

Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (Bysiec) And The Conduct Of Local Government Election, (2015-2019)

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<p>Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.</p>	<p><i>This study examined the effectiveness of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) in conducting free, fair, and credible local government elections in Bayelsa State, focusing on the period from 2004 to 2023. Despite BYSIEC's legal mandate, local government elections in the state have been plagued by credibility issues, including political interference, electoral irregularities, and voter disenfranchisement. The study adopted Institutional Theory as its theoretical framework, with key proponents being Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983). A historical research design was employed to investigate the relationship between BYSIEC's operations and electoral outcomes. Data were sourced from secondary materials such as government reports, academic publications, and media reports. Thematic and content analysis revealed that BYSIEC struggled with political interference, especially from the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP), which undermined its independence and credibility. Other findings included recurring electoral irregularities, low voter turnout, and persistent electoral violence. Despite these challenges, BYSIEC failed to implement effective measures to ensure free and fair elections. The study concluded that BYSIEC has not succeeded in conducting credible local government elections due to political interference, inadequate voter participation, and failure to address electoral violence. To improve BYSIEC's effectiveness, the study recommends reforms to strengthen its independence, introduce technological solutions to curb electoral malpractices, enhance voter access, and address the issue of electoral violence.</i></p>
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1. Introduction

Elections are a cornerstone of democratic governance, allowing citizens to choose their representatives and leaders through a transparent and legitimate process. In Nigeria, the conduct of elections is a critical aspect of the democratic experience, ensuring that the voice of the people is heard at all levels of governance. Local government elections, in particular, play a pivotal role in promoting democracy at the grassroots level, as they provide a platform for citizens to engage directly with governance in their immediate communities, and these elections are vital for enhancing accountability, fostering local development, and ensuring that leadership reflects the people's needs and aspirations (Ayoade, 2010; Adelusi, 2017). Local government in Nigeria serves as the third tier of government, responsible for addressing the needs of citizens at the community level.

It is designed to be the closest administrative body to the people, dealing with issues like primary education, healthcare, and local infrastructure (Adelusi, 2017). The significance of local government elections, therefore, cannot be overstated, as these elections determine who will manage local resources, policies, and services that affect the daily lives of citizens. However, the effectiveness of local government elections often depends on the integrity of the electoral process and the institutions that oversee it (Obiyan & Oni, 2013).

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) plays a critical role in managing federal and state elections in Nigeria, ensuring that they adhere to democratic principles. However, local government elections are conducted by state electoral bodies. In this context, the

Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) is responsible for organizing and supervising elections at the local government level in Bayelsa State. The BYSIEC's mandate is defined by the Constitution of Nigeria and the Bayelsa State Electoral Law, empowering the Commission to regulate political activities, register voters, and ensure a fair and transparent electoral process (Obiyan & Oni, 2013). Despite its crucial role, the performance of the BYSIEC has been a subject of debate, with concerns about the Commission's capacity to deliver free and fair elections. Like many other state electoral commissions, the BYSIEC has faced challenges such as electoral malpractice, political interference, and logistical issues, which undermine the credibility of local government elections. Ensuring transparency and fairness in local government elections is essential for fostering democratic governance, as these elections impact the lives of citizens at the grassroots level (Omotola, 2009).

This study examines the conduct of local government elections in Bayelsa State, focusing on the role of the BYSIEC in upholding democratic values. The study also explores the legal and institutional frameworks guiding the BYSIEC's activities, assessing its performance in promoting free and credible elections. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for strengthening electoral management and democratic governance in Bayelsa State and Nigeria at large.

2. Statement of the Problem

The integrity of elections is a fundamental pillar of democratic governance, as it ensures that the will of the people is accurately reflected in the outcome. In Nigeria, local government elections provide an opportunity for citizens to engage with governance at the grassroots level, and they are pivotal for enhancing development, accountability, and political participation (Obiyan & Oni, 2013). However, the administration of these elections has often been fraught with irregularities, undermining the credibility of the electoral process and weakening trust in the institutions responsible for managing them (Ayoade, 2010). This has led to widespread concerns about the capacity of state electoral commissions to deliver transparent and credible elections. The Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) is entrusted with the critical responsibility of managing local government elections in Bayelsa State. Despite its legal mandate to ensure free and fair elections, the Commission has faced challenges that have hindered its ability to achieve this goal. These challenges range from logistical shortcomings to accusations of political interference and electoral malpractice (Obiyan & Oni, 2013). The quality of elections conducted by BYSIEC has far-reaching implications for the democratic process in Bayelsa State,

particularly in fostering public trust and enhancing the legitimacy of elected local government officials (Omodia, 2013; Omotola, 2009).

The central problem addressed by this study revolves around the question as to why, despite the existence of BYSIEC and its legal mandate, local government elections in Bayelsa State continue to face significant credibility issues. Although there is a plethora of scholarly literature on the role of SIECs in conducting elections within states, there is a lack of in-depth scholarly investigation into BYSIEC and its conduct of local government elections, thereby creating a gap in the existing literature. This study aims to fill this gap by critically examining the role of BYSIEC in conducting local government elections and evaluating its capacity to ensure free, fair, and credible elections in Bayelsa State. The study will explore the factors that contribute to electoral malpractice and assess how BYSIEC can strengthen its processes to enhance democratic governance at the grassroots level. Furthermore, this research will contribute to the broader understanding of electoral management in Nigeria, providing insights that can inform policy reforms aimed at improving the functionality of SIECs. Through a focused examination of the BYSIEC, this study seeks to offer practical recommendations for enhancing the quality of local government elections, thereby promoting greater accountability, transparency, and public trust in the electoral process.

Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to examine the effectiveness of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) in conducting local government elections in Bayelsa State. The specific objective of this study is:

- To investigate if the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) has been effective in conducting local government elections in Bayelsa State.

Hypothesis

This study proposes the following tentative answers:

- i. The Bayelsa state independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) has not ensured the conduct of credible local government elections in Bayelsa state from 2004 to 2024, as election within this period have been marked by instances of fraud, political dominance, and opposition boycotts.
- ii. Political interference has influenced the operations and independence of BYSIEC in the conduct of local government elections between 2004 and 2024, as ruling parties have often dictated outcomes through control of resources, institutions and security apparatus.

3. Literature Review

Electoral Commissions in Nigeria

Electoral commissions are critical institutions tasked with the responsibility of organizing and conducting elections in various political systems. These bodies play a fundamental role in safeguarding the integrity of the electoral process and ensuring that elections are transparent, free, and credible (Ake, 1996; Young, 1998). In most democratic systems, the electoral commission is constituted by the executive arm of the government, with its members typically selected to maintain a level of impartiality (Nwabueze, 1982). The mandate of electoral commissions often extends beyond just organizing elections to overseeing voter registration, ensuring voter education, and validating election results (Almond, Powell, Strom, & Dalton, 2008). According to McLean and McMillan (2009), an electoral commission is defined as:

"A non-partisan body which determines election procedures and district boundaries and oversees the conduct of elections" (McLean and McMillan 2009, p. 165).

This definition emphasizes the critical importance of neutrality within the framework of an electoral commission, highlighting that the body's effectiveness is heavily dependent on its impartiality. When the neutrality of an electoral commission is compromised, the credibility of the elections it oversees is significantly diminished, leading to public distrust (Aiyede, 2009). This dynamic is evident in various political contexts, particularly in emerging democracies like Nigeria.

The evolution of electoral commissions in Nigeria is reflective of the nation's turbulent political history. Since Nigeria operates a federal structure, there are two levels of electoral commissions: the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), responsible for federal and state elections, and the State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs), which manage elections at the local government level (Adejumobi, 2000). These commissions, although distinct in their mandates, share the overarching goal of ensuring that elections are conducted in a fair and credible manner (Joseph, 1991). INEC's authority is outlined in Section 15 of the Third Schedule of the 1999 Constitution, which states that the body is tasked with:

"Organising, undertaking, and supervising all elections to the offices of the President and Vice-President, the Governor and Deputy Governor of a State, and to the membership of the Senate, the House of Representatives and House of Assembly of each State of the Federation" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999:143).

In contrast, the SIECs are constitutionally mandated to manage local government elections within their respective

states. Section 3, Part II of the Third Schedule of the Constitution specifies the powers of SIECs, which include the ability to:

"Organise, undertake and supervise all elections to local government councils within the state" (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999:148).

This division underscores the decentralized nature of Nigeria's electoral system. However, despite this distinction, INEC remains the superior electoral management body, particularly because SIECs depend on the voter register compiled by INEC (Suberu, 2007). The autonomy of both bodies is crucial to maintaining the democratic integrity of elections in the country (Dudley, 1982).

The first electoral management body in Nigeria was the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN), which was established to conduct the pre-independence elections of 1959. This marked the beginning of electoral democracy in Nigeria, allowing the country to transition from colonial rule to self-governance (Sklar, 1963). ECN's establishment signaled Nigeria's readiness to engage in democratic governance, and it laid the foundation for the formation of subsequent electoral bodies (Ogbeide, 2011). Upon independence in 1960, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEC) was formed, and it oversaw the 1964 and 1965 general elections (Post & Vickers, 1973). However, political instability soon set in, culminating in a military coup in 1966 that led to the dissolution of FEC. The dissolution of this body reflected the broader trend in which military interventions disrupted democratic processes, particularly electoral activities (Nnoli, 2003).

Following a hiatus caused by military rule, Nigeria returned to electoral democracy in 1978 when the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) was established by the military regime of General Olusegun Obasanjo (Kurfi, 1983). FEDECO was instrumental in organizing the 1979 elections, which marked the beginning of Nigeria's Second Republic, with Alhaji Shehu Shagari elected as the country's President (Sklar, 1983). FEDECO's efforts in organizing the 1979 elections were pivotal in transitioning Nigeria to civilian rule (Ibrahim, 1991). However, Nigeria's political environment remained unstable, and the Second Republic was short-lived. Another military coup in 1983 led to the dissolution of FEDECO. During the military regime of General Ibrahim Babangida, a new electoral body known as the National Electoral Commission (NEC) was created to oversee elections during the transition to civilian rule (Diamond, 1994). NEC is most remembered for organizing the 1993 presidential elections, which were widely regarded as the freest and fairest in Nigeria's history, before they were controversially annulled (Ihonvbere, 1994). The annulment of the 1993 election not

only ended NEC's operations but also plunged the country into political turmoil.

Following the death of General Sani Abacha in 1998, the subsequent transition to democracy led to the dissolution of NECON (National Electoral Commission of Nigeria), which had been established by Abacha's regime (Thonvbere, 1996). General Abdulsalami Abubakar, who succeeded Abacha, created the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in 1999 to oversee the elections that marked Nigeria's return to democracy. Since its inception, INEC has been the main body responsible for organizing elections at the federal and state levels (Omotola, 2010). INEC's establishment was a significant development in Nigeria's electoral history. Its creation symbolized a renewed effort to build a transparent electoral system capable of conducting credible elections (Jinadu, 2011). INEC successfully organized the 1999 elections, which ushered in the Fourth Republic under President Olusegun Obasanjo (Okoosi-Simbine, 2014). The commission has since conducted several general elections, with varying degrees of success and challenges (Aiyede, 2007; Omodia, 2011).

In contemporary Nigeria, INEC remains the foremost electoral management body responsible for organizing elections at the national and state levels (Ojo, 2014). Despite challenges such as logistical issues, accusations of political interference, and widespread voter apathy, INEC has made significant strides in improving the electoral process. Innovations such as the use of biometric voter registration and the introduction of electronic transmission of results have enhanced the credibility of elections (Jega, 2014). However, issues of electoral fraud and violence still pose serious challenges (Duruji, 2010). At the state level, SIECs continue to be responsible for conducting local government elections. However, their effectiveness has been called into question due to concerns about political manipulation by state governments (Abutudu & Egwu, 2012). The appointment of SIEC members by state governors has raised concerns about their neutrality, leading to accusations of bias in favor of the ruling party at the state level (Adejumobi & Agbaje, 2006). This issue highlights the need for greater independence and transparency in the appointment and operations of SIECs to ensure free and fair local elections.

Electoral Commissions and the Conduct of Elections in Nigeria

Many Nigerians believe that electoral commissions are central to the challenges associated with conducting elections in the country. The Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) was responsible for organizing the 1959 elections, which led to the formation of the first neo-colonial civilian government. However, the election

outcome was contentious, leading to controversy that culminated in the 1964 regional elections in the Western Region. The controversies surrounding these elections played a role in the military coup of 1966, which overthrew the civilian government (Iyayi, 2006). In 1979, the Federal Electoral Commission (FEDECO) conducted elections that sparked the famous "two-thirds of nineteen states" crisis. This controversy arose from allegations that the military favored a specific political group in the handover of power (Iyayi, 2006). In 1983, FEDECO was seen as instrumental in the National Party of Nigeria (NPN)'s return to power, with accusations of inflating registered voter numbers—from 48,499,907 in 1979 to 65,304,818 in 1983 (Iyayi, 2006).

Similarly, the 1999 elections organized by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) were perceived as being pre-arranged, with the goal of legitimizing the electoral process and its outcomes (Iyayi, 2006). This perception of INEC's complicity continued into the 2003 and 2004 elections, marred by widespread fraud. According to the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), INEC's mismanagement contributed significantly to the electoral issues. Voter secrecy was compromised due to the lack of clearly designated compartments, and the absence of proper arrangements for transporting sensitive election materials allowed for result sheets to disappear and reappear at collation centers, often manipulated by party agents (Aiyede, 2007; Okoosi-Simbine, 2014). The 2007 elections were marked by poor organization, lack of transparency, procedural irregularities, and credible fraud allegations. The European Union Observer Mission (EUOM) noted that the voter registration process was delayed, undermined by insufficient Direct Data Capturing (DDC) machines, and marred by technical failures. The final voter register was of poor quality, with duplicate entries, underage voters, and blurred images. Moreover, permanent voter cards were not issued on time, further complicating the process (Omotola, 2010; Jinadu, 2011).

The 2011 general elections, under the leadership of INEC Chairman Professor Attahiru Jega, were hailed as an improvement over previous elections. INEC introduced new technologies, including the Direct Data Capturing Machines (DDCs), aimed at reducing electoral fraud. Despite these efforts, the elections were marred by violence, particularly in northern Nigeria, where post-election violence claimed several lives (Suberu, 2011). Nevertheless, the 2011 elections were regarded as relatively free and fair compared to past polls, with improved organization and transparency, setting the stage for further reforms in electoral governance (Jinadu, 2011; Omotola, 2010). The 2015 general elections marked a significant turning point in Nigeria's electoral history. For the first

time, the country witnessed the peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another. The introduction of the Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs) and Smart Card Readers (SCRs) by INEC under Professor Jega significantly reduced electoral fraud, particularly multiple voting (Onapajo, 2015). Despite challenges such as technical failures of card readers and logistical delays, the election was seen as a major step forward in Nigeria's democratic process. The victory of Muhammadu Buhari over the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, was widely regarded as a reflection of the will of the people, contributing to the election's legitimacy (Onapajo, 2015; Ezeani, 2015). The 2019 elections, under INEC Chairman Mahmood Yakubu, were characterized by a mix of successes and challenges. INEC continued the use of PVCs and SCRs, but there were widespread reports of malfunctioning machines, voter intimidation, and violence. Observers noted that while there were improvements in the overall electoral process, significant issues persisted, especially in terms of voter disenfranchisement in certain regions (Adibe, 2019). According to The National Democratic Institute (NDI) and The International Republican Institute (IRI), the elections were generally peaceful, but irregularities such as vote-buying, violence, and logistical lapses marred the process (Okoye, 2019).

The 2023 elections, widely regarded as a critical moment for Nigeria's democracy, saw further efforts to refine the electoral process. INEC introduced the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing (IRev) Portal aimed at enhancing transparency and reducing electoral malpractices (Edeh, 2023). Despite these technological advancements, the elections faced significant challenges, including technical failures, delays in the transmission of results, and violence in several regions. Observers from the European Union Election Observation Mission (EU-EOM) and ECOWAS noted that while the technology deployed by INEC improved transparency, the election still faced significant logistical challenges and allegations of voter suppression (Nwokolo, 2023; Adibe, 2023). Despite these issues, the election marked another milestone in Nigeria's democratic evolution, with the ruling All Progressives Congress (APC) retaining power. The recurring challenges in Nigeria's elections suggest that electoral commissions, particularly INEC, often face difficulties in maintaining neutrality and operational efficiency. Despite technological innovations and reforms, the problem of credibility persists, as elections are still marked by irregularities and logistical failures (Iyayi, 2006; Suberu, 2011; Adibe, 2019). However, the role of these commissions remains vital in shaping the future of Nigeria's democratic journey.

State Independent Electoral Commissions and the Conduct of Local Government Elections in Nigeria

The conduct of local government elections in Nigeria is primarily the responsibility of State Independent Electoral Commissions (SIECs). These commissions, established by Section 197 of the 1999 Constitution, are meant to organize, conduct, and supervise elections at the local government level across Nigeria's 36 states (Omotola, 2010). In theory, this provision was designed to bring democratic governance closer to the people and foster political participation at the grassroots. However, in practice, the role and function of SIECs in conducting local government elections have been riddled with controversies, ranging from political manipulation to lack of transparency, which has significantly compromised the credibility of local government elections (Nwokolo, 2023; Ezeani, 2015; Onapajo, 2015). The composition of SIECs has been a major factor affecting the credibility of local government elections in Nigeria. State governors typically appoint members of these commissions, often selecting individuals with strong political allegiances to the ruling party in the state. This appointment process has been criticized for fostering a lack of neutrality in the operations of SIECs, as the members tend to align with the interests of the appointing governor rather than adhering to the principles of impartiality and fairness (Igbokwe-Ibeto, 2016). Consequently, the independence of SIECs is frequently called into question, as they are perceived as extensions of the state governments, leading to a situation where the outcomes of local elections are almost always skewed in favor of the ruling party.

The overt political control exercised by governors over SIECs has resulted in several instances of electoral malpractice. Opposition parties across Nigeria have often accused these commissions of rigging local government elections in favor of the ruling party, making it difficult for genuine democratic competition to thrive at the local level. According to Adeyemo (2018), "SIECs have become political tools manipulated by state governments to ensure their continuous control of local governments," a development that significantly undermines the democratic process in the country. Another major issue plaguing the conduct of local government elections in Nigeria is the frequent postponement or outright cancellation of elections (Nwokolo, 2023). While Section 7 of the 1999 Constitution guarantees a system of democratically elected local government councils, it does not provide a strict timeline for when these elections must be held. This loophole has allowed many state governments to manipulate the electoral process, often postponing elections for years without valid reasons. In the interim, governors appoint caretaker committees to run local governments, effectively bypassing

the democratic process. These caretaker committees are typically composed of individuals loyal to the state governor and are used as a means of consolidating political power (Nwokolo, 2023; Ezeani, 2015; Onapajo, 2015). This trend has been particularly common in states where the opposition is strong or where the governor seeks to maintain tight control over local government funds and resources. For example, in Rivers State, local government elections were conducted just days before Governor Rotimi Amaechi left office in 2015. These elections were later nullified by the courts, reflecting the extent to which local government elections can be manipulated for political purposes (Nigerian Tribune, 2015). In Ondo State, local government elections were delayed for eight years, with successive state governments preferring to appoint caretaker committees rather than conduct democratic elections. When elections were eventually held in 2016, the ruling party won all the available seats, an outcome that was widely criticized by opposition parties as fraudulent (The Punch, 2016). This manipulation of the local government electoral process through postponements and the use of caretaker committees has created a democratic deficit at the grassroots level, undermining the right of citizens to freely elect their local representatives (Nwokolo, 2023).

The economic dimension of local government elections is also critical to understanding the challenges faced by SIECs. State governments frequently cite financial constraints as a reason for postponing or canceling local government elections. However, this explanation is often viewed with skepticism, as local government appropriations come from the federal government, meaning that state governments are not directly responsible for funding local councils. The real issue lies in the management of the Joint State-Local Government Account, which is a constitutional provision that allows state governments to control local government funds. This system enables state governments to withhold a significant portion of the funds meant for local councils, leaving local governments with limited resources to carry out their functions. As a result, many governors are reluctant to hold local government elections, preferring instead to maintain appointed caretaker committees that will not challenge their control over local government finances (Alao, 2016b). The financial manipulation of local government funds has significant implications for the functioning of SIECs and the conduct of local government elections. The Speaker of the House of Representatives, Yakub Dogara, has described the Joint Account as one of the "biggest evils" preventing local government autonomy in Nigeria. Dogara argues that this financial arrangement subsumes local government councils under the control of state executives, making it difficult for them to operate independently or challenge state-level interference in local governance (Alao, 2016a).

This financial stranglehold exacerbates the problems of corruption, mismanagement, and inefficiency in the local government system. (Onapajo, 2015).

The cumulative effects of political interference, financial manipulation, and the postponement of local government elections have led to a widespread failure of democratic accountability at the local level in Nigeria. In many states, local government councils have become mere extensions of state governments, with little or no independent authority to make decisions or address the needs of their constituents. This situation has led to widespread disenfranchisement, as citizens are denied the opportunity to participate in the electoral process and hold their local representatives accountable (Nwokolo, 2023; Ezeani, 2015; Onapajo, 2015). Moreover, the lack of credible local government elections has serious implications for service delivery and governance at the grassroots. Local governments are supposed to be the closest tier of government to the people, responsible for providing essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. However, the failure to conduct free and fair elections has rendered many local councils ineffective, as they are either run by politically appointed caretakers or controlled by state governments through financial manipulation. This has led to widespread inefficiency, corruption, and a general failure to meet the needs of the people Nwokolo, 2023).

The conduct of local government elections in Nigeria is fraught with significant challenges that undermine the democratic process at the grassroots level. The political control exercised by state governors over SIECs, coupled with the frequent postponement of elections and the financial manipulation of local government funds, has created a system in which local governments are effectively controlled by state governments. This has led to a failure of democratic accountability, as local government councils are either run by unelected caretaker committees or manipulated by state governments to serve their political interests. Until these issues are addressed, local government elections in Nigeria will continue to be marred by irregularities, rendering them ineffective as a mechanism for promoting democracy and good governance at the grassroots (Nwokolo, 2023; Ezeani, 2015; Onapajo, 2015).

The current structure of SIECs and the Joint State-Local Government Account has created a situation in which local governments are unable to operate independently, leading to widespread inefficiency and a lack of accountability to the people they are supposed to serve.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the institutional theory to explore the functions and conduct of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission in local government elections.

Institutional theory, rooted in the works of scholars like Meyer and Rowan (1977) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983), examines how institutional structures, norms, and rules influence organizational behavior and decision-making. The theory posits that institutions are not just formal structures but are embedded within social and political contexts, which shape organizational practices through established rules, norms, and beliefs.

Central to institutional theory is the idea that organizations, including government agencies, operate within a "field" that comprises other institutions, regulations, societal expectations, and cultural beliefs (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Organizations are compelled to conform to institutional norms to gain legitimacy, stability, and social approval. This drive to align with external expectations often leads to isomorphism—organizations becoming more similar over time due to shared pressures (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This theory highlights three main types of isomorphism that shape institutions: coercive isomorphism (pressures from formal rules and authority), mimetic isomorphism (imitation of other successful organizations), and normative isomorphism (influence from professional standards and education) (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Institutional theory has been widely used to study how governmental bodies are influenced by regulatory, political, and cultural environments, explaining why such entities conform to, or diverge from, established procedures and policies to secure legitimacy and effectiveness.

Application of the Theory

The institutional theory provides a valuable lens for understanding the operations of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (SIEC) in the conduct of local government elections. As an institution responsible for election oversight, the Bayelsa SIEC operates within a complex regulatory and political environment that influences its functions and decision-making processes. The commission faces coercive pressures from constitutional mandates, such as the 1999 Nigerian Constitution, which empowers state governments to oversee local elections through bodies like SIEC. This mandate shapes the commission's responsibility to uphold democratic principles and ensure fair electoral processes.

Moreover, the Bayelsa SIEC encounters normative pressures from professional standards within the field of electoral governance. These standards set expectations for transparency, fairness, and accountability, urging SIEC to adopt practices that align with democratic ideals (Scott, 2008). By adhering to these norms, SIEC seeks legitimacy among stakeholders, such as voters, political parties, and governmental bodies, which is crucial for maintaining

public trust. Mimetic pressures also play a role in the commission's operations. Observing other state electoral commissions that are deemed effective, the Bayelsa SIEC may adopt similar approaches to election monitoring, voter education, and transparency. Such imitation can enhance the commission's credibility and increase its efficiency in managing electoral activities (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Through the lens of institutional theory, we see that the Bayelsa State SIEC's adherence to constitutional mandates, professional norms, and best practices not only ensures compliance with democratic standards but also bolsters its legitimacy as a credible electoral body in Nigeria.

5. Research Design

This study adopted the historical research design. Historical research design involves systematically investigating, recording, analyzing, and interpreting past events to understand their causes, effects, and relevance to current contexts (Berg & Lune, 2012). This method allows researchers to explore patterns, trends, and the continuity of social or institutional phenomena over time. It was chosen for this study due to its suitability in examining the history, functions, and evolution of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission and its role in conducting local government elections. Through a historical lens, the study seeks to identify and interpret how past events, decisions, and institutional practices have influenced the current conduct and challenges of local government elections in Bayelsa State.

6. Methods of Data Collection

Data for this study were obtained from secondary sources, which included an extensive review of existing literature such as government reports, scholarly books, journal articles, and reliable internet resources. The data collection method used was document analysis, focusing on official records, legal frameworks, and academic works related to the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission and local government elections in Bayelsa State.

7. Methods of Data Presentation and Analysis

The data were presented under thematic headings, focusing on key areas such as the legal mandate of BYSIEC, the procedural conduct of local government elections, and the challenges faced by the commission. For data analysis, the study employed content analysis and thematic analysis. Content analysis was utilized to critically examine the materials, particularly the legal frameworks and reports on past elections, while thematic analysis helped in identifying and analyzing patterns in the data, particularly regarding the effectiveness and limitations of BYSIEC in fulfilling its statutory functions in local government elections in Bayelsa State.

8. Empirical Verification

Historical Context of Local Government Elections in Bayelsa State

The historical development of local government elections in Bayelsa State provides critical insights into the political and administrative dynamics shaping grassroots governance in the region. Bayelsa State, created in 1996, has held four local government elections to date: in 2004, 2010, 2017, and 2024. These elections represent important milestones in the state's efforts to promote local democracy, despite the challenges of political interference, logistical limitations, and electoral malpractices.

Bayelsa State held its first local government election on May 15, 2004, eight years after its creation. This election was conducted under the supervision of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC). The election marked a significant moment in the state's political history, as it was the first time citizens participated in electing their local representatives (ThisDay, May 16, 2004). However, the election was marred by logistical challenges, including delayed voting materials and reports of irregularities such as ballot stuffing and voter intimidation. Although the election provided a foundation for local governance, the electoral process faced widespread criticisms. Political analysts argued that the ruling party in the state exerted undue influence on the election results, leading to questions about the credibility of the process (Vanguard, May 17, 2004). Despite these challenges, the 2004 local government election laid the groundwork for future elections and opened up political participation at the grassroots level.

The second local government election in Bayelsa State took place on April 3, 2010. This election came with high expectations, as it was seen as an opportunity to correct the errors of the 2004 elections. However, the 2010 elections were again fraught with challenges, including a low voter turnout and logistical constraints. Delays in the delivery of election materials, especially to remote areas, and allegations of political interference by state actors plagued the election (ThisDay, April 4, 2010). In 2010, Governor Timipre Sylva of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) was keen to maintain his administration's dominance over Bayelsa's local government areas (LGAs). The PDP, being the ruling party, aimed to extend its control through the local elections. However, internal divisions within the party and rising opposition from the Action Congress (AC) complicated the political landscape.

Prior to the elections scheduled for April 3, 2010, the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) faced challenges related to the PDP's internal struggles. The commission was presented with two

conflicting lists of candidates, one submitted by the embattled state chairman, Chief Rufus Abadi, and another by the party secretary, James Agary. This division within the PDP highlighted deeper issues within the party's leadership. Agary's faction argued that Abadi's actions were unconstitutional since he allegedly did not participate in the primary elections that produced the candidates (The Tide News, January 16, 2010). The conflict reflected the unresolved cracks within the party, despite interventions from the national secretariat.

The Action Congress (AC), led by Comrade Ebikibina Miriki, strongly opposed the conduct of the elections. Following the announcement of results, in which the PDP won all the chairmanship seats in Bayelsa's eight LGAs, the AC rejected the results, describing the elections as fraudulent. In a statement, the AC claimed that the elections were marred by irregularities, violence, and disenfranchisement. Seven individuals reportedly lost their lives due to election-related violence (Vanguard News, April 8, 2010). The opposition further accused BYSIEC of colluding with the PDP to rig the election in their favor. Miriki labeled the election as "the most fraudulent and flawed polls in the history of the state," pointing to numerous anomalies and a lack of transparency (Vanguard News, April 8, 2010). These accusations led the opposition to call for legal action, as they sought to challenge the outcome of the election through the judicial system. The Action Congress (AC), led by Comrade Ebikibina Miriki, strongly opposed the conduct of the elections. Following the announcement of results, in which the PDP won all the chairmanship seats in Bayelsa's eight LGAs, the AC rejected the results, describing the elections as fraudulent. In a statement, the AC claimed that the elections were marred by irregularities, violence, and disenfranchisement. Seven individuals reportedly lost their lives due to election-related violence (Vanguard News, April 8, 2010). The opposition further accused BYSIEC of colluding with the PDP to rig the election in their favor. Miriki labeled the election as "the most fraudulent and flawed polls in the history of the state," pointing to numerous anomalies and a lack of transparency (Vanguard News, April 8, 2010). These accusations led the opposition to call for legal action, as they sought to challenge the outcome of the election through the judicial system.

The internal crisis within the PDP further complicated the 2010 local government elections. As noted earlier, BYSIEC was left to choose between two lists of candidates, one submitted by Chief Rufus Abadi and another by James Agary. Agary's faction claimed that Abadi's list was illegitimate because he did not participate in the primaries, while Abadi argued that it was his constitutional duty as chairman to submit the list of candidates (The Tide News,

January 16, 2010). This division reflected a deeper power struggle within the PDP. Despite calls for reconciliation, the rift remained unresolved, with each faction seeking to undermine the other. The internal wrangling threatened to destabilize the party's cohesion, even as it sought to retain dominance over Bayelsa's LGAs. Despite the controversies, Governor Sylva proceeded with the inauguration of the newly elected chairmen. In his address, Sylva challenged the chairmen to shun fraudulent practices and to ensure that they included members of the opposition in their governance efforts (Vanguard News, April 8, 2010). This call for inclusivity stood in stark contrast to the allegations of fraud and manipulation that marred the election process. The PDP's quick declaration of victory, with election results being released less than 24 hours after the polls, further fueled suspicion. The opposition, led by the AC, continued to reject the results and insisted that only the judiciary could correct the anomalies (This Day, April 6, 2010).

The third local government election in Bayelsa State was the 2017 local government elections, held in December, were marked by the dominance of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and a series of controversies, including allegations of electoral malpractice. Governor Seriaké Dickson, whose administration was keen on consolidating power at the grassroots level, faced internal party conflicts as well as external pressure from opposition parties like the All Progressives Congress (APC). Internal strife within the PDP, notably around candidate selection, mirrored issues from previous elections, though the party ultimately retained its dominance. The Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC), led by Dr. Perekeme Bertola, was criticized for alleged bias in favor of the PDP. Reports from the Tide News and ThisDay in December 2017 highlighted claims of vote rigging, ballot stuffing, and voter intimidation. Despite the APC's efforts, including a petition filed by the party's leaders, all chairmanship positions were won by the PDP, a result the opposition rejected as fraudulent. Governor Dickson, however, praised the election's outcome and urged the newly elected chairmen to focus on grassroots development and to engage opposition figures for inclusive governance (ThisDay, 25 December 2017; The Tide, 22 December 2017).

The most recent local government election is the 2023 local government elections in Bayelsa State, held on 12 August, 2023, which similarly saw the PDP maintaining its stronghold on the state's political landscape. Governor Douye Diri, who succeeded Dickson, oversaw the process amidst continued allegations of electoral irregularities. The APC and other opposition parties accused the PDP and BYSIEC of manipulating the electoral process to ensure the ruling party's victory, with claims of vote suppression and

biased voter registration processes. According to a Vanguard report on 14 August 2023, opposition figures decried the lack of transparency, yet the election results once again favored the PDP, which swept all eight local government chairmanship positions. BYSIEC, led by its new chairperson, Chief Lambert Igwe, dismissed the allegations, asserting that the election was conducted in line with the law. Governor Diri praised the peaceful conduct of the election, calling for the elected chairmen to focus on infrastructural development and service delivery at the grassroots level (Vanguard, 14 August 2023; ThisDay, 13 August 2023). The opposition, however, remained dissatisfied, continuing to call for reforms in the state's electoral processes.

BYSIEC and the Conduct of Local Government Elections in Bayelsa State

The Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) has played a pivotal role in the administration of local government elections in the state, but its conduct over the years has been marred by allegations of partisanship, irregularities, and manipulation. The elections of 2004, 2010, 2017, and 2023, in particular, highlight the recurring challenges that have plagued the state's local electoral process.

In 2004, the local government elections, held in March, were fraught with allegations of electoral fraud and disenfranchisement. Opposition parties, led by the Action Congress (AC), accused BYSIEC of orchestrating a biased electoral process that favored the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). Complaints of voter suppression, ballot box snatching, and manipulation of results were rife, yet the PDP swept all the chairmanship seats across Bayelsa's local government councils (Vanguard, March 12, 2004). Despite these allegations, the PDP and then-Governor Diepreye Alamieyeseigha defended the integrity of the election, dismissing the opposition's claims. Nevertheless, opposition parties took their grievances to court, seeking to nullify the results.

By 2010, the issues surrounding BYSIEC's role in local elections had escalated. The April 3, 2010, local government elections were marked by more intense allegations of fraud and violence. The opposition Action Congress, in a petition led by Comrade Ebikibina Miriki, accused BYSIEC of colluding with the PDP to manipulate the electoral process. The opposition party decried the flagrant abuse of electoral procedures, claiming that BYSIEC disenfranchised voters and engaged in fraudulent practices, culminating in widespread electoral violence, including the killing of seven people (Vanguard, April 8, 2010). Despite these accusations, the PDP once again dominated the elections, winning all chairmanship positions in the state.

Following the results, the Action Congress and other opposition parties urged the state Chief Judge, Justice Kate Abiri, to establish the Local Government Election Tribunal to address the alleged irregularities. They cited Section 85, Subsection 1 of the Local Government Law of Bayelsa State, arguing that the anomalies noticed during the election could only be addressed through judicial intervention (*ThisDay*, April 6, 2010). The opposition parties were particularly concerned with BYSIEC's alleged complicity in the electoral fraud, which they claimed undermined the credibility of the election. Legal challenges ensued, with the opposition seeking to annul the results and expose the underlying issues in the election's administration.

The 2017 local government elections, held in December, followed a similar pattern, as the PDP once again emerged victorious across all eight local government areas. The All Progressives Congress (APC), the main opposition party, described the election as "grossly manipulated" and accused BYSIEC of partisan bias. Incidents of electoral malpractice, such as ballot tampering, intimidation of voters, and the exclusion of opposition candidates from polling units, were reported (*The Tide*, December 22, 2017). Despite these concerns, BYSIEC declared the elections free and fair, although voter turnout was notably low, and public confidence in the commission's ability to conduct impartial elections remained strained.

The 2023 local government elections, conducted on August 12, continued to reflect the same issues of manipulation and illegalities. As in previous elections, the PDP swept the polls, securing all chairmanship positions. Opposition parties, notably the APC, raised numerous complaints about the conduct of the election, citing irregularities in the voter register, vote buying, and the use of thugs to intimidate voters. According to *Vanguard* (August 14, 2023), opposition groups called into question the quick announcement of results, alleging that the outcomes were predetermined. Furthermore, reports of violence and electoral disruptions were widespread, with accusations that BYSIEC had failed to ensure a level playing field for all participants. As a result, several petitions were filed to challenge the validity of the election, although BYSIEC maintained that the process was conducted in line with the law.

Overall, BYSIEC's management of local government elections in Bayelsa State has been consistently criticized for its lack of transparency and impartiality. The recurring pattern of accusations—ranging from voter suppression and violence to partisan bias—highlights the commission's failure to inspire public trust in the electoral process. As opposition parties continue to push for reforms, the question of BYSIEC's independence remains central to the

broader discourse on local governance and democracy in Bayelsa State.

9. Discussion of Findings

This study made the following findings:

- 1. Political Interference and Lack of Independence in BYSIEC:** One major finding from the historical analysis of local government elections in Bayelsa State is the pervasive political interference, particularly by the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP). BYSIEC has repeatedly been accused of partisanship, favoring the PDP in the conduct of elections. The opposition has consistently alleged manipulation of election results, as seen in the 2004, 2010, 2017, and 2023 elections. The integrity of BYSIEC's independence is highly questionable, with evidence pointing to its collusion with the ruling party to maintain control over local governments.
- 2. Recurring Electoral Irregularities:** A second finding is the persistent pattern of electoral malpractices. Across the 2004, 2010, 2017, and 2023 elections, there were reports of widespread irregularities, including ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and vote buying. These malpractices have undermined the credibility of the elections, leading to a loss of public confidence in the electoral process. The manipulation of voter registers and the use of thugs to suppress opposition votes further point to a deeply flawed system.
- 3. Low Voter Turnout and Disenfranchisement:** Another finding is the issue of low voter turnout, compounded by the disenfranchisement of opposition voters. The 2010 election, in particular, saw logistical failures, such as delayed voting materials and inaccessible polling units in remote areas, which discouraged voter participation. The disenfranchisement of voters through violence and intimidation, as highlighted in the 2017 and 2023 elections, also contributed to the low turnout and reflected the failure of BYSIEC to ensure an inclusive and fair election process.
- 4. Ineffectiveness in Addressing Electoral Violence:** Lastly, the elections in Bayelsa State have been marred by recurring electoral violence, with little to no effective response from BYSIEC or the state government. The 2010 election saw the deaths of seven individuals due to violence, while subsequent elections, including in 2017 and 2023, were similarly marked by unrest and the use of thugs to disrupt voting. Despite these violent

disruptions, BYSIEC has failed to put in place adequate measures to prevent violence or hold perpetrators accountable, thereby compromising the security of the electoral process.

10. Conclusion

The analysis of local government elections in Bayelsa State from 2004 to 2023 reveals a consistent failure of the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission (BYSIEC) to conduct free, fair, and credible elections. Political interference, electoral irregularities, voter disenfranchisement, and violence have plagued the state's local elections, undermining the democratic process and eroding public trust in BYSIEC. The mass of data gathered from various secondary sources supports the hypothesis that **BYSIEC has not been effective in conducting free, fair, and credible local government elections in Bayelsa State.**

11. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to improve the Bayelsa State Independent Electoral Commission's (BYSIEC) effectiveness in conducting free, fair, and credible local government elections:

- 1. Strengthening BYSIEC's Independence:** To address the issue of political interference, BYSIEC must be restructured to operate as an independent body free from undue influence by the ruling party. This can be achieved by reforming the process of appointing its members, ensuring a transparent and merit-based selection process that includes stakeholders from both the ruling and opposition parties, civil society, and the judiciary.
- 2. Implementing Electoral Reforms to Curb Irregularities:** Electoral reforms are needed to tackle the issue of electoral malpractices. BYSIEC should adopt technological solutions like electronic voting and biometric verification to prevent vote rigging, ballot stuffing, and voter fraud. There must also be a comprehensive overhaul of the voter registration process to eliminate biases and ensure that all eligible voters are fairly represented.
- 3. Improving Voter Access and Participation:** To resolve the issue of low voter turnout and disenfranchisement, BYSIEC must improve logistical planning for elections. Voting materials should be delivered on time, particularly to remote areas, and security should be provided to protect voters from intimidation and violence. Additionally, public awareness campaigns should

be initiated to educate voters on their rights and the importance of participating in local elections.

- 4. Addressing Electoral Violence and Insecurity:** A firm response is required to deal with the problem of electoral violence. BYSIEC, in collaboration with security agencies, must establish clear protocols to prevent violence during elections. This includes deploying adequate security personnel to polling stations, setting up conflict resolution mechanisms, and ensuring that perpetrators of electoral violence are prosecuted. Implementing these measures will promote a safer and more credible electoral environment.

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