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INEC OFFICIALS' COMPLIANCE WITH THEIR RULES OF ENGAGEMENT IN THE CONDUCT OF ELECTIONS IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

INEC is Nigeria's constitutionally established electoral management body responsible for organizing, conducting, and supervising specified elections in the country. The study investigated INEC officials' compliance with their rules of engagement which have to do with accountability, transparency and electoral integrity in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria and its implications for community development. A descriptive survey research design was adopted for the study. The population comprised 26,326 electoral stakeholders, consisting of 1,200 community leaders, 21,631 party agents and 3,495 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). A sample of 2,633 respondents was selected using a multistage sampling procedure. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled *INEC Officials' Compliance with their Rules of Engagement in the Conduct of Elections and its Implications for Community Development in South-East Nigeria Questionnaire (IOCECEISEQ)*. The instrument was validated by three experts and yielded an overall Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of .81. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses at the .05 level of significance. The finding among others revealed that INEC officials complied with the principles

of transparency and accountability and adhered to the rule of law to a high extent. The results further showed that there were no significant differences among the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives regarding transparency, accountability and adherence to the rule of law. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that INEC strengthened transparency in electoral procedures, reinforced mechanisms for holding officials accountable and ensured consistent and non-discriminatory application of electoral laws and guidelines.

Keywords: INEC officials, professional ethics, transparency, accountability, rule of law, elections, community development

Introduction

Democratic governance rests substantially on the credibility of the institutions responsible for translating citizens' political preferences into legitimate governmental authority. Elections provide citizens with opportunities to choose representatives, hold political leaders accountable and participate in determining the direction of governance. However, the periodic conduct of elections does not, in itself, guarantee democratic legitimacy. The integrity of an election is also determined by the fairness of electoral procedures, transparency of administration, impartiality of electoral personnel and confidence of citizens in the institutions managing the process. These factors or variables constitute their rules of engagement. Recent Nigerian electoral scholarship continues to identify institutional capacity, autonomy, transparency and integrity of election administration as central to electoral credibility (Madueke, 2025; Adie, 2026). Consequently, the ethical behaviour of electoral officials represents an important link between the formal rules governing elections and citizens' practical experience of democracy. However, since Nigeria's return to civilian rule in 1999, elections have been affected by concerns about violence, logistical difficulties, political interference, vote buying, result management, voter intimidation and declining public confidence. Omotola (2021) associated electoral credibility with the effectiveness and independence of election-administration institutions. CDD (2023) identified operational challenges, insecurity and distrust, while Yiaga Africa (2023) highlighted transparency, procedural compliance and election technology in assessing the 2023 general elections. These concerns make the professional conduct of electoral officials an important subject of investigation.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is responsible for organizing, conducting and supervising elections into constitutionally specified offices. Its permanent and ad hoc officials therefore shape citizens' experiences and perceptions of elections. INEC (2023) required officials to act impartially, transparently and professionally, and the Electoral Act (2022) establishes requirements intended to promote neutrality and accountability. International IDEA (2022) likewise identified independence, professionalism, integrity and public confidence as foundations of credible electoral management. Ethical conduct therefore translates statutory provisions into electoral practice. Professional ethics comprises the principles and behavioural standards regulating institutional responsibilities. In electoral administration, it includes integrity, impartiality, transparency, accountability, confidentiality, competence and adherence to electoral laws. INEC (2023) identified transparency, accountability, and adherence to rule of law as core principles, while Van Ham & Garnett (2019) emphasized competence, neutrality and consistency. Norris & Nai (2017) further maintained that election administration significantly shapes public evaluations of electoral integrity.

Transparency involves openness, accessible information, proper documentation and procedures that permit legitimate scrutiny. It strengthens electoral credibility by enabling stakeholders to assess the fairness of administration (International IDEA, 2022). INEC (2022a) recognized it as essential, while Yiaga Africa (2023) highlighted transparent result management and communication during the 2023 elections. The use of BVAS and electronic result platforms has increased the need for clear and consistent procedures. Technology cannot guarantee credibility where implementation is poorly understood or uneven (CDD, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023; Madueke, 2025). Accountability requires officials to accept responsibility for their actions, document decisions and remain subject to investigation and sanctions. The Electoral Act FEN (2022) specifies offences and penalties, while INEC (2022b) establishes behavioural expectations. International IDEA (2022) and Adie (2026) emphasized that ethical standards require effective organisational mechanisms for enforcement. Adherence to the rule of law constitutes another fundamental dimension of professional ethics in electoral administration. The rule of law requires public institutions and their officials to exercise authority within established constitutional, statutory and regulatory frameworks rather than according to personal preferences, political pressures or arbitrary considerations. For INEC officials, adherence to the rule of law extends across the different stages of the electoral process, including accreditation of voters, opening and closing of polls, voting procedures, counting of votes, recording and transmission of results, collation and management of electoral materials. Officials who consistently implement these procedures demonstrate that electoral authority is exercised within legally established frameworks rather than through discretion influenced by partisan interests. International IDEA (2022) emphasized that predictable and consistent application of electoral rules is fundamental to credible electoral management, while INEC (2023) required election officials to perform their duties in accordance with approved electoral procedures. Similarly, Yiaga Africa (2023) identified adherence to electoral guidelines and consistency in implementing procedures as important considerations in assessing Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Thus, compliance with the rule of law provides an institutional safeguard against arbitrariness and strengthens the procedural integrity of elections.

Together, transparency, accountability, and adherence to rule of law shape electoral credibility and could be understood as the extent to which citizens and stakeholders perceive elections as reflecting established rules and voters' genuine choices (Norris & Grömping, 2019; Birch et al., 2020). Ethical compliance may also influence institutional trust. Citizens are more likely to trust electoral institutions when procedures appear fair, officials neutral and outcomes legitimate. Perceptions of corruption, bias, incompetence or manipulation may produce distrust (Birch et al., 2020; Norris & Grömping, 2019; Umeh et al., 2025). Trust can affect political and civic participation. Citizens who regard elections as meaningful may be more willing to register, vote, engage representatives and participate in democratic processes, whereas perceived manipulation may encourage withdrawal. Studies of South-East Nigeria associate electoral irregularities and institutional distrust with voter apathy and weakened participation (Adiele and Uvere, 2025; Umeh et al., 2025; Nzekwe, 2026). Although participation is influenced by insecurity, socio-economic conditions and political factors, the conduct of electoral officials remains a relevant institutional factor. These relationships have implications for community development, which involves collective problem identification, resource mobilisation, decision-making and initiatives that improve social and economic well-being of the people. Phillips and Pittman (2016), Brennan et al. (2021) and UNDP (2022) emphasized participation, civic engagement, social trust, effective institutions and collective capacity as characteristics of an

acceptable electoral process. Electoral processes may also affect social cohesion as perceived injustice can deepen divisions and weaken cooperation, whereas credible elections can support peaceful competition and acceptance of legitimate outcomes (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018; Birch et al., 2020; UNDP, 2023).

This connection is particularly relevant to Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States, where voter apathy, political distrust, insecurity and electoral participation have attracted attention for investigation (Umeh et al., 2025; Adiele & Uvere, 2025; Nzekwe, 2026). Community development in the region requires citizens willingness to cooperate across political and social differences, participate in decision-making and maintain confidence in legitimate institutions. Governance institutions influence development through participation, cooperation and citizens' expectations (Brennan et al., 2021; UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2017). The study does not suggest that INEC officials should directly provide infrastructure or services. Rather, ethical compliance may create conditions favourable to development in the form of integrity, transparency, accountability. Also adherence to rule of law can strengthen electoral credibility which can enhance institutional trust that can encourage participation; and sustained participation for social cohesion and collective action (Birch et al., 2020; Brennan et al., 2021; International IDEA, 2022). The conceptual sequence is therefore INEC officials with professional ethical compliance and electoral credibility, institutional trust with civic/political participation and community development.

Existing studies have examined electoral integrity, violence, voter apathy, technology, voter participation and INEC performance, but often as separate issues (Omotola, 2021; Umeh et al., 2025; Madueke, 2025; Adiele & Uvere, 2025). Limited attention has been given to how integrity, impartiality, and transparency collectively relate to community development. Moreover, studies that end with electoral outcomes, or democratic consolidation may overlook the wider effects of election administration on institutional trust, civic engagement and local development (UNDP, 2022; World Bank, 2017; Brennan et al., 2021). Against this background, the study examined INEC officials' compliance with professional ethics in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria and its implications for community development.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. To what extent do INEC officials comply with transparency requirements in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria?
2. To what extent do INEC officials demonstrate accountability in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria?
3. To what extent do INEC officials comply with their rules of engagement in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

1. There is no significant difference among the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and representatives of non-governmental organisations on INEC officials' compliance with transparency requirements in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria.
2. There is no significant difference among the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and representatives of non-governmental organizations on INEC officials' demonstration of accountability in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria.

3. There is no significant difference among the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and representatives of non-governmental organizations on INEC officials' compliance with their rules of engagement the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 26,326 respondents, encompassing 1,200 community leaders, 21,631 party agents and 3,495 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) drawn from the five states of the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. A sample of 2,633 respondents using the multi-stage sampling procedure was used for the study. Researcher's developed instrument titled "INEC Officials' Compliance with Rules of Engagement and its Implications for Community Development South-East Nigeria Questionnaire (IOCPECESEQ)" was used. Three experts validated the instrument, and reliability of the instrument was determined through trial test and overall coefficient value of .81 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha Method. Data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions while Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the rejection or non-rejection of the hypotheses at .05 level of significance.

Results

Table 1: *Respondents' ratings on extent of INEC Officials' Compliance with Rules of Engagement in the Conduct of Elections in South-East Nigeria*

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGOs (n = 350)	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
1	Publicly display the results at each polling unit before moving to the next stage	3.31	0.72	3.05	0.84	3.18	0.78
2	Allow party agents and observers to stand close enough to see the ballot counting and sorting process	3.24	0.75	2.98	0.87	3.11	0.79
3	Explain the voting procedure clearly to voters in the local language before accreditation begins	3.16	0.77	2.87	0.91	3.08	0.82
4	Show the BVAS machine to party agents to confirm voter verification before each accreditation	2.42	0.95	2.36	0.99	2.45	0.93
5	Allow party agents to sign the result sheets (EC8 forms) without intimidation or delay	3.27	0.73	2.93	0.89	3.12	0.80

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGOs (n = 350)	
6	Conduct the collation of results at the Ward and Local Government levels openly for the public and media to observe	2.39	0.96	2.28	1.01	2.43	0.94
7	Announce the total number of accredited voters and make it visible to everyone at the polling unit	3.18	0.76	2.95	0.86	3.09	0.78
8	Respond to questions or complaints from voters and agents in a respectful and open manner	2.47	0.91	2.33	0.98	2.41	0.95
9	Show all sensitive materials (e.g., ballot papers, result sheets) to stakeholders before voting starts	3.09	0.79	2.86	0.88	3.04	0.81
Cluster Mean		**2.95**		**2.73**		**2.88**	

Findings from Table 1 revealed that INEC officials complied with their rules of engagement to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria, as indicated by the cluster mean scores of 2.95, 2.73 and 2.88 for community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives, respectively. Specifically, respondents perceived high compliance in the public display of polling-unit results, observation of ballot counting and sorting, explanation of voting procedures, signing of result sheets by party agents, announcement of the number of accredited voters and display of sensitive electoral materials. However, low compliance was observed in showing the BVAS machine to party agents, conducting Ward and Local Government result collation openly for public and media observation, and responding openly to questions or complaints from electoral stakeholders. The standard deviation scores ranged from 0.72 to 0.96 for community leaders, 0.84 to 1.01 for party agents and 0.78 to 0.95 for NGO representatives. These relatively low standard deviation values indicated that the respondents' ratings were reasonably close to their respective mean scores, suggesting a fair degree of agreement within the three groups regarding INEC officials' compliance with transparency principles. Nevertheless, the comparatively higher standard deviations recorded among party agents indicate that their opinions were slightly more varied than those of community leaders and NGO representatives. Therefore, the finding indicated a high but uneven level of transparency, with notable weaknesses in electoral technology visibility, openness of result collation and responsiveness to stakeholders.

Table 2: *Respondents' ratings on Extent of INEC officials' adherence to the Principle of Accountability in the Conduct of Elections in South-East Nigeria*

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGO Representatives (n = 350)	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
10	Take full responsibility for the conduct of elections in their assigned polling units	3.25	0.73	2.96	0.85	3.17	0.77
11	Provide clear and honest explanations for any delays or problems that occur during the voting process	2.41	0.95	2.29	0.99	2.45	0.92
12	Sign and date all official result sheets (EC8 forms) to take personal ownership of the results	3.32	0.70	3.05	0.81	3.24	0.75
13	Document complaints from party agents and voters in the official complaint register	2.46	0.91	2.35	0.97	2.49	0.90
14	Provide a final report of the election process to stakeholders in your area after the exercise	3.06	0.80	2.82	0.88	3.01	0.79
15	Allow themselves to be questioned or cross-examined by party agents or observers about their decisions during the process	2.38	0.97	2.24	1.02	2.42	0.94
16	Openly admit errors made during accreditation, voting, or counting when they are pointed out	3.11	0.77	2.87	0.89	3.04	0.80
17	Face disciplinary consequences for misconduct or gross negligence during elections in your area	2.29	0.99	2.18	1.04	2.34	0.97
18	Ensure that all electoral materials (sensitive and	3.22	0.74	2.95	0.86	3.14	0.78

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)	Party Agents (n = 2,163)	NGO Representatives (n = 350)
	non-sensitive) are properly accounted for before and after the election			
Cluster Mean		**2.83**	**2.63**	**2.81**

Result from Table 2 revealed that INEC officials adhered to the principle of accountability to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria, as indicated by the cluster mean scores of 2.83, 2.63 and 2.81 for community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives, respectively. Specifically, high compliance was reported in taking responsibility for elections at assigned polling units, signing and dating official result sheets, providing final reports, admitting identified errors, and accounting for electoral materials before and after elections. However, low compliance was observed in providing explanations for delays or problems, documenting stakeholders' complaints, allowing officials' decisions to be questioned by party agents or observers, and facing disciplinary consequences for misconduct or gross negligence. The standard deviation scores ranged from 0.70 to 0.99 for community leaders, 0.81 to 1.04 for party agents and 0.75 to 0.97 for NGO representatives. These values indicated that the respondents' ratings were generally close to their respective mean scores, suggesting a reasonable degree of agreement within the three respondent groups. However, the comparatively higher standard deviations recorded among party agents, particularly the value of 1.04 concerning disciplinary consequences for misconduct, showed that their opinions were somewhat more varied. Therefore, the finding indicated that INEC officials demonstrated a high but uneven level of accountability, with notable weaknesses in complaint documentation, openness to scrutiny and enforcement of disciplinary consequences.

Table 3: *Respondents' Ratings on Extent of INEC Officials' Adherence to the Rule of Law in the Discharge of their Responsibilities in South-East Nigeria*

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGOs (n = 350)	
		M	**SD**	**M**	**SD**	**M**	**SD**
19	Follow the Electoral Act strictly when conducting voter registration and verification	3.23	0.74	2.94	0.87	3.17	0.78
20	Allow all registered political parties to field candidates without illegal disqualification	2.43	0.93	2.31	0.98	2.46	0.91
21	Adhere to the official voting time	3.14	0.76	2.89	0.85	3.08	0.79

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGOs (n = 350)	
	(opening and closing) as prescribed by law						
22	Ensure that only accredited persons (voters, agents, observers) are allowed into the polling unit as required by law	3.19	0.73	2.96	0.84	3.12	0.77
23	Use the official result sheets (EC8 forms) as prescribed by law, without using unofficial or substitute documents	3.28	0.71	3.01	0.82	3.21	0.74
24	Respect the right of voters to cast their votes in secret, without intimidation	3.26	0.72	2.97	0.85	3.18	0.76
25	Properly announce the number of invalid or rejected votes in line with legal guidelines	3.08	0.88	2.84	0.81	3.03	0.96
26	Investigate and act on complaints of electoral malpractice brought to their attention during the process	2.38	0.96	2.27	1.00	2.41	0.95
27	Apply the same legal rules and standards to all political parties and candidates without discrimination	2.45	0.92	2.33	0.98	2.48	0.90
28	Ensure that electoral offences (e.g., ballot box snatching, multiple voting) are reported to the appropriate law enforcement agencies as required by law	3.12	0.78	2.86	0.89	3.07	0.80
Cluster Mean		**2.96**		**2.74**		**2.92**	

The findings in Table 3 revealed that INEC officials adhered to the rule of law to a high extent in the discharge of their electoral responsibilities in South-East Nigeria, as indicated by the cluster mean scores of 2.96, 2.74 and 2.92 for community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives, respectively. Specifically, high adherence was reported in following the Electoral Act during voter registration and verification, observing prescribed voting times, restricting access to polling units to accredited persons, using official result sheets, protecting the secrecy of voting, announcing invalid or rejected votes appropriately, and reporting electoral offences to the relevant law enforcement agencies. However, low adherence was observed in allowing political parties to field candidates without illegal disqualification, investigating and

acting on complaints of electoral malpractice, and applying the same legal rules and standards to all political parties and candidates without discrimination. The standard deviation scores ranged from 0.71 to 0.96 for community leaders, 0.81 to 1.00 for party agents and 0.74 to 0.96 for NGO representatives. These relatively low standard deviation values indicated that the respondents' ratings were generally close to their respective mean scores, suggesting a reasonable degree of agreement within the three groups. However, the relatively higher standard deviations recorded for items relating to candidate disqualification, investigation of electoral malpractice and equal application of legal standards indicate greater variation in respondents' perceptions of these aspects. Party agents recorded the highest standard deviation of 1.00 regarding the investigation of and response to electoral malpractice complaints, suggesting comparatively diverse experiences or opinions on this issue. Therefore, the findings indicate that INEC officials demonstrated a high but uneven level of adherence to the rule of law, with notable weaknesses in handling electoral complaints, applying electoral rules equally and protecting candidates against unlawful disqualification.

Table 4: *ANOVA Analysis on the Significant Difference in the Mean Ratings of Community Leaders, Party Agents and NGOs on the Extent INEC Officials Comply with the Principle of Transparency in the Conduct of Elections in South-East Nigeria*

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.274	2	2.637	1.652	.192
Within Groups	4197.746	2630	1.596		
Total	4203.020	2632			

Data presented in Table 4 revealed the significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and NGOs on the extent INEC officials complied with the principle of transparency in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. The result revealed that $p > 0.05$ level for the three respondent groups ($F(2, 2630) = 1.652$, $p = .192$) indicating that there is no significant difference. This means that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and NGOs on the extent INEC officials complied with the principle of transparency in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Table 5: *ANOVA Analysis on the Significant Difference in the Mean Ratings of Community Leaders, Party Agents and NGOs on the Extent INEC Officials Comply with the Principle of Accountability in the Conduct of Elections in South-East Nigeria*

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.198	2	2.099	1.334	.264
Within Groups	4138.072	2630	1.573		
Total	4142.270	2632			

Data presented in Table 5 revealed the significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and NGOs on the extent INEC officials complied with the principle of accountability in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. The result revealed that $p > 0.05$ level for the three respondent groups ($F(2, 2630) = 1.334$, $p = .264$) indicating that there is no significant difference. This means that there is no significant difference in the mean

ratings of community leaders, party agents and NGOs on the extent INEC officials complied with the principle of accountability in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Table 6: *ANOVA Analysis on the Significant Difference in the Mean Ratings of Community Leaders, Party Agents and NGOs on the Extent INEC Officials Comply with the Rule of Law in the Conduct of Elections in South-East Nigeria*

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	3.886	2	1.943	1.231	.292
Within Groups	4151.544	2630	1.578		
Total	4155.430	2632			

Data presented in Table 6 revealed the significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and NGOs on the extent INEC officials complied with the rule of law in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. The result revealed that $p > 0.05$ level for the three respondent groups ($F(2, 2630) = 1.231$, $p = .292$) indicating that there is no significant difference. This means that there is no significant difference in the mean ratings of community leaders, party agents and NGOs on the extent INEC officials complied with the rule of law in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of the study revealed that INEC officials complied with the principle of transparency to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. Community leaders, party agents and representatives of NGOs recorded cluster mean scores of 2.95, 2.73 and 2.88 respectively. The finding indicated that respondents generally perceived INEC officials as making important aspects of the electoral process sufficiently open and accessible to stakeholders. This was particularly evident in the public display of polling-unit results, allowing party agents and observers to observe ballot counting and sorting, explaining voting procedures, permitting party agents to sign result sheets, announcing the number of accredited voters and displaying sensitive electoral materials before voting. However, the finding also revealed weaknesses in showing the BVAS machine to party agents, openness of result collation at Ward and Local Government levels, and responsiveness to questions and complaints from electoral stakeholders. The finding is consistent with the position of International IDEA (2022) that transparency is an essential characteristic of credible electoral management because electoral stakeholders should have sufficient access to information and procedures to evaluate the integrity of an election. Similarly, INEC (2022) identified transparency as one of the principles expected to guide the conduct of election officials, while Yiaga Africa (2023) emphasised openness in voting, counting, result management and communication as important components of electoral credibility. The finding also supported Norris and Grömping (2019), who maintained that transparent electoral processes strengthen citizens' evaluation of electoral integrity. Thus, the relatively high level of transparency found in the present study suggests that several important polling-unit procedures were implemented in ways that permitted stakeholder observation. Nevertheless, the low ratings recorded for transparency surrounding BVAS verification and Ward and Local Government result collation are particularly important. The introduction of technology into electoral administration does not automatically produce transparency;

stakeholders must also understand and be able to observe how such technology is applied. CDD (2023) observed that the credibility of electoral technology depends partly on consistency, accessibility and effective communication, while Yiaga Africa (2023) raised concerns about aspects of result management and technological implementation during Nigeria's 2023 general elections. Madueke (2025) similarly maintained that weaknesses in election-management practices can adversely affect perceptions of electoral integrity. The present finding therefore suggests that transparency was stronger at some polling-unit activities than at some technologically mediated and higher-level collation processes. The study further revealed no significant difference among community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives in their ratings of INEC officials' compliance with transparency, $F(2, 2630) = 1.652$, $p = .192$. This indicated that the three categories of stakeholders held broadly similar perceptions of the level of transparency demonstrated by INEC officials. Such convergence is noteworthy because the groups interact with the electoral process from different positions. The result suggests that the observed strengths and weaknesses in transparency were not peculiar to the perception of one stakeholder category but were relatively consistent across the groups. The finding has implications for community development because transparency can strengthen institutional trust and citizens' willingness to participate in collective governance processes. Birch et al. (2020) linked perceptions of electoral integrity with citizens' attitudes towards democratic institutions, while the World Bank (2017) emphasized transparency and institutional legitimacy as conditions that facilitate cooperation and collective action. UNDP (2022) similarly associated accountable and transparent institutions with inclusive participation and sustainable development. Therefore, greater transparency in election administration may strengthen confidence in democratic institutions, which can encourage civic participation, peaceful political engagement and collective community action. Conversely, weaknesses in result collation and stakeholder communication may generate suspicion that is capable of weakening institutional trust and social cooperation.

The study also revealed that INEC officials complied with the principle of accountability to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. The cluster mean scores of 2.83 for community leaders, 2.63 for party agents and 2.81 for NGO representatives indicated a general positive assessment across the three groups. Specifically, respondents perceived high compliance in taking responsibility for elections at assigned polling units, signing and dating official result sheets, providing reports, admitting identified errors and accounting for electoral materials before and after elections. However, relatively low compliance was observed in providing explanations for electoral delays, documenting complaints, allowing decisions to be questioned by party agents or observers, and facing disciplinary consequences for misconduct or gross negligence. These results showed that accountability was generally high but was less evident in mechanisms concerned with response, external scrutiny and sanctions. The finding agreed with International IDEA (2022), which emphasized that electoral accountability involves clearly defined responsibilities, mechanisms for oversight and opportunities for stakeholders to seek explanations concerning electoral decisions. It is also consistent with the Electoral Act (2022), which established responsibilities and sanctions relating to the conduct of election officials. INEC (2022) similarly expects electoral officials to perform their assigned responsibilities professionally and remain responsible for their actions. The relatively high overall accountability reported in the study may therefore reflect the existence and implementation of institutional procedures requiring election officials to document electoral activities and assume responsibility for assigned functions. Of particular significance, however,

is the finding that respondents perceived low compliance regarding disciplinary consequences for misconduct, documentation of complaints and willingness of officials to subject their decisions to questioning. Accountability goes beyond assigning responsibilities to officials; it also requires mechanisms through which officials explain their decisions and face appropriate consequences where established standards are violated. Norris and Nai (2017) argued that accountability mechanisms are central to safeguarding electoral integrity, while International IDEA (2022) maintained that electoral-management bodies needed effective mechanisms for oversight and redress. Adie (2026) similarly drew attention to institutional and operational challenges affecting election administration in Nigeria. The present finding therefore suggests that the comparatively weaker aspect of accountability may lie not in defining officials' responsibilities but in strengthening answerability, complaint management and enforcement. The ANOVA result further revealed no significant difference among community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives regarding INEC officials' accountability, $F(2, 2630) = 1.334$, $p = .264$. Thus, the null hypothesis was not rejected. The consistency of perceptions across the stakeholder groups strengthens the descriptive finding that accountability was generally high but uneven. It indicated that concerns about complaint documentation, scrutiny of officials' decisions and disciplinary consequences were not limited to one category of respondents. Accountability is also connected with community development through institutional trust and responsible governance. Brennan et al. (2021) maintained that community development requires effective institutions, participation and collective capacity, while UNDP (2022) associated accountable governance needed citizens' participation and sustainable development. The World Bank (2017) further argued that institutions capable of enforcing rules and maintaining accountability are better positioned to generate legitimacy and facilitate collective action. In the electoral context, officials who take responsibility for their decisions and are answerable for misconduct can strengthen citizens' confidence in democratic institutions. Such confidence may contribute to peaceful participation and cooperation, whereas perceived absence of sanctions for electoral misconduct may encourage distrust, political disengagement and social tension.

The study further revealed that INEC officials adhered to the rule of law to a high extent in the discharge of their electoral responsibilities in South-East Nigeria. Community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives recorded cluster mean scores of 2.96, 2.74 and 2.92 respectively. Respondents reported high adherence in following the Electoral Act during voter registration and verification, observing prescribed voting times, restricting polling-unit access to accredited persons, using official result sheets, protecting ballot secrecy, properly announcing invalid or rejected votes and reporting electoral offences to appropriate law-enforcement agencies. Nevertheless, lower ratings were obtained for handling complaints of electoral malpractice, applying legal rules equally to political parties and candidates, and issues relating to improper candidate disqualification. The finding supported the provisions of the Electoral Act (2022), which established the legal framework within which electoral officials are expected to perform their responsibilities. It also agreed with INEC (2022, 2023), which required election officials to comply with prescribed regulations and procedures in accreditation, voting, counting, documentation and result management. Similarly, International IDEA (2022) maintained that consistent and impartial implementation of electoral laws is fundamental to credible election administration. The high level of adherence reported in the present study therefore suggests that respondents generally perceived INEC officials as conducting routine electoral responsibilities within established legal and procedural frameworks. However, the finding that respondents reported low adherence in investigating electoral malpractice and applying the same legal

standards to all parties and candidates deserves particular attention. Rule of law requires more than formal observance of electoral procedures; it also requires equality before established rules and consistent enforcement irrespective of political affiliation or status. Cheeseman and Klaas (2018) argued that selective implementation and manipulation of electoral rules can undermine the legitimacy of elections, while Norris and Grömping (2019) associated procedural fairness with electoral integrity. In the Nigerian context, Madueke (2025) highlighted institutional practices and election management as important factors in understanding the integrity of the 2023 general election. Consequently, even where routine procedures are generally followed, perceived selective enforcement can weaken the credibility generated by broader compliance.

The hypothesis relating to rule of law also revealed no significant difference among the three respondent groups, $F(2, 2630) = 1.231$, $p = .292$. Consequently, the null hypothesis was not rejected. This indicated that community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives held relatively similar views regarding INEC officials' adherence to the rule of law. The convergence of perceptions provided additional support for the conclusion that adherence was generally high but that specific areas of legal and procedural implementation still required strengthening. Adherence to the rule of law has broader implications for community development because citizens' willingness to cooperate with institutions depends partly on whether public rules are perceived as predictable and fairly applied. The World Bank (2017) maintained that rule-based institutions can promote legitimacy, cooperation and collective action, while UNDP (2022) emphasized access to justice, accountable institutions and inclusive governance as important foundations of sustainable development. Brennan et al. (2021) similarly identified civic participation and collective capacity as important components of community development. Accordingly, when electoral laws are applied consistently, citizens may be more willing to accept legitimate electoral outcomes, participate peacefully in governance and ensure cooperation across political differences. Selective application of rules, on the other hand, can create grievances that may weaken institutional trust and social cohesion.

Conclusion

The study concluded that INEC officials complied with the principles of transparency and accountability and adhered to the rule of law to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. However, compliance was uneven, with notable weaknesses in the transparency of electoral technology and result collation, complaint management, disciplinary accountability, investigation of electoral malpractice and consistent application of electoral rules. The similarity in the perceptions of community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives further indicated a shared assessment of INEC officials' ethical conduct. The study therefore concluded that strengthening professional ethical compliance among INEC officials would enhance electoral credibility and institutional trust, thereby promoting peaceful political participation, social cohesion and sustainable community development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made:

1. INEC should strengthen transparency in the conduct of elections by ensuring greater stakeholder visibility of BVAS procedures, making Ward and Local Government result collation more open to accredited party agents, observers and the media. INEC should also ensure that election officials provide clear and timely responses to legitimate questions and complaints from electoral stakeholders.

2. INEC should strengthen accountability mechanisms by requiring election officials to properly document and respond to complaints, provide explanations for delays and other electoral challenges. They should accept responsibility for their decisions and actions, and ensure that officials found guilty of misconduct or gross negligence are subjected to appropriate disciplinary measures.
3. INEC should ensure strict and consistent adherence to the Electoral Act and relevant electoral guidelines by applying the same legal rules and standards to all political parties and candidates without discrimination. They should promptly investigate reported cases of electoral malpractice, and ensuring that electoral offences are appropriately documented and referred to the relevant law-enforcement agencies.

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