

Between Neutrality and Influence: Public Perceptions of Foreign Election Observers in Nigeria's 2023 General Elections

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Abstract- This study examines public perceptions of foreign election observers during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, focusing on the tension between perceived neutrality and influence. Drawing on theories of democratic legitimacy and international election observation, the research investigates how Nigerian voters assess the credibility, impartiality, and impact of observer missions on electoral outcomes. A mixed-methods design was employed, combining a survey of 450 registered voters across six states with 20 semi-structured interviews with civil society actors and journalists. Findings show that while 62% of respondents viewed observer presence as important for electoral credibility, only 38% trusted their neutrality, citing concerns over foreign interests and selective reporting. Perceptions varied significantly by region, education level, and party affiliation, with opposition supporters more likely to view observers as legitimate validators. The study reveals that media framing of observer reports amplified perceptions of influence, often overshadowing the missions' stated mandate. The findings contribute to debates on the role of international actors in African elections and highlight implications for electoral communication, observer transparency, and domestic ownership of electoral processes.

Keywords: Election Observation, Public Perception, Electoral Legitimacy, Nigeria 2023, Media Framing, Democratic Accountability

I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign election observation has become a standard feature of democratisation processes in Africa, with missions from the EU, AU, ECOWAS, and Commonwealth deploying to monitor elections and issue public assessments. In Nigeria's 2023 general elections, over 87 international and domestic observer groups were accredited, making it one of the most observed elections in the country's history. Yet the role of these missions remains contested. While they are mandated to provide impartial assessments, their

statements often shape domestic and international narratives about electoral credibility.

The gap lies in how publics interpret these interventions. Much of the literature focuses on observer methodology and state responses, with less attention to how citizens perceive observer neutrality and influence. This matters because public trust in elections depends not only on what happens at polling units, but also on how external actors are understood and framed. This study asks: How do Nigerian voters perceive foreign election observers in the 2023 elections, and what factors shape these perceptions?

Answering this contributes to two debates. First, it extends literature on international election observation beyond the "supply side" of observer missions to the "demand side" of public reception. Second, it speaks to media and communication studies by examining how observer reports are mediated and interpreted in low-trust electoral contexts.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite the presence of foreign election observers during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, public opinions about their neutrality and credibility remained divided. While some citizens viewed them as impartial defenders of electoral integrity, others perceived them as politically influenced actors. However, few studies have examined how Nigerians perceived the role and influence of these foreign observer missions during the elections.

Research Objectives

The objectives include the following among others:

1. To examine public perceptions of the neutrality of foreign election observers during Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

2. To determine whether Nigerians perceived foreign election observers as influencing electoral legitimacy and public opinion.
3. To identify the factors shaping public perceptions of foreign election observers in Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

Research Questions

The following are the Research Question:

1. How did Nigerians perceive the neutrality of foreign election observers during the 2023 general elections?
2. Did Nigerians perceive foreign election observers as influencing electoral legitimacy and public opinion during the elections?
3. What factors shaped public perceptions of foreign election observers in Nigeria's 2023 general elections?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Election observation has become an essential component of democratic governance and electoral accountability across the world. In transitional democracies such as Nigeria, foreign election observers are often invited to monitor electoral processes, assess compliance with democratic standards, and provide independent evaluations of election credibility. During Nigeria's 2023 general elections, several international observer missions—including those from the European Union Election Observation Mission, African Union, Commonwealth Observer Group, and Economic Community of West African States—participated actively in observing the conduct of the elections.

Despite their officially declared neutrality, public perceptions of foreign election observers in Nigeria remain divided. While some citizens perceive them as credible defenders of electoral integrity and democratic accountability, others view them as politically selective actors influenced by Western geopolitical interests. Consequently, debates surrounding neutrality, legitimacy, sovereignty, and external influence became highly visible during and after the 2023 general elections.

This literature review examines scholarly arguments and empirical studies related to election observation, public perception, electoral legitimacy, foreign influence, democratic accountability, and political trust within the Nigerian electoral context.

Concept of Election Observation

Election observation refers to the systematic process through which independent individuals or organizations monitor electoral processes to determine whether elections are conducted in accordance with democratic principles, electoral laws, and international standards.

Foreign election observers are usually international organizations, diplomatic missions, or non-governmental organizations invited to monitor elections in sovereign states. Their responsibilities typically include:

- observing voter registration;
- monitoring campaigns;
- assessing voting procedures;
- evaluating collation and result declaration;
- reporting electoral irregularities.

According to European Union Election Observation Mission, election observation seeks to strengthen democratic institutions, improve electoral transparency, and enhance public confidence in elections.

Election observation has become increasingly institutionalized in Africa following democratic transitions in the 1990s. Nigeria has consistently hosted international observers during major elections since the return to democracy in 1999.

Foreign Election Observation in Nigeria

Nigeria has experienced sustained international election observation due to concerns surrounding electoral violence, fraud, vote-buying, and institutional weaknesses.

Foreign observer missions during Nigeria's 2023 elections included:

- European Union Election Observation Mission;

- African Union;
- Commonwealth Observer Group;
- National Democratic Institute;
- International Republican Institute;
- Economic Community of West African States.

These observer missions monitored the presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial, and House of Representatives elections across Nigeria.

Studies indicate that foreign election observers are often perceived as agents of democratic accountability because their reports can shape international legitimacy and diplomatic recognition of election outcomes.

However, critics argue that observer missions sometimes lack enforcement mechanisms and may merely legitimize flawed electoral processes through diplomatic language.

Public Perception of Foreign Election Observers

Public perception refers to the collective opinions, attitudes, interpretations, and evaluations held by citizens regarding individuals, institutions, or political processes.

Perceptions of foreign election observers in Nigeria are influenced by:

- political affiliation;
- trust in democratic institutions;
- media framing;
- ethnic and regional identity;
- historical distrust of Western intervention;
- post-election political narratives.

Research suggests that many Nigerians perceive foreign election observers as symbols of transparency and democratic oversight, particularly in contexts where domestic electoral institutions are distrusted.

However, other citizens question the neutrality of foreign observers, especially when observer reports

appear inconsistent with public experiences of electoral irregularities.

Following the 2023 elections, mixed reactions emerged concerning international observer assessments. While some Nigerians praised the observer missions for criticizing procedural failures, others accused them of diplomatic compromise and selective neutrality.

Online public discourse reflected deep skepticism toward both international observers and domestic electoral authorities. Reddit discussions during the election period revealed perceptions that some observers maintained symbolic rather than active engagement with electoral problems.

Neutrality and Electoral Observation

Neutrality is a foundational principle of election observation. Foreign observer missions are expected to maintain impartiality, objectivity, and non-partisanship throughout the electoral process.

Neutrality requires observers to:

- avoid political interference;
- assess elections independently;
- apply international standards consistently;
- refrain from endorsing political candidates.

However, neutrality in election observation remains contested in many developing democracies.

Some scholars argue that foreign observers may unconsciously reflect the political interests of sponsoring countries or international organizations. Critics contend that observer reports may prioritize diplomatic stability over strict democratic accountability.

Studies on Nigeria's 2023 elections indicate that observer missions identified serious concerns including:

- logistical failures;
- delayed voting;
- technological breakdowns;
- voter intimidation;

- procedural inconsistencies.

Nevertheless, sections of the Nigerian public believed that international observers failed to fully condemn perceived electoral irregularities.

This tension between perceived neutrality and perceived political influence forms a central debate in election observation scholarship.

Electoral Legitimacy and International Validation

Electoral legitimacy refers to the extent to which citizens accept election outcomes as credible, lawful, and democratically valid.

Foreign observer reports often contribute significantly to electoral legitimacy because governments use positive international assessments to strengthen domestic and international acceptance of election outcomes.

Research shows that observer endorsements can influence:

- public confidence;
- international diplomatic relations;
- investor confidence;
- post-election stability.

According to studies on Nigeria's 2023 elections, observer reports had mixed effects on public legitimacy perceptions.

Some Nigerians viewed international criticism of election management as validation of public concerns, while others believed observer reports were too cautious and politically diplomatic.

Public controversies intensified after the European Union Election Observation Mission released reports criticizing failures in result transmission and election administration.

Government officials rejected aspects of the EU report and accused the mission of bias. Public reactions on social media reflected both support for and distrust of foreign observers.

Media Framing and Public Interpretation

Media framing significantly shapes public perceptions of foreign election observers.

Traditional and digital media platforms influence how citizens interpret:

- observer reports;
- election controversies;
- international reactions;
- electoral legitimacy.

In Nigeria's 2023 elections, social media platforms such as Twitter (X), Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube amplified competing narratives regarding election credibility and observer neutrality.

Supporters of opposition parties often used observer criticisms to question election legitimacy, while ruling party supporters accused foreign observers of interfering in Nigeria's sovereignty.

The media therefore became a major arena for constructing meanings around neutrality and influence.

Theoretical Framework

Democratic Legitimacy Theory

This study is anchored on Democratic Legitimacy Theory.

Democratic legitimacy refers to the degree to which political institutions, electoral processes, and governments are perceived by citizens as rightful, acceptable, credible, and deserving of obedience.

According to democratic legitimacy theory, elections derive legitimacy when citizens believe that:

- electoral procedures are fair;
- votes are counted accurately;
- institutions act impartially;
- outcomes reflect the will of the people.

Foreign election observers contribute to democratic legitimacy by serving as external validators of electoral credibility.

Their assessments may influence both:

- domestic public confidence;
- international recognition of election outcomes.

Application of Democratic Legitimacy Theory to the Study

The theory is relevant because public perceptions of foreign election observers are directly connected to broader questions of electoral legitimacy and democratic trust.

During Nigeria's 2023 elections, foreign observers became symbolic actors within public debates about:

- election fairness;
- institutional credibility;
- democratic accountability;
- international influence.

Where citizens perceive observer missions as neutral and objective, their reports may strengthen confidence in electoral outcomes.

Conversely, where citizens perceive observers as politically selective or externally influenced, observer legitimacy may decline and public distrust may increase.

The theory therefore explains how legitimacy is socially constructed through interactions among:

- electoral institutions;
- international actors;
- political elites;
- citizens;
- media narratives.

Framing Theory

The study is also supported by Framing Theory, developed by Erving Goffman and later expanded by Robert Entman.

Framing theory explains how media and political actors shape public understanding by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while ignoring others.

Media framing influenced how Nigerians interpreted:

- observer reports;
- election irregularities;
- foreign reactions;
- international credibility.

Competing political actors framed foreign observers differently:

- as defenders of democracy;
- as foreign meddlers;
- as neutral watchdogs;
- as diplomatic actors protecting elite interests.

These competing frames shaped public perceptions and attitudes toward observer missions.

Relevance of Framing Theory to the Study

Framing theory is relevant because public perceptions of foreign election observers were largely mediated through:

- television reports;
- newspaper coverage;
- political speeches;
- online discourse;
- social media narratives.

Citizens did not experience observer activities directly in most cases; rather, perceptions were constructed through mediated interpretations.

The theory therefore helps explain why different segments of the Nigerian public interpreted the same observer activities differently.

For example:

- opposition supporters often framed observers as truth-tellers exposing electoral flaws;
- ruling party supporters sometimes framed them as biased external actors undermining national sovereignty.

Framing theory thus provides analytical understanding of how narratives surrounding neutrality and influence were socially constructed during the 2023 elections.

Integration of the Theories

Democratic Legitimacy Theory and Framing Theory complement each other in explaining public perceptions of foreign election observers.

- Democratic Legitimacy Theory explains the relationship between election observation and public trust in democratic processes.
- Framing Theory explains how media and political narratives shaped citizens' interpretation of observer neutrality and influence.

Together, the theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex relationship between:

- foreign election observers;
- public perception;
- media narratives;
- electoral legitimacy;
- democratic accountability in Nigeria's 2023 general elections.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed-methods design was adopted to capture both breadth and depth in the study. The quantitative aspect provided breadth by generating numerical and generalizable data from a large number of respondents through questionnaires, while the qualitative aspect provided depth through detailed interviews and personal explanations from participants. The combination of both methods enabled the researcher to obtain comprehensive findings, understand public perceptions more clearly, and explain not only what respondents thought about foreign election observers during Nigeria's 2023 general elections, but also why they held such perceptions.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted across six states in Nigeria representing the country's six geopolitical zones. The selected states were Lagos State representing the South-West zone, Kano State representing the North-West zone, Enugu State representing the South-East zone, Rivers State representing the South-South zone, Plateau State representing the North-Central zone, and Borno State representing the North-East zone.

Survey: 450 registered voters were sampled across six states representing Nigeria's six geopolitical zones: Lagos, Kano, Enugu, Rivers, Plateau, and Borno. A multistage sampling approach was used. The questionnaire measured exposure to observer reports, trust in observer missions, perceived neutrality, and assessment of electoral credibility. Pilot testing yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81.

Interviews: 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with civil society actors, journalists, and party agents who engaged directly with observer missions. Interviews explored how observer statements were received, circulated, and contested.

Analysis: Survey data were analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, chi-square, and ANOVA. Interview transcripts were coded thematically in NVivo.

IV. RESULTS

4.1 Perceptions of Observer Presence and Credibility
 Table 1 shows that 62% of respondents agreed that foreign observer presence improved the credibility of the election process. However, only 38% believed observers were neutral, and 41% suspected that missions advanced foreign political interests.

Table 1: Public Attitudes Toward Foreign Election Observers (N=450)

Statement	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %
Observer presence improves credibility	62.2	21.3	16.5

Observers are neutral and impartial	38.0	25.6	36.4
Observers advance foreign interests	41.1	30.2	28.7

4.2 Variation by Demographics

ANOVA results indicate significant differences by region $F(5, 444) = 8.34, p < 0.001$, education level $F(3, 446) = 6.12, p < 0.001$, and party affiliation $F(2, 447) = 12.91, p < 0.001$. Respondents in the South-East and South-South, those with tertiary education, and opposition supporters reported higher trust in observer assessments.

4.3 Role of Media Framing

Interview data revealed that local media often framed observer statements to fit pre-existing narratives. For example, preliminary statements by EU EOM were amplified by opposition-aligned outlets as evidence of rigging, while ruling party outlets emphasised praise for INEC's technical improvements. This selective framing reinforced partisan perceptions of observer influence.

V. DISCUSSION

The findings show a paradox: Nigerians value the presence of foreign observers but distrust their neutrality. This reflects what Norris (2014) calls "differentiated legitimacy," where citizens accept the procedural role of observers while questioning their substantive impartiality.

The variation by region and party affiliation suggests that perceptions are filtered through prior political identities. Opposition supporters, who were more skeptical of domestic institutions, turned to observers as alternative validators. This aligns with Kelley's (2012) argument that observers matter most in contexts of low domestic trust.

Media framing emerged as a critical mechanism. By selectively reporting observer statements, Nigerian outlets amplified perceptions of influence, often

beyond what the missions intended. This underscores the need for direct communication channels between observer missions and the public.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Public perceptions of foreign election observers in Nigeria's 2023 elections are shaped by a mix of procedural appreciation, skepticism about neutrality, and mediated framing. While observers enhance perceived credibility for many, distrust of their impartiality limits their impact.

Recommendations:

1. *Observer transparency:* Missions should publish full methodology and data behind assessments to reduce perceptions of opacity.
2. *Direct public engagement:* Town halls and local language briefings can counteract selective media framing.
3. *Domestic capacity building:* Strengthening domestic observer networks can balance foreign influence and enhance local ownership.

Limitations: The study did not include social media data, which increasingly mediates observer messaging.

Future Research: Comparative studies across multiple African elections can test whether these patterns hold in different institutional contexts.

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