. It was adopted as a useful method to analyse the contents of the Sun newspaper and use the data so gathered to draw inferences on the public perception of INEC before and after the May 2023 general elections.

## Population of Study

The population of study comprised the entire publication of Sun newspaper during the election year of 2023. Since the Sun newspaper publishes daily, it then meant that there were 365 editions of the paper in 2023.

## Sample and Sampling Technique

Since it would be somehow difficult to study the entire year's publication of the Sun newspaper to measure the public perception of Nigerians towards INEC's conduct of that election, it was adjudged pertinent to zero in on the month preceding the election month of February, 2023, that is January. Equally, the preceding month after the results were declared, that is March 2023, that was also chosen for the post-election analysis. Consequently, the 31 editions of the newspaper in January and the 31 editions of the same newspaper in March formed the sample.

## Validity

Validity is the ability of a research instrument to measure the concept it is supposed to measure. Lederman (1991) advocated that validity could be achieved through the examination of the text by person(s) who are familiar with the content and to the extent of the agreement on the categorization procedures and the meanings, definitions and connotations that are described by the Researcher. After developing the unit of analysis, content categories and variables of analysis in consonance with previous research works on content analysis, a team of communication scholars from Imo State University, Owerri and Rhema University, Aba vetted and agreed on their adoption.

## Reliability

Reliability refers to the replication or consistency in the coding or interpretation of content or portions of content. Lederman (1991) suggests that central concern in content analysis stems from reliability issue associated with the ambiguity of word meanings or category definitions or with other coding rules. To ensure that there is replicability in the coding and analysis of the Sun newspaper contents, the Researcher and one other Coder pulled seven consecutive editions, that is, one week publication of Sun newspaper for January and March, second time, to allow for inter-coder reliability. The Researchers then compared their coding forms on key variables. The results showed a satisfactory level of agreement between the two coders (Cohen's Kappa coefficient averaged 0.82)

## Coding Procedure

The following steps were adopted in coding the contents of the Sun newspaper.

(i) The coding units adopted were the news and features articles. The Researchers were required to read through the entire article or story to establish the existence/presence of the suggestive opinion being sought. The identification was more implicit than explicit since what the Researchers were looking for was not just the occurrence of words, set of words or phrases but the opinion/perception in the news story or article

(ii) The Researcher coded for both the existence and frequency of the dominant perception or opinion

(c) A dictionary was developed to guide the Researcher in distinguishing among concepts

(d) The coding of the texts was done by hand, that is, reading through the texts and manually writing down concept occurrences.

(e) With the coding completed, the Researcher examined the data and attempted to draw whatever conclusions and generalisations were possible.

## Method of Data Collection

The data for this research was collected through two sources; first through library sources and second through analysis of contents of the Sun newspaper.

## Method of Data Analysis

Two methods of analysing data common to content analysis were adopted. These were Conceptual Analysis and Relational Analysis. For the Conceptual analysis, the texts were first reduced to categories or themes consisting of specific words or patterns that were indicative of the research questions. Then, the analysis involved quantifying and tallying their presence so as to the existence and frequency of the concepts.

The second stage was to analyse the relationship among the already identified concepts. The focus of Relational analysis was to look for semantic or meaningful relationships. These relationships were represented as logical, causal, sequential and mathematical relationships.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

This section contains data generated through content analysis of Sun newspaper. They were presented in frequency and percentage tables. Included in this section also is discussion of findings.

## Data Presentation and Analysis

**Table 1**. Opinion of Nigerians on the ability of INEC to conduct a credible February,2023 election.

| Month and Year | Yes response | No response | Do not know |
|---|---|---|---|
| January ,2023 | 37(31%) | 40(34%) | 40(34%) |
| 117 No. of News Stories and Feature Articles | | | |

**Source:** Content Analysis of Sun Newspaper January,2023

From Table 1 above,37or 31% of combined news stories and feature articles for the Month of January 2023 indicated that people were confident that INEC would conduct credible elections that year.40 or 34% indicated otherwise while another 40 or 34 % were non-committed. Why the large number of non-committed, just the same number with nay sayers? The answer could be found in the interpretation of findings.

However, one needs to comment on the equally large number of 'Don't Know' answers. Could it be the non-committal nature of Nigerians on issues of national importance especially politics because of religion and ethnicity. This should be a matter for further research.

**Table 2**. **Summary of Number of News Stories and Feature Articles**

| No of Editions | No of News stories | No of feature articles | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| 30 editions from January 1- 30,2023 | 75 | 81 | 156 |

**Source:** Content Analysis of Sun Newspaper 2023

Table 2 revealed that there was a combined 156 number of news stories and feature articles that addressed the issue of INEC credibility to conduct a free and fair 2023 elections. 78 were derived from news stories while 81 came from feature articles.

**Table 3. Possible Factors that could hinder the successful conduct of the elections**.

| Possible factors that could hinder the successful conduct of the elections | Corrupt INEC and Election officials, logistics, Rigging, Voter apathy and turnout, Malfunctioning of BVAS and IREC technologies, Vote buying, Tampering of election results. |
|---|---|

Source: Content Analysis of Sun Newspaper. February ,2023

**Table 4**: **Was the outcome of the elections accepted by Nigerians**

| Month, Year and No of News stories /feature March, 2023 413 news and articles | Yes 155(40%) | No 164(42%) | Don't know 66(17%) |
|---|---|---|---|

**Source:** Content Analysis of Sun Newspaper

Table 4 revealed that 155or40% of Nigerians accepted the outcome of the elections. 164 or 42%, did not accept the outcome of the elections, while 66 or 17%did not commit themselves either way.

**Table 5**: **Do Nigerians still trust INEC to conduct future Elections**

| Yes | No | Don't know |
|---|---|---|
| 2(66%) | - | 1(33%) |

Table 5 showed that only two persons talked about putting trust in INEC to conduct future elections in Nigeria, none even addressed the issue while one person expressly didn't take a position on that. Expectedly no one would be in doubt about this low response as Nigerians always become despondent after every general election mainly because expectations were not met. This is in agreement with Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception which argues that: (a) The model of reality constructed from perception is biased by our perceptual set rather than being objective.  (b) The perceptual set is influenced by culture, motivation and expectations (Especially in Nigeria where tribe and religion are important factors in national politics).

**Discussion of Findings**

The answer to this enquiry was provided by Table 1. The Background to the Study provided an insight to this recurring dilemma, Ameh,2023, Okonkwo2022, Olowolagba 2023. In all these reviews by scholars and non-scholars alike, there have always been doubts about INEC ability to conduct credible elections. Therefore, it wasn't a surprise that the news stories and feature articles analyzed returned a "guilty' verdict on INEC.

Equally, even the introduction of modern technology such as BVAS, IREV, Ogunleye 2022 [though not the focus of the research] did not mitigate this loss of credibility.

The outcome of the study has provided a gargantuan of such factors, even INEC itself in its introduction of BVAS and IREV technology suggested such factors. These issues tally with the sound arguments of the Perception Theory especially the Richard Gregory's Constructivist Theory of Perception, an adaptation of the Perception Theory.

Table 4 provided the answer to this question. The answer is clearly no, though the margin between the no or yes was narrow. This can be justified by the propositions of the Agenda Setting Theory of the mass media which emphasizes how the media not only inform the public but also shape the priorities and perceptions of issues by focusing on particular topics, at least in the context of Nigeria's 2023 elections. These media narratives before and after the elections played a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing the way INEC was perceived by the electorate.

**Table 6: INEC and Future Elections**

| Still believe in INEC can improve and do better | Will not participate as INEC has lost credibility | Undecided |
|---|---|---|
| 2 | - | 1 |

**Sources:** Content Analysis of Sun Newspaper

The findings to research question four could be said to logical as only two persons expressed trust in INEC, none commented on INEC and credibility and one was undecided. The reasons for this scanty figure could be attributed to the research design adopted for the study.

A survey which asks for direct questions could have allowed respondents to react accordingly, but a content analysis only shows available records and therefore does not permit new inputs. Secondly, it could have been that Nigerians saturated themselves in the aftermath of the elections and therefore didn't bother to dwell on future elections. Thirdly, INEC being a creation of the constitution holds the ace and Nigerians know this and felt that there was nothing they could do about it, at least for now.

**Conclusion**

The outcome of this research is a serious indictment on this important national institution, a creation of the constitution of Nigeria. If not managed properly, it could be a destabilizing factor in the democratic stability of the country**.**

**Recommendation**

In order to make Nigerians have faith in future elections, it is hereby recommended that INEC should commission/engage a consortium of reputable public relations firms, both local and foreign, technical and technological consultants, civil rights groups /stakeholders and the entire populace on the ways and means to restore INEC credibility.

**Suggestion for Further Studies**

It is hereby suggested that social science scholars should do a comparative study of Nigeria's INEC and the electoral bodies of other African Countries such as Rwanda, and Ghana whose conduct of their countries elections are viewed as more credible.

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