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Elections in the Global South and North

A Comprehensive Overview

Edited by Opeyemi Idowu Aluko



Elections in the Global South and North - A Comprehensive Overview

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Social Sciences

Volume 9

Aims and Scope of the Series

The social sciences, as a form of scientific knowledge anchored on epistemological foundations, theories, and specific methodologies, both in their fundamental and applied dimensions, are paramount for understanding and, consequently, developing instruments that contribute to improving social and environmental living conditions. This Social Sciences book series, based on the concept of the social sciences as key elements in the promotion of scientific knowledge and its inherent consequences, has as its primary goal to be a space for the dissemination of relevant information on various objects of study, aimed at specialists, students, policymakers, and others interested in the challenges facing humanity. Thus, the aim is to promote scientific progress through the sound and rigorous dissemination of studies that, from the perspective of the social sciences, either through a specialised disciplinary approach or through interdisciplinary perspectives, foster a deeper understanding of the objects under analysis, clarifying the issues addressed and their implications.

Meet the Series Editor



Dr. Sandro Serpa is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Azores (UAc), Portugal. His career in social sciences and education began at UAc in 2000. He earned his Ph.D. in Education, specializing in Sociology of Education, from UAc in 2013. He is also an integrated researcher at the Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences of the Azores Centre (CICS. NOVA. UAçores). Dr. Serpa has demonstrated a strong commitment to higher education throughout his career. He has served in various positions at UAc, including Head of the Department of Sociology, Director of the Bachelor's in Social Work, Coordinator of the Scientific-Pedagogical Supervision Team for Social Work Internships, Member of the Pedagogical Council of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, and Member of the Quality Commission. Additionally, he held the position of Deputy Director of CICS. UAc. Currently, he serves as Senior Editor (Sociology Section) for Social Sciences & Humanities Open (Elsevier), among several other journals. He previously held the position of Senior Editor - Sociology Section for Cogent Social Sciences (Taylor & Francis) from 2020 to 2022. Dr. Serpa maintains a distinguished research profile, evidenced by over 400 publications in international journals, books, and other scientific outlets across a wide range of countries: Brazil, Canada, China, United Arab Emirates, Germany, India, Kazakhstan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, United States of America. His research interests encompass Teaching Sociology, Sociology of Education, Sociology of Organisations, Organisational Culture, Scientific Communication, Digital Society, Digital Literacy, Society 5.0 and Sociology of Artificial Intelligence. Dr. Serpa emphasizes the importance of integrating academic knowledge with service to the university and society at large.

Meet the Volume Editor



Dr. Aluko Opeyemi Idowu, a distinguished scholar with a Ph.D. in Political Science, specializes in comparative politics, political theory, elections, and urban violence studies. He lectures at Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria, where he serves as Head of the Department of Political Science and the University Assistant Chaplain. He has co-edited several books. With expertise in advanced research design and applied qualitative and quantitative methods, he has published over 120 papers in reputable journals globally and presented at numerous international conferences. He is a Global Citizenship Lead for the Global Citizenship and Children's Rights Network (GLOCCRIN) and an Advanced National Training Officer (ANTO) for the Boys' Brigade Nigeria.

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Preface

An election is a popular and acceptable way to consolidate power and change government. It is accepted by several countries in the world. Indeed, any country that fails to hold periodic elections will be seen as a deviant state. Almost all countries with different systems of government use elections because they are a peaceful means for political transition, continuity, and change in governance.

This book, titled “*Elections in the Global South and North – A Comprehensive Overview*”, is an exceptional, timely, and evergreen concept that speaks to the ubiquitous nature of elections across all climes. The nature of elections in the global north and global south is similar in some respects and different in many aspects. However, the expected results in the two are more similar than different. This seems to be a paradox. Can different process and unique systems in the two separate poles produce or result in similar outcomes - ‘public acceptability’? The book has nine chapters, divided into two subsections: election dynamics in the global south and in the global north.

Chapters in this edited book explore various issues, such as ‘Election Imbroglio and Democratic Solutions in Africa: A Synopsis on 28 Countries’, which explains that when elections go wrong, election violence becomes inevitable. Many developed countries have overcome the trend of repeated election violence, but many developing countries are still largely affected by it. Why do elections in Africa often breed violence instead of democratic sustenance and development? The chapter ‘Information Disorder and Electoral Integrity: The Impact of Disinformation on Elections in Developing Democracies’ is a crucial policy-oriented inclusion that emphasizes the effect of information disorder on election integrity in developing countries. The impact is always negative on democratic trust and the sustainable development of the state.

The chapter ‘Audience Perception of the Reportage of 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria: An Analysis of Facebook Posts of Selected Newspaper Organisations’ analysis comments from 18 posts, six posts from each of the three newspapers. The study concludes that Facebook users have not used the platform to propose policies to the government or its agencies. The chapter ‘Trust for Electoral Management Bodies’ expresses the continuous participation of election observers in the electoral processes of transitional democracies, and it is supposed to increase the capacity of electoral management bodies (EMBs) and consequently increase trust in EMBs. However, very little is known about the relationship between election observation and perceptions of trust in EMBs.

Also, the chapter ‘Social Media, Economic Well-Being and Satisfaction with Democracy in Africa’ is a notable inclusion that speaks indirectly to elections. It shows the inseparable nature of citizens’ participation and satisfaction with democratic sustenance variables. It examines the effect of social media and economic

well-being on citizens' satisfaction with democracy in Africa. The analysis focuses on a sample of 34 African countries. The econometric results show that following news on social media significantly reduces satisfaction with elections and democracy, among other interesting findings in the book. The chapter 'Moroccan Legislative Elections: A Problematic Formulation of the Electoral Quotient' interrogates the formula currently applied in Morocco, which calculates the quotient based on the total number of registered voters, rather than the number of valid votes cast, constitutes a normative singularity in comparative electoral law.

The chapter 'Political Violence Reported in Media against Candidates for the Senate and Federal Deputies in the 2024 Mexican Elections' analyzes the portrayal of political violence in traditional media, focusing on campaigns for the Senate and federal deputies. It identified that certain parties and candidacies were more mentioned in relation to acts of violence, revealing a differential treatment in the coverage that can influence public perception. 'The Spanish Electoral System: Effects and Proportionality' chapter criticized the electoral system for not responding to the real representativeness of the votes cast at the ballot box. However, the chapter on 'Reactions of the Romanian People to the Recent Election Campaign Regarding the Russia-Ukraine War' interrogates the positions the Global North and Global South take with respect to the Russia-Ukraine War in the recent election campaigns in Romania. The Global North supports Ukraine, seeing this action as symbolic of support for democracy, while the Global South maintains a neutral stance, not wishing to interfere in the problems of the Western world.

This book is edited by Opeyemi Idowu Aluko (PhD), the Head of the Political Science Department of Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria. I want to express my appreciation for the indefatigable assistance of the entire IntechOpen team involved in producing this book, as well as all the chapter contributors. I thank my wife (Mrs Iyanuoluwa Aluko, who is also a lecturer) for her invaluable contributions and support during the book's editorial stages.

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Section 1

Election Dynamics in Global South

Chapter 1

Election Imbroglia and Democratic Solutions in Africa: A Synopsis on 28 Countries

Opeyemi Idowu Aluko

Abstract

Elections are an important component of a democratic process. It is a popular way of changing government peacefully and ensuring continuity in the political system. When an election goes wrong, election violence becomes inevitable. Election violence makes democracy counterproductive. Election violence occurs in many countries of the world. Many of the developed countries have overcome repeated election violence trends, but many developing countries are still largely affected by repeated election violence. Why do elections in Africa often breed violence instead of democratic sustenance and development? Tyre burning theory and Game theory perspectives are used to analyse the place of citizens' reactions to bad governance. Documentary analysis and descriptive data from the World Bank and time series Afrobarometer data using 28 countries in Africa are utilised for this study. The study finds that government's neglect of the socio-political and economic needs of the citizens often results in election violence. These needs must be catered for across Africa states. The study concludes that good governance and public trust must be built among the citizens. The government must ensure that the reputations of election processes are re-enhanced to minimise election violence.

Keywords: development, election, game theory, tyre burning theory, violence

1. Introduction

Elections are democratic parameters used for regime change or its continuity across many countries in the world. Many countries in the world conduct a form of election or the other to empower a set of representatives or confirm their ascendancy to power. However, there is no absolute perfect election in the world. Regardless of how popular and acceptable or unpopular and not acceptable the election process is, it is a means of validating or revalidating the power of the people's representatives to authoritatively allocate values in every human society.

Across Europe and America, election is a popular means of ensuring that the people are involved in the governance process of choosing who will be the leader of such countries in a peaceful atmosphere [1, 2]. The processes are mostly transparent, free, fair and credible [3–5]. The results are mostly acceptable to all, and the contestants

have little or no litigation. This is partly because the process had been calibrated with the best practice derived from several randomised trials over a period of time.

The election process in Africa, Asian, Middle East and other regions regarded as developing countries is seldom turbulent and often encounters several challenges, debacles and anarchy. These situations cumulate into democratic conundrums and poor sustainable development. The resultant effect of such election makes most people to disgust the electoral processes, and the eventual winners who emerged from the election process are seen as corrupt leaders [6–8]. This is because the processes are mostly not transparent, not free or fair and lack credibility. The results are mostly and highly contested, not acceptable to most people and the post-election judicial litigation is often enormous. This is partly because the process had been calibrated with prejudice, favouritism and nepotism, and it lacks enough continuous random trials over a period of time.

Therefore, elections in the developing countries are often characterised with violence, frauds, voters' disenfranchisement, assassination of opponents, destruction of election-related materials, vote buying, rigging, ballot box stuffing and unlawful election result declarations among others [9]. It is literally a period of 'war among political opponents', and in so doing, the country becomes a battleground, fierce power tussles, resulting in the game theory principle of the 'winner takes all'. These occurrences mostly promote political, economic and social backwardness in the country. If such occurrences goes unabated and elongates, it may result in perpetual stagnancy and democratic governance breakdown.

What are the dimensions of election violence manifestation in developing countries? What are the democratic solutions to election violence in Africa? The study conceptualises election and election violence, and reviews relevant literature through thematic and theoretical analysis using game theory and tyre burning theory. It examines deliberate actions by public actors that are inimical to the development of the society, resulting in citizens' protest and violent actions. Data from the World Bank and Afrobarometer were presented and analysed descriptively. Democratic solutions are provided to reduce the election violence caused by the games of the political actors.

2. Elections and election violence conceptual clarification

2.1 Election

Election is a competitive selection of representatives among several alternatives to a public or private office through a popular means usually ballots. Election can only be said to be correct when popular mandates of the people are not denied in a competitive environment in electing a representative for a period of office tenure.

Election is the active process of appointing and empowering a group of people to occupy public offices through a popular mandate and voters' consensus. This popular mandate emanates from the majority of the people [10]. However, election is also the democratic process of picking, selecting or appointing the most suitable candidate in a free, fair and transparent manner devoid of ambiguity and manipulations so as to occupy an office for a constitutional time frame [11].

Election is the process that emphasises the majority votes, determining the winner and minority having their say on representative democracy. In other words, election centres on the majority having their way while minority has their say through the

ballots. Election is the act of using the ballot and vote to determine and empower a political or organisation leader. This implies that election is a process of choosing a political leader using ballot papers to select the best or popular candidate for a particular office.

2.2 Election violence

Election violence, on the other hand, is the act of disruption of the free flow of the election process. It is the act of truncating a free, fair and credible election process into an appalling process. It is the method of diverting the attention of the voters from the natural course of voting to other things that induce voting decisions [12, 13]. This may be through the instrument of food and monetary bribery of the electorates to peacefully vote against their initial mandates or forcefully vote for a prescribed candidate.

Election violence is the organised process of winning election through other means other than the popular voting medium. It is the opportunistic model of subverting and compromising the election process to suit or favour a candidate or group of people at the expense of the entire system [14, 15]. This may be through technological diversion of votes, election machine vote manipulation, vote buying, technical disenfranchisement of perceived opposition electorates and unlawful disqualification of candidates among others.

Election violence is the use of brute force to kill electorates, destroy election materials and mandate the voters to vote in a particular direction against their personal wishes. It is a kind of game where media propaganda is used to swivel the opinion of the people about the election outcomes that are the product of manipulations, rigging, disenfranchisement, killing of opponents, forceful imputation of election record, forgery of the entire process for an 'anointed or special' candidate and false declaration of election victory.

3. Game theory and tyre burning theory

Game theory explains how actors manipulate the available information to the best of their ability for maximum results. Actors compete for information and how to utilise it for their personal success at the expense of the others [16]. It may be a zero-sum game scenario where an actor's gain is the loss of the other. The total summation of the wins of an actor is the total summation of losses of the other actor. The winner takes all and the loser is left with his fate. Another variant is the non-zero sum game. This explains how the largesse is distributed among the actors. There is no absolute winner but sharing of the common spoils. Another expression of game theory is the prisoners' dilemma. This explains the use of a deceptive way to elicit information and facts from an innocent actor to the advantage of the other actor.

Elections are political games between contestants that give an actor the opportunity to manipulate and maximise the opportunity of the information at hand about the polls so as to win an election. The election game may be a peaceful game, which is free and fair, and it enables all actors to take some stakes in the election. It could be a forceful and violent process where the winner takes all and suppress the loser through all means, which include vote buying, media manipulation and hate speech, and killing of opponents among others election violence. The possibility of having an increase in violence is very high in zero-sum game theory scenarios because winner

takes all. The losing party has to wait until another electioneering period before they may have the opportunity of contesting for public office or gaining political appointments. These deliberate games of the political actors result in violent protests of citizens.

Tyre burning theory, on the other hand, is a postulation that explains how a peaceful process gradually deteriorates and eventually becomes violent. It explains why and how a peaceful election process becomes violent. It explains how a peaceful protest from a phenomenon becomes chaotic and violent to the extent of killing and burning of properties with the symbolic expression of tyre combustion in the venue of the violent epicentre [17–19]. The reason behind the debased and derogatory escalation of riot, crises or violence as professed by the theory, is the perceived unyielding response of the government or the powers that be to a particular lawful societal request. Also, when the force of habit is used against the peaceful process to suppress the will of the people, the peaceful society becomes chaotic, with the burning of substances as characterised in the combustion of tyre in the epicentre of the crises.

Peaceful elections become violent when some individuals disenfranchise the electorate from voting at the polls. Also, when people perceive manipulation of the election process and the false and forceful declaration of forged election results, they protest and it leads to violent escapade [20, 21]. Election violence is very high in regions where respects for the fundamental human rights are low; the tyre burning theory scenario is inevitable in such locations. This phenomenon is prominent in developing countries in Africa, Middle East and Asia.

4. Research methodology

Documentary analysis using content analysis in relevant literature from sources, such as Web of Science and Scopus-indexed journals, is utilised to obtain reasons why election leads to violence in Africa. Data from Afrobarometer and the World Bank data repository were collected and descriptively analysed in this study. Time series data across 28 randomly selected countries (Algeria, Angola, Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cabo Verde, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Eswatini, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Togo, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe) in Africa were obtained from Afrobarometer [22], where time series variables are measured across the 28 countries. The variables used in measuring election violence in developing countries in the descriptive study include; 'Ethnic group treated unfairly', 'Corrupt religious leaders and Trust religious leaders' and 'Corruption: government officials', 'most important problem-poverty and unemployment' and 'most important problem: education' were analysed. World Bank data [23] on major problems in Africa considering the variables of ethnic, religion, poverty and education in Africa are analysed.

4.1 Analysis of findings: Why elections lead to violence in Africa

Election imbroglio and debacles popularly characterised with election violence have the propensity to expand, escalate and gain momentum over a period of time and under certain favourable circumstances in any part of the world, especially in the developing countries. Evidence from the documentary and content analysis of selected literature reveals the following reasons why election violence occurs in

Africa: ethnic reasons, religious reasons, poverty reasons, educational reasons and technology reasons of election violence gaining momentum.

- a. Ethnic favouritism and bigotry: Studies shows that this is a potent dimension that propels election violence to gain momentum in Africa [24, 25]. Ethnicity and all its variants, such as racism and xenophobia, are prominent dimensions that propel violence in elections. The perceived opponents are always at the receiving end of the ethnic chauvinist violence attacks. Much violence in election is fuelled due to ethnic difference from the contestants and their corresponding electorates. The election umpires also have this sentiment, which may affect the choice of the preferred candidate [26]. The perceived manipulation of elections from this dimension leads to violence, which could be protracted.

Afrobarometer [22] time series data across 28 countries in Africa on ‘ethnic group treated unfairly-variable’ in **Figure 1** revealed that over 70% in the selected countries have ethnic sentiments and vote along ethnic lines. Violence is ignited when manipulations are perceived from the process. The World Bank data 2021 also confirmed that ethnic dimension is a prominent reason why election violence is a reoccurring incident in developing countries. It is the causative mechanism of over 90% of violence in developing countries and also has the propensity to escalate if not well managed.

- b. Religious chauvinism: This is a potent dimension that propels election violence to gain momentum in Africa. Religion is a very prominent factor driving people and allowing them to form alignments on public and private matters. In fact, every individual in the world is either aligned to a religion or the other. Election opponents are cloned with religious masks and are always at the receiving end of the religious bigots’ violent attacks. Violence in election is fuelled due to perceived religious difference from the electorates to the contestants [27]. The election umpires also have this sentiment, which may affect the choice of the preferred candidate. The perceived manipulation of elections from religious dimension leads to violence, which could be protracted.

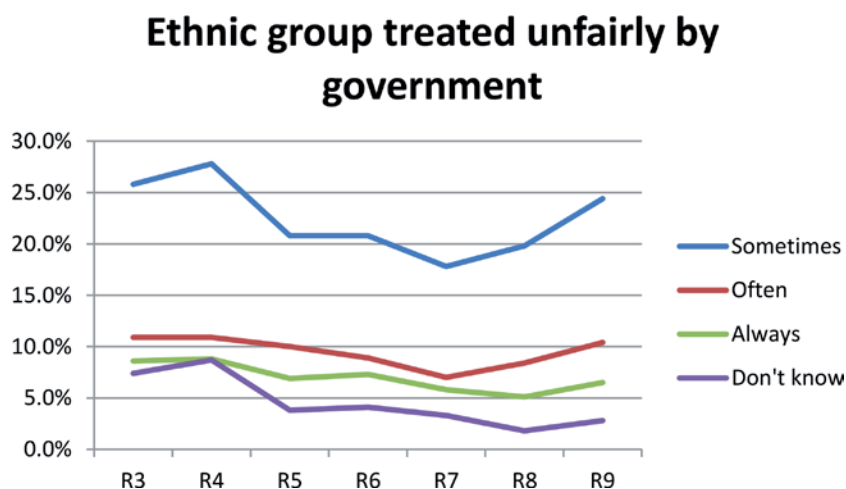


Figure 1.
 Source: Afrobarometer [22].

The time series data across 28 countries in Africa from Afrobarometer [22] on ‘Corrupt religious leaders and Trust religious leaders’ variables’ in **Figures 2 and 3** respectively revealed that over 75% of the people have religious sentiments and vote along religion inclinations. Violence is ignited when manipulations are perceived from the process. The World Bank data 2021 also confirmed that religious dimension is a prominent reason why election violence is a reoccurring incidence in developing countries. It also has the propensity to escalate if not well managed.

- c. High poverty rate: This is a very potent dimension that propels election violence to gain momentum in Africa. Poverty is the state of ‘moneylessness’, powerlessness and ‘voicelessness’ of a person or group of people. It is the condition of incapacitation of an individual to do what is lawful due to no accessibility or affordability of the substance. World Bank data 2021 revealed that many citizens (over 50%) of countries categorised as developing are poor because they live below one dollar (\$1) daily spending benchmark. This condition makes the citizens vulnerable to vote buying and election manipulations during electioneering period.

The time series data across 16 countries in Africa from Afrobarometer [22] on ‘most important problem-poverty and unemployment’ variables’ in **Figure 4** revealed that

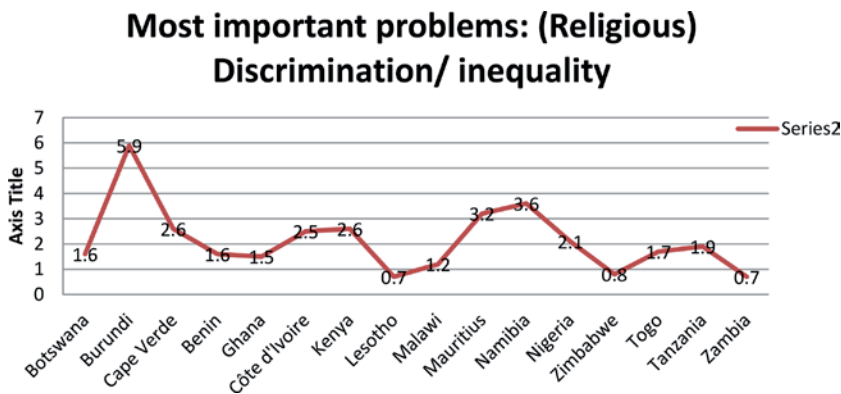


Figure 2.
Source: Afrobarometer [22].

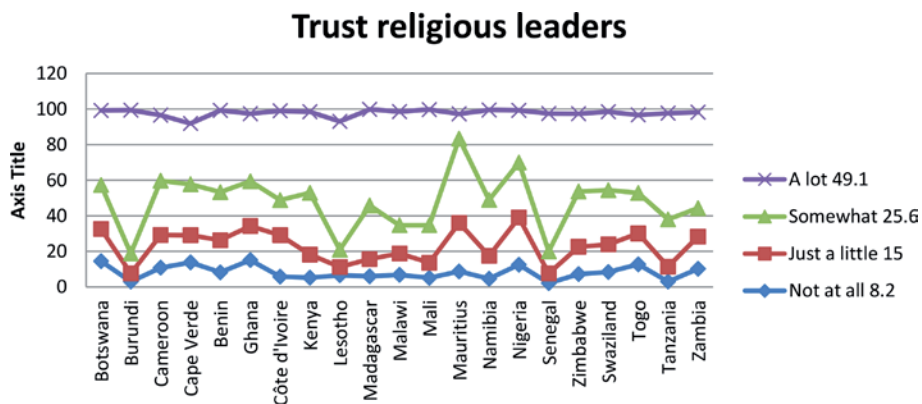


Figure 3.
Source: Afrobarometer [22].

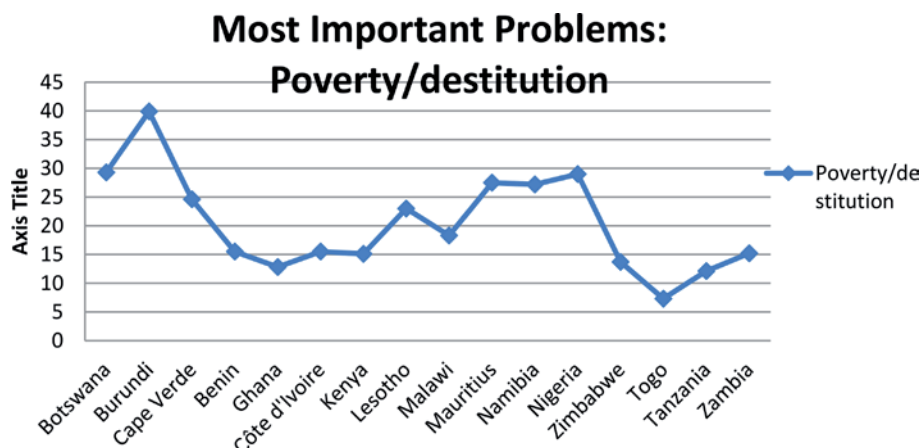


Figure 4.
 Source: Afrobarometer [22].

about 65% of the people are deeply poor and are thus susceptible to the manipulations by political actors. They are induced to vote along the highest bidder's dictate during election. Violence is ignited when rival political actors are competing to get the attention of the electorates through money or food inducement to vote. Much violence erupts when perceived voter that collected a sum of money voted in opposite direction. This trend will continue to expand election violence if the poverty gap between the rich and poor continues to expand in the society and especially in developing countries.

d. Low level of educational standards: This is a potent dimension that propels election violence to gain momentum in Africa. The education level of a community is proportional to their level of development. A country with very high and quality education will have enlightened population that will be able to manage their differences amicably with little or no conflict. They know and acknowledge that the community is a place for mutual growth and everyone needs one another for sustainable development. Therefore, properties are communally protected [28–30]. They also know their rights and civic responsibilities. On the other hand, a country with low level of education will witness more unabated crises because everyone will see their neighbour as an object of obstruction to their progress. They therefore oppose good ideas and fall cheaply for political propaganda and election manipulations.

The time series data across 16 countries in Africa from Afrobarometer [22] on 'most important problem: education' in **Figure 5** revealed that about 31% of the people are not educated and are thus susceptible to the manipulations of political actors to induce them to vote in a manipulative way during election. Violence is ignited when the manipulations are opposed by educated electorates. The World Bank data [23] also confirmed that the education level is below 50% of the entire population in the developing countries. It is a prominent reason why election violence is a reoccurring incidence in developing countries. It also has the propensity to escalate if the level of the uneducated or uninformed in the society continues to soar.

e. Poor technology development and utilisation: This is a potent dimension that propels election violence to gain momentum in Africa. This is the use of technology to sway off the electorates and disenfranchise people from performing their

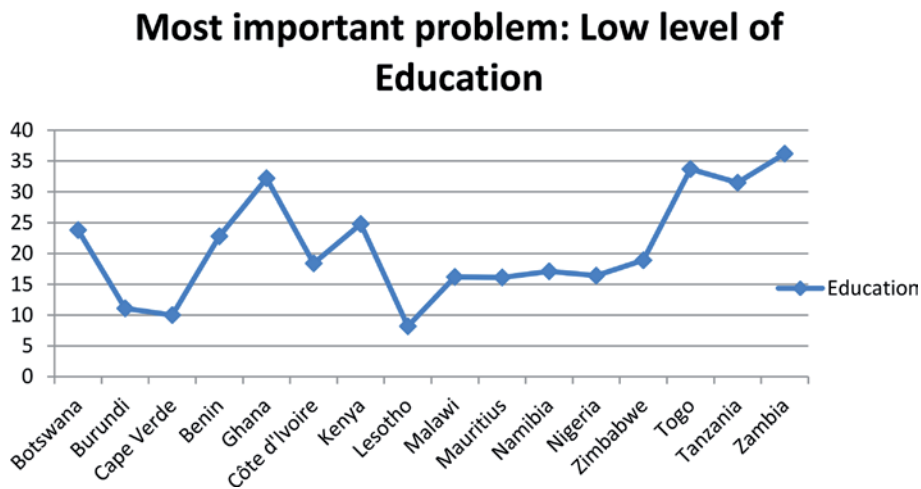


Figure 5.
Source: Afrobarometer [22].

civic responsibilities. Technology in election is mostly new in many developing countries. The operators therefore either use it to screen out some eligible voters to favour a candidate at the expense of the other or use it to manipulate votes [2, 11]. The vote manipulation through the use of voting technology may be by auto subtraction, division, addition, multiplication or any computation errors in the technology calibration [31]. This dimension of election breeds violence to a large extent, especially if the affected group becomes enlightened about the process.

The World Bank data 2021 revealed that e-governance and the use of technology in developing country are at the low ebb. This is because of the level of education and poor electricity logistics. The existing few technologies have skewed many citizens out of service. Time series data across 28 countries in Africa from Afrobarometer [22] on 'Most important problem-Infrastructure-Technology' in **Figure 6** revealed that

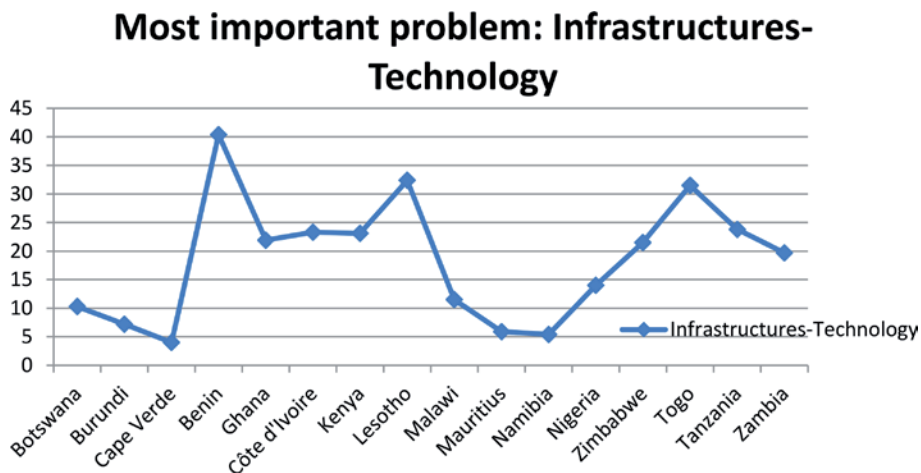


Figure 6.
Source: Afrobarometer [22].

over 63% of the people have the sentiments that government official can manipulate the people to suit their patrons and clients in election and other related matters due to the low level of technology in the executing elections. Violence ignited from manipulations is always difficult to tame. In such cases, government properties are always the prime target perceived to be destroyed from the process. It also has the propensity to escalate if not well managed.

5. Effects of election violence in Africa

Election violence is on a continuous increase in most developing countries as further revealed in the documentary and descriptive analysis. These have led to severe effects on the countries. The following are some of the effects [32, 33];

- i. Poor government credibility effect: The government formed from corrupt trend of election violence and manipulations of the people are low in credibility level in both domestic and foreign levels. No country will want to trust and rely completely on such country. Therefore, their domestic and foreign policy will be monitored closely by friends and foes so as not to fall into such government's corrupt practices.
- ii. Limited democratic peace: Democratic peace is mostly an evidence of democratic governments where regimes will prefer negotiation to violence. This will be limited or absent in such country because violence was used to set up the regime, and only through violence, such regime can be preserved. Cascade of violence, litigations and counter attacks will be a regular interplay of such government.
- iii. Economic backwardness: This is one of the direct offshoots of election violence. Scarce resources meant for continuation of general development will be used for re-construction, reintegration and relocation of victims among others. The money spent to manipulate and bribe electorates will be amassed back in multiple fold when such person assumed political office. This will slow down the rate of development as it would be compared with other countries of no pre- or post-election violence.
- iv. High corruption rate: This will be prevalent because the government ascended to power through corruption, the appointed officers will be cronies and beneficiaries of corruption who will maintain the corrupt status. Government business cannot be effectively done without corrupt practices and the citizens will be using the public offices to enrich the private realms. This will slow down the growth of the country because too much money will be spent on little development.
- v. Continuous poverty: Poverty will be a normal phenomenon in such country because it is the tactics of maintaining the power to control the general public. When the people are poor, they can be easily bought over during elections and neglected after the election. Poor people mostly care about what they will eat for the moment and forget about the future. Deliberate impoverishment of the people is the direct consequence of violent elections that empower corrupt government.

6. Democratic solutions to election violence in Africa

The following are some of the important holistic and systematic solutions to deescalate election violence in developing countries.

- i. Constitutional solution: The constitution should clearly stipulate the consequences of election violence. All the dimensions of the election violence elasticity should be listed and updated in the constitution and the punitive measures against anyone that utilises those ways. Government or politician that uses such medium to abrogate power should be constitutionally sanctioned up to the extent of life ban from public offices.
- ii. Poverty eradication solution: Poverty eradication schemes should be made to assist the people to have basic necessity of life. This includes food, cloth and shelter. These provisions on regular basis will reduce the extent of dependence on emergency welfare scheme tied to voting direction on the Election Day. When people are fairly comfortable, the extent of scavenging for food and rioting to that effect during electioneering period will be reduced or eliminated.
- iii. Education and enlightenment solution: The people should be educated on their rights and the consequences of violence. They should be enlightened on the use of technologies for elections and how to verify it effectively so as to prevent suspicion and violence. Enlightenments on the place of ethnic and religion in the conduct of the national life must be systematically explained to the people. This is to reduce the possibilities of exploring the medium to cause mayhem in the country.

7. Conclusion

Election violence is the result of leaders who deliberately attempt to manipulate elections as presented in the games theory and the citizens' violent response to their actions as depicted in the tyre burning theory. It has the tendency of repeating itself over and over again. It will do so if the leeway paved for it in the initial escapade is still active. At the second opportunity of its occurrence, it will expand to a new frontier and make use of new dimensions. This will keep expanding from year to year if nothing positive is done to stop the trend until the entire country is engulfed in the violent torrents.

This phenomenon is prominent in the developing countries of the world. The documentary and content analysis and descriptive analysis of data from Afrobarometer [22] and World Bank [23] reveal that the tendency of expansion of election violence in developing countries is high because most of the people are poor, uneducated, technologically backward and easily persuaded with primordial issues of ethnic and religious sentiments. Many of such countries will encounter cascade and series of election violence among others.

This study reveals that developing countries can only prevent the election violence and its negative effects through democratic solutions. This includes constitutional proscription of people that instigate violence and make use of corrupt ways to win elections, poverty eradication strategies, rapid education and enlightenment of the people on the need for peaceful co-existence. When such things are instilled in the country, the country will become more peaceful and develop gradually with little or no election violence in the future.

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Chapter 2

Information Disorder and Electoral Integrity: The Impact of Disinformation on Elections in Developing Democracies

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Abstract

This chapter examines how electoral disinformation undermines voting integrity in developing democracies of the Global South. Integrating perspectives from political communication, media-system studies, and democratic theory, it traces how algorithmic micro-targeting, coordinated campaigns by populist elites, and bot networks amplify false or malicious content. Using the disinformation–misinformation–malinformation typology, the authors show how information disorder interacts with eroding public trust, delegitimizes electoral institutions, and can trigger post-election unrest. Particular focus falls on social-media ecosystems, political influencers, and automated infrastructures that distort debate and fracture deliberation. The chapter also reviews institutional, media, and civil-society counter-measures—from EU and Canadian regulatory models to Brazil’s digital-literacy initiatives—while highlighting structural hurdles such as digital income inequality and government resistance to transparency. Ultimately, the analysis argues for comprehensive, society-wide strategies that combine informed civic engagement, ethical media practice, and transnational governance to protect elections against manipulated information and bolster democratic resilience in the digital age.

Keywords: media and elections, electoral integrity, disinformation ecosystems, digital democracy, information disorder typology, political microtargeting

1. Introduction

Elections serve as the primary mechanism through which democratic legitimacy is constituted and transferred. They are intended not only as technical processes for selecting political representatives, but also as symbolic moments reaffirming collective trust in democratic institutions. However, in recent years, this trust has increasingly come under strain in many developing democracies, where the prevalence of

electoral disinformation has emerged as a systemic threat. Disinformation—deliberately false or misleading information intended to manipulate electoral outcomes—exploits vulnerabilities in both communication infrastructure and political culture. It undermines voters' capacity to make informed decisions and erodes confidence in the electoral process itself [1]. This chapter critically explores how information disorder—defined as the convergence of disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation—challenges electoral integrity in the Global South. Through empirical and comparative evidence, it argues that combating disinformation is not merely a matter of communication ethics, but of democratic survival.

The concept of electoral integrity encompasses more than just procedural correctness. It refers to elections conducted in accordance with democratic principles, grounded in transparency, fairness, and informed participation. Disinformation disrupts this by distorting the informational environment in which citizens evaluate candidates, policies, and institutional credibility. In developing democracies, where media ecosystems are often under-resourced, politically captured, or lacking regulatory oversight, the impact of disinformation is especially pronounced. Empirical studies have shown that electoral disinformation can significantly polarize voters, delegitimize institutions, and in some cases, incite violence. Hence, this chapter positions disinformation as a structural threat rather than a mere symptom of modern political communication.

The rise of digital technologies, particularly social media, has transformed the speed, reach, and sophistication of disinformation campaigns. Unlike traditional propaganda, digital disinformation is decentralized, data-driven, and micro-targeted, often escaping the scrutiny of conventional fact-checking mechanisms. Political actors, both domestic and foreign, increasingly weaponize digital platforms to manipulate public opinion during electoral cycles. In countries with limited digital literacy and weak electoral oversight, such manipulation often goes undetected or unchallenged [2]. This digital asymmetry exacerbates democratic backsliding, as misinformed electorates become less capable of holding leaders accountable or discerning factual from fabricated content.

Disinformation in electoral contexts cannot be understood in isolation from broader sociopolitical dynamics. In many developing democracies, historical legacies of authoritarianism, ethnic conflict, and institutional distrust have already weakened the democratic fabric. Disinformation thrives in these environments, exploiting existing grievances and amplifying divisions. The Brazilian case during the 2018 presidential election vividly illustrates how disinformation targeting electoral infrastructure—such as false claims about rigged voting machines—was weaponized to undermine the electoral legitimacy [3]. These tactics are not isolated events but part of a growing global trend where contested information environments are reshaping the nature of political legitimacy.

This chapter focuses on developing democracies, often referred to as part of the Global South, not because they are uniquely susceptible to disinformation, but because they tend to lack the institutional buffers and media resilience found in more established democracies. Electoral commissions, civil society watchdogs, and independent media are frequently underfunded or politically constrained, limiting their capacity to respond effectively to disinformation campaigns. Moreover, in many such contexts, electoral periods coincide with spikes in politically motivated information warfare, further complicating efforts to ensure free and fair elections [4]. Addressing these challenges requires a context-specific understanding of how disinformation manifests and influences electoral behavior.

While developed democracies have also experienced disinformation—such as the widely documented Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. election—their institutional responses tend to be more robust and better coordinated. In contrast, developing democracies often rely on *ad hoc*, fragmented, or reactive measures. The lack of a comprehensive regulatory and normative framework for managing disinformation limits the effectiveness of interventions. In Zimbabwe, for example, initiatives to counter electoral disinformation through community media training faced infrastructural and political resistance, illustrating the systemic barriers to resilience [4]. This asymmetry underscores the urgency of building long-term capacity and institutional safeguards in the Global South.

It is also critical to situate electoral disinformation within the broader theoretical debate about democratic legitimacy. In deliberative democratic theory, the legitimacy of electoral outcomes depends on inclusive, informed, and rational public discourse. Disinformation erodes this foundation by replacing rational argumentation with manipulation, sensationalism, and epistemic fragmentation [5]. In turn, this undermines the very idea of elections as expressions of the popular will. As such, countering disinformation is not simply a technical challenge—it is a normative imperative rooted in the defense of democratic ideals.

Finally, this chapter serves as a conceptual and empirical entry point into the rest of the study. It outlines the nature of information disorder, the vulnerabilities of developing democracies, and the multidimensional impact on electoral processes. By drawing on cross-regional cases and scholarly literature, the chapter aims to develop a grounded understanding of how electoral disinformation functions, why it matters, and what can be done. The urgency of the issue is underscored by rising authoritarian tendencies globally and the erosion of trust in democratic institutions, a pattern especially acute in transitional democracies [6]. In this light, electoral integrity cannot be sustained without confronting the fundamental challenges posed by information disorder.

2. Conceptual framework: Electoral integrity and information disorder

A precise understanding of disinformation in the electoral context requires clear conceptual delineation of key terms that are often used interchangeably in academic literature and policy discourse. Terms such as electoral integrity, disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation carry distinct definitional boundaries and normative implications. Electoral integrity is generally understood as elections conducted freely, fairly, and transparently in accordance with universal democratic standards [7]. Meanwhile, disinformation refers to deliberately false or misleading information designed to deceive the public, as opposed to misinformation, which is inaccurate but not malicious in intent [8]. Proper use of these concepts is crucial in this study, as misdefining them may lead to analytical errors in identifying the symptoms, actors, and communication strategies shaping contemporary elections.

Information quality plays a central role in shaping public trust in elections and democratic institutions. Within the framework of procedural democracy, political legitimacy is not only derived from legally valid election results, but also from the perception that voters make choices based on accurate and equitable information [1]. When the informational landscape is distorted by disinformation or dominated by partisan narratives, electoral integrity may be compromised even if the procedural mechanics remain intact. Research by Mauk and Grömping shows that in developing

democracies, disinformation is strongly correlated with the increased prevalence of inaccurate beliefs about election fairness, which in turn erodes confidence in electoral outcomes and the legitimacy of election authorities [9]. The relationship between trust, legitimacy, and information thus lies at the heart of electoral disinformation challenges.

To build resilience against disinformation, it is essential to construct a typology that systematically categorizes various forms of informational threats in operational terms. Not all disinformation has the same modalities or impacts; some target electoral institutions, others distort public perceptions of candidates, and some seek to manipulate voters with fear-based or hate-based narratives. McKay and Tenove propose a framework rooted in deliberative democratic theory, illustrating how disinformation corrodes the quality of political discourse by fostering moral polarization and epistemic cynicism [10]. On the other hand, Syrovátka and colleagues argue that disinformation often reinforces pre-existing attitudes rather than converting opinions, highlighting the importance of belief reinforcement mechanisms in electoral contexts [11]. By constructing a typology based on impact and strategy, this chapter provides a foundation for more targeted academic and policy responses to the information disorder.

2.1 Understanding electoral integrity, disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation

The concept of electoral integrity refers to the adherence of electoral processes to international standards of democracy, ensuring that elections are free, fair, inclusive, and transparent. It is not limited to voting day procedures but includes pre-election preparations, media access, voter education, campaign finance, and post-election dispute resolution. In fragile democracies, electoral integrity is often undermined not only by administrative failures but also by the manipulation of the information environment [12]. When citizens are exposed to false or manipulated information, the legitimacy of the entire process may be called into question, regardless of procedural compliance. Therefore, protecting electoral integrity increasingly requires attention not only to ballot security but also to the informational conditions under which citizens form electoral preferences.

In this context, the distinction between disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation becomes analytically crucial. According to Wardle and Derakhshan, disinformation is false information created and shared deliberately to cause harm; misinformation is false information shared without malicious intent; and malinformation is genuine information used out of context to mislead or damage [8]. These categories differ in intent, accuracy, and effect, yet all have the potential to distort political discourse and undermine informed decision-making. The electoral context is particularly sensitive to such distortions, as voters rely heavily on media and interpersonal communication during campaign periods to evaluate candidates and policies. As a result, the boundaries between opinion, propaganda, and deception often become blurred, challenging both researchers and regulators alike.

In electoral environments, disinformation presents a unique threat because it often mimics credible information formats while aiming to deceive and manipulate. Disinformation may take the form of fabricated polling data, falsified videos, or conspiracy narratives circulated through digital platforms to erode confidence in the electoral process. Research has shown that the strategic deployment of disinformation can lead to widespread doubts about vote integrity and suppress voter turnout [9].

Furthermore, in developing democracies, disinformation exploits institutional weaknesses and low media literacy to reinforce preexisting political biases, making electoral resilience more difficult to achieve. This underlines the importance of distinguishing disinformation from other forms of misleading content in both academic analysis and legal responses.

In contrast, misinformation—despite being unintentional—can be equally harmful in its effects, especially in politically charged contexts. For example, the viral spread of inaccurate voting dates or locations, even if shared in good faith, can disenfranchise voters. The difference in intent between misinformation and disinformation is thus less significant than the impact on democratic participation. Recent electoral studies suggest that citizens often struggle to distinguish between true and false content, particularly when the content aligns with their political preferences [13]. As a result, regulatory and educational interventions must address both intentional and unintentional spread of falsehoods, especially on digital platforms where verification is minimal and virality is high.

Lastly, malinformation, though less frequently discussed, represents a subtle yet powerful tool in election manipulation. This category includes accurate information used maliciously—such as selectively leaking private emails or releasing old footage to imply recent wrongdoing. Malinformation thrives on manipulating context, which makes it harder to detect and regulate. As noted by Judge and Korhani, the principle of information equality—ensuring equal access to timely and relevant information—is increasingly vital in addressing malinformation's impact on electoral fairness [12]. In societies with weak information infrastructure and polarized media, malinformation can effectively distort public perception without ever resorting to falsehood. This highlights the need for electoral integrity frameworks to account for all three categories of information disorder.

2.2 Understanding electoral integrity, disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation

Public trust in the electoral process is the foundation for the legitimacy of electoral democracy. Legitimacy does not only mean compliance with legal procedures, but also reflects the collective acceptance of election results by citizens who believe that the process is fair and credible. Cross-country surveys show that declining trust in electoral processes is often triggered by perceptions of manipulation, media bias, and delegitimizing rhetoric [14] from political elites [15].

In studies of Africa and Latin America, it was found that the widespread acceptance of election results depends on the belief that the process took place without systematic fraud [16]. This confirms that electoral legitimacy is closely related to public perception, not just procedural indicators. The quality of political information is a crucial factor in shaping electoral trust. Accurate and verifiable information allows citizens to make decisions based on democratic rationality. On the other hand, when the information ecosystem is filled with conspiratorial narratives, partisan framing, or systematic hoaxes, public trust in electoral institutions decreases sharply [17].

A comparative study from the World Values Survey also shows that the quality of information systems and the level of trust in elections have a strong positive correlation in more than 80 countries [18]. Even in countries with proportional electoral systems such as Belgium, information-based electoral participation has been shown to increase overall political trust [19]. This shows that legitimacy is not only shaped by the process, but by the clarity of the information that shapes public perception.

Public trust in elections is also greatly influenced by the autonomy of the election management body and media freedom. Kerr and Lührmann's research shows that public trust increases significantly when electoral institutions are autonomous and the media have the freedom to report without political intervention [16]. Meanwhile, a study by Elklit et al. in Zanzibar found that public perception of election integrity is highly dependent on the performance and institutional design of election organizers, especially in ethnically polarized societies [20].

In addition, Gronke et al. emphasized that poor election administration, even if legal, can erode perceptions of fairness in the eyes of minority voters. Thus, institutional legitimacy is largely determined by transparency and accountability in the management of election information.

Decreased trust in the election process can lead to the delegitimization of the democratic system as a whole, especially in developing countries facing challenges in information infrastructure and digital inequality. Research by González et al. shows that negative perceptions of election integrity directly reduce support for democracy as a political system [21]. This finding is reinforced by Rilwan's research in Sri Lanka, which noted that the collapse of public trust in elections has resulted in increasing political apathy and doubts about representation mechanisms [22]. In the Indonesian context, Gunawan and Ruldeviyani's study shows that data quality in public-based electoral monitoring such as *KawalPemilu* plays an important role in rebuilding public trust [23]. This confirms that information engineering and poor governance of election information can be a systemic threat to the legitimacy of democracy itself.

Social media plays a dual role in shaping public perceptions of electoral legitimacy—as a tool for political mobilization and as a source of disinformation. On one hand, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter allow citizens, especially youth and marginalized groups, to access political discourse directly, enhancing the civic engagement and widening campaign reach [24]. On the other hand, the algorithmic structure of these platforms tends to create echo chambers, reinforce confirmation bias, and facilitate the rapid spread of misleading content. This vulnerability is particularly evident in transitional democracies, where institutional responses are weak and digital literacy uneven. A study on university students in Kurdistan revealed that heavy reliance on social media reduced their exposure to diverse political views and increased susceptibility to manipulated narratives. As a result, political actors can exploit these vulnerabilities to discredit electoral outcomes or delegitimize opponents, regardless of the factual basis.

Sociodemographic factors also play a crucial role in shaping electoral trust. Studies across various countries show that individuals with higher education levels and better access to quality information are more likely to trust democratic institutions and the electoral process [25]. In contrast, marginalized groups—including rural populations, individuals with low digital literacy, and young voters with the limited political experience—are more susceptible to disinformation and more skeptical of electoral outcomes. Economic factors such as unemployment and inequality further weaken perceptions of legitimacy, as they foster a belief that elections do not lead to tangible change. A study of Indonesian millennials confirmed that perceived economic exclusion directly undermined confidence in democratic institutions [26]. Understanding these demographic dynamics is essential for designing inclusive electoral communication strategies that address the informational needs of diverse populations.

2.3 Typology of information threats in electoral contexts

In the context of elections in developing democracies, threats to information integrity encompass not only disinformation but also forms such as misinformation and malinformation. Disinformation refers to deliberately falsified information meant to deceive, while misinformation consists of incorrect information shared without malicious intent, and malinformation involves truthful content used in misleading or harmful contexts [12]. This typology has become increasingly important in the digital era, as all three types can spread rapidly *via* social media platforms.

Disinformation is the most dangerous type of threat to electoral integrity due to its strategic and organized nature, often involving political or foreign actors aiming to undermine public trust [27, 28]. This may include fake news, manipulated images, or conspiracy theories distributed through bots and fake accounts. Misinformation often stems from ignorance or misperception and can escalate social tensions if not quickly corrected by authorities or trusted media [28, 29]. In elections, it often concerns inaccurate voting procedures, wrong dates, or false claims about candidates. Although malinformation is based on fact, it can still cause damage due to its presentation being intended to mislead public opinion. This includes leaked official documents repackaged manipulatively to shape certain narratives during election cycles [12]. This creates a regulatory dilemma between the public's right to information and threats to political stability.

Advanced information manipulation tactics now leverage AI and deepfake technology to produce narratives that appear authentic. Manipulated videos can depict candidates engaging in compromising behavior that, though false, significantly affect public perceptions [27, 30]. Additionally, disinformation is used to create political polarization and distrust in electoral management bodies. This weakens voter participation and strengthens narratives delegitimizing election results [31].

Disinformation campaigns often aim to damage the credibility of particular candidates or groups by spreading xenophobic, racist, or personal lies through digital networks [32]. This creates an "informational echo chamber" where voters are only exposed to information that reinforces their preexisting beliefs. Microtargeting tactics also allow malicious actors to distribute false information to specific voter segments, making it harder to detect and counter at scale [12]. These techniques exploit vast behavioral data harvested online.

In the Global South, these challenges are worsened by digital illiteracy and unequal access to information. Voters are more vulnerable to disinformation, particularly on messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram [33, 34]. Collaborations among election bodies, media, and digital platforms to build early warning systems for false information dissemination are key to strengthening electoral integrity [35, 36].

Overall, mapping the typology of information threats in elections helps policy-makers design specific and targeted strategies to counter them. By recognizing the characteristics of each harmful information type, legal and technological approaches can be more adaptive to local contexts [37]. Therefore, threats to information in elections cannot be understood as a single phenomenon. They are complex, dynamic, and highly contextual. Identifying and classifying these threats is the first step toward building information resilience systems that can protect democracy from increasingly sophisticated digital disruption.

3. Media, technology, and disinformation in the electoral ecosystem of the global south

The digital era has profoundly reshaped how information is produced, circulated, and consumed within electoral contexts—especially in the Global South. While democratic transitions have often been accompanied by the liberalization of media sectors, this shift has not uniformly translated into more pluralistic or independent media systems. Instead, new vulnerabilities have emerged, where both legacy and digital media are frequently captured by political and economic elites, becoming tools not just for communication but for influence, control, and disinformation during elections.

Media in developing democracies often operate within precarious political and regulatory environments that compromise their autonomy and credibility. The convergence of political patronage, corporate ownership, and weak regulatory enforcement contributes to a fragile information ecosystem where factual reporting is often overshadowed by strategic narratives crafted for electoral advantage. As political actors increasingly exploit the virality and opacity of digital platforms, disinformation has become a key vector for manipulating voter behavior and discrediting opponents.

3.1 Media ecosystems and political power in developing countries

In many Global South countries, the media landscape is shaped by a complex interplay of state control, private ownership, and political patronage. Media ownership often consolidates among a few conglomerates closely linked to ruling political elites, thereby undermining pluralism and editorial independence. This concentration of power enables selective coverage, censorship, and, in some cases, active dissemination of partisan narratives. For instance, the Bangladeshi media system reflects this dynamic, where a nexus of corporate and political interests heavily influences broadcast and editorial agendas [38].

The issue of media regulation is also uneven and often serves elite interests rather than democratic ideals. In countries such as Pakistan and Brazil, regulatory bodies such as PEMRA have been criticized for enabling rather than restraining media monopolies and for allowing politically motivated licensing practices [39]. Similarly, Brazil has struggled with cross-ownership and lack of content diversity due to the strong grip of economic and political groups over the broadcasting sector [40].

Digital media and social platforms have provided new avenues for information dissemination, yet these too are affected by ownership and political manipulation. In Kenya, independent digital outlets offer alternative narratives, but they operate within an environment where legacy media retain dominance and digital regulation remains ambiguous [41]. This shifting power dynamic reflects a broader transformation of the media ecosystem in the Global South, where traditional hierarchies are being challenged but not fully restructured.

Furthermore, in many developing democracies, media policy frameworks lack transparency and participatory mechanisms. This allows for policy capture by dominant actors and erodes trust in regulatory institutions. For democratic media ecosystems to thrive, reforms must emphasize diversity of ownership, editorial independence, and digital literacy to reduce the influence of vested political and

economic interests. Only through these measures can media in the Global South fulfill their democratic role of informing citizens, holding power to account, and facilitating informed electoral participation.

The Southeast Asian media landscape reveals similar vulnerabilities. In Indonesia, ownership of mainstream media remains concentrated among a handful of conglomerates that have deep ties with political parties and elites, influencing news content during election periods. Meanwhile, in the Philippines, political dynasties and large business groups dominate traditional media outlets, and recent crackdowns on independent journalism—such as the shutdown of ABS-CBN—demonstrate the shrinking space for critical reporting [42]. These conditions weaken the media's role as a check on political power and open the door to unchecked disinformation campaigns.

Thailand provides another example where state influence over media is maintained through both direct ownership and regulatory oversight. Although digital platforms have expanded civic space, laws such as the Computer Crime Act have been used to suppress dissenting voices online. The interplay between restrictive regulation and state-aligned media has contributed to a fragmented information environment, often exploited during contentious elections.

To counter these trends, there is a growing push in Southeast Asia for stronger protections for journalistic freedom and independent public service media. Civil society organizations and regional media networks have initiated programs to strengthen media literacy, promote investigative journalism, and challenge disinformation, though progress remains uneven. These efforts demonstrate that despite structural limitations, local actors are actively working to build more democratic media ecosystems tailored to regional realities.

3.2 The role of social media in the production and circulation of disinformation

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok have emerged as dominant forces in the spread of disinformation during electoral periods, particularly in the Global South. These platforms are not only sources of political news for millions but also serve as powerful tools for disinformation agents. Their design prioritizes virality, engagement, and emotional resonance, allowing false narratives to spread quickly and widely. For example, in the 2019 Nigerian elections, WhatsApp was extensively used to circulate rumors, fake election results, and conspiracy theories targeting political opponents [43, 44]. This trend reflects a broader pattern where political campaigns and malign actors exploit social media's reach to manipulate voter perceptions and delegitimize electoral processes.

Facebook's role in facilitating political disinformation has been widely documented, especially in contexts marked by political polarization and low media literacy. In Brazil's 2018 general election, fabricated stories about vote tampering and false accusations of corruption against candidates spread rapidly *via* Facebook pages and private WhatsApp groups [45, 46]. Algorithms on Facebook tend to prioritize emotionally charged content, often intensifying polarization and encouraging selective exposure. These dynamics, in turn, create echo chambers that amplify the impact of electoral disinformation and hinder the ability of users to access corrective information.

WhatsApp's private messaging structure presents a distinct challenge to combating disinformation. Encrypted end-to-end and designed for group messaging, WhatsApp facilitates the rapid and untraceable spread of manipulated videos, memes, and fake news. In India, for example, politically motivated disinformation

campaigns using WhatsApp have contributed to voter confusion, communal tensions, and even mob violence during election seasons [47]. Fact-checking organizations face severe constraints in accessing content shared in closed WhatsApp groups, making timely intervention difficult [48].

TikTok is increasingly recognized as a critical frontier in the fight against electoral disinformation, particularly among younger demographics. The platform's algorithm promotes videos based on engagement, regardless of factual accuracy, enabling political misinformation to gain rapid traction. In Indonesia and the Philippines, electoral hoaxes have circulated widely in short-form video formats, making it difficult for watchdog groups to respond effectively [49]. Moreover, TikTok's lack of transparency in content moderation policies makes it susceptible to abuse by coordinated disinformation networks.

A common trait across all these platforms is the role of recommendation algorithms in shaping user exposure to political content. These algorithms are designed to optimize engagement, often at the expense of informational accuracy. Studies show that emotionally charged or fear-based content is significantly more likely to be shared, thereby increasing the reach of falsehoods during electoral periods. These mechanisms inadvertently incentivize the creation and circulation of misleading political content.

In Southeast Asia, social media is frequently weaponized by political actors to shape electoral narratives and attack opponents. In the Philippines, "troll armies" have been documented disseminating targeted disinformation to distort historical records and malign candidates [50]. Similar patterns have been observed in Myanmar and Malaysia, where state and non-state actors deploy digital propaganda to sway public opinion and suppress dissent.

Attempts to combat disinformation have included platform-led interventions, such as content flagging, demotion of misleading posts, and partnerships with third-party fact-checkers. While some progress has been made, these strategies often fall short in countries with limited institutional capacity, weak digital governance, and political resistance to platform accountability. Moreover, moderation tools often lack local language support and cultural sensitivity, further undermining their effectiveness in the Global South.

A more holistic response to electoral disinformation on social media requires integrated strategies that combine platform regulation, media literacy, and civic engagement. Building institutional capacity for digital governance, promoting transparency in content moderation, and empowering civil society watchdogs are the essential steps to safeguard electoral integrity. Collaborative efforts between governments, tech companies, academia, and local communities can help mitigate the weaponization of social platforms during elections [51]. Without comprehensive and context-sensitive interventions, disinformation will remain a persistent threat to democratic processes.

3.3 Information inequality and technological infrastructure in the global south

The digital divide remains a central factor exacerbating electoral disinformation in the Global South. Many developing countries suffer from uneven technological infrastructure, which limits citizens' access to reliable information and digital tools necessary for critical evaluation of content. These disparities are especially evident in rural and peri-urban areas, where internet penetration and device availability are significantly lower. Satellite and geospatial studies reveal substantial infrastructure gaps in digital access and built-up environments between regions in the Global South and their Northern counterparts [52, 53].

In many parts of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, access to broadband internet remains low, particularly outside major cities. This unequal distribution of connectivity reduces opportunities for civic participation and digital education. It also limits the exposure of marginalized communities to reliable news and media diversity. Studies confirm that areas with inadequate internet access often experience higher vulnerability to misinformation due to dependence on unregulated or informal information channels.

In regions like Latin America and Southeast Asia, the fragmentation of digital infrastructure intensifies political and informational exclusion. Often, investment in technological infrastructure is aligned with political incentives, leading to deliberate neglect of opposition-dominated areas. In Malaysia, for example, infrastructure investments have historically favored Peninsular regions while leaving East Malaysia underdeveloped, contributing to digital marginalization. This uneven investment deepens divides in political participation and limits exposure to electoral information [54–56].

Weak infrastructure also disrupts local media ecosystems, particularly in under-resourced countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, and Laos. In these environments, media outlets frequently operate with minimal electricity, unreliable internet, and limited equipment. These deficiencies reduce their capacity to produce timely, fact-based content and expose them to pressure from better-funded partisan or state actors. As a result, independent journalism faces technical as well as political obstacles to maintaining credibility and consistency [54].

Another central issue is digital literacy. In many communities across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, individuals lack the competencies to distinguish the credible sources from deceptive ones. Without critical skills to assess online content, populations are more likely to believe and share disinformation. Empirical research from Kenya and Indonesia highlights that digital illiteracy correlates with increased vulnerability to electoral misinformation, especially in contexts lacking public education initiatives on media use.

The impact of infrastructural inequality is also evident in the availability of mobile technology. While mobile phone ownership has expanded across the Global South, disparities persist in access to smartphones and mobile data, which are crucial for engaging with diverse media sources. Many citizens rely on zero-rated services like Facebook Free Basics, which limit access to a narrow slice of the internet, reinforcing filter bubbles and reducing exposure to verified information [54].

In parallel, the lack of multilingual digital infrastructure poses a significant barrier to equitable information access. Many official electoral and fact-checking websites are available only in dominant national or colonial languages, excluding minority language speakers from critical civic content. This exclusion is especially evident in multilingual countries such as India, Nigeria, and Indonesia, where linguistic diversity is vast but poorly integrated into digital services [52].

Compounding these infrastructural and linguistic gaps is the issue of trust in digital media. In low-infrastructure settings, misinformation often thrives on interpersonal trust, where information from friends and family is prioritized over institutional sources. Disinformation actors exploit this by embedding false content in familiar communication channels such as WhatsApp or SMS broadcasts [41, 54].

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires localized, context-sensitive policy interventions. National strategies should prioritize not only expanding internet access but also investing in digital literacy programs that are linguistically inclusive and culturally appropriate. Case studies from Rwanda and Vietnam illustrate the

effectiveness of community-led digital inclusion initiatives that combine technological support with civic education.

In tandem, international cooperation can play a crucial role. Development agencies and global technology firms must collaborate with local governments to ensure that investments in digital infrastructure do not entrench existing inequalities. Public-private partnerships can support scalable projects in fiber-optic expansion, mobile network coverage, and subsidized internet services. However, such efforts must be tied to local accountability and transparency measures to prevent elite capture and reinforce public trust [54, 57].

4. Information inequality and technological infrastructure in the global south

The exponential rise of digital technologies has profoundly altered how political campaigns are waged and how voters receive information. In contemporary democracies, electoral disinformation operates not only as a byproduct of misinformation but as a strategic discommunication tool, deliberately engineered to sway public opinion and manipulate democratic processes. From social media platforms to encrypted messaging apps, the digital ecosystem has created fertile ground for the rapid, targeted dissemination of misleading or outright false content, often hidden behind layers of anonymity and automation [58].

Electoral disinformation strategies today function through highly coordinated systems that span human agents, algorithmic infrastructures, and artificial amplification. These systems operate in ways that often blur the lines between organic discourse and manipulative influence operations. For instance, social bots and fake accounts can simulate genuine political engagement, while algorithmic micro-targeting exploits personal data to deliver polarizing messages tailored to specific voter segments [30].

Three dominant vectors of disinformation campaigns have emerged in recent global elections. First is the use of social media platforms and their algorithms to amplify misleading content *via* micro-targeting, creating echo chambers and accelerating polarization. Second is the role of populist influencers and political elites in shaping and legitimizing false narratives, often exploiting populist rhetoric for political gain. Third is the deployment of automated accounts—bots and trolls—which acts as the invisible infrastructure amplifying and replicating disinformation across platforms.

Understanding these vectors is critical not just for diagnosing the threat, but also for developing effective countermeasures. Disinformation campaigns are not limited to technical manipulation—they are sociotechnical phenomena that exploit societal cleavages, exploit platform policies, and bypass conventional norms of journalistic verification. Moreover, their transnational nature, often aided by state and non-state actors, means electoral disinformation can destabilize both established and emerging democracies.

4.1 Social media and micro-targeted content: Algorithms as accelerators of polarization

Social media algorithms systematically amplify the polarizing effects of political content through microtargeting practices. Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok

leverage user behavioral data to filter and serve content that is most likely to evoke emotional responses and high engagement. This creates echo chambers where users are only exposed to narratives that reinforce their political beliefs, narrowing the horizon of diverse information [59, 60]. Research in Brazil and India suggests that algorithmic changes on social platforms have fueled extreme fragmentation of public opinion and eroded trust in traditional media [40, 61]. These algorithms actively act as accelerators of polarization by prioritizing emotional and controversial content.

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that algorithmic microtargeting fosters the emergence of ideological echo chambers, where users are increasingly insulated from opposing views. These algorithmic structures, particularly on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, guide users toward content that aligns with pre-existing beliefs, intensifying partisan divides and impeding democratic discourse. For instance, echo chambers on Facebook often arise through coordinated inauthentic behavior and group-based dissemination of identical false content. In the Global South, where media literacy and platform regulation may be limited, this closed-loop system of exposure can exacerbate polarization and distort electoral integrity. Such algorithmic guidance limits cognitive diversity and transforms platforms into instruments of ideological segmentation.

Microtargeting not only narrows users' informational exposure but also facilitates the weaponization of data analytics in political campaigns. Data collected through browsing history, likes, and shares allows campaigns to craft emotionally resonant messages tailored to individual psychological profiles. These personalized narratives are more likely to bypass rational scrutiny and be accepted as truth. This psychological targeting has raised concerns among scholars about its capacity to manipulate perceptions without detection [60].

The effects of microtargeting are amplified in societies with the limited digital literacy and weak media regulatory institutions. In these contexts, users may not recognize manipulative content or understand the algorithmic logics shaping their feeds [62]. Campaigns in the Philippines and Myanmar have demonstrated how algorithmic targeting is deployed to reinforce existing ethnic and political divisions. Algorithms are not neutral tools but embedded with biases that prioritize visibility over veracity.

Another critical concern is how algorithmic systems reward content that is emotionally extreme or divisive. Platforms such as Facebook and TikTok are optimized for engagement and therefore promote content that provokes outrage, fear, or enthusiasm, even if it is misleading or false [63, 64]. Disinformation thus becomes not just tolerated but algorithmically rewarded. This design flaw incentivizes the circulation of harmful content during elections, undermining public trust in democratic institutions. TikTok presents a unique variation of algorithmic amplification due to its heavy reliance on a single recommendation engine: the "For You" page. Unlike networks built on social ties, TikTok feeds users content based on behavioral patterns, making political disinformation easier to spread virally without requiring large follower bases. This design accelerates viral falsehoods by reducing friction in dissemination. Studies show that TikTok's algorithm promotes politically polarizing videos at rates higher than other platforms, particularly in pre-election periods.

Even encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp have contributed to the segmentation of political information through group-based forwarding and broadcast lists. Unlike public-facing platforms, WhatsApp relies on social credibility and closed networks, making disinformation harder to detect and debunk [62]. During elections

in Brazil and India, misinformation on WhatsApp had tangible effects on voter perception, especially in rural and underserved areas where the app often acts as the primary information source.

Attempts to mitigate algorithmic polarization through platform-based solutions have had limited success. While Facebook and TikTok have implemented content moderation policies, their algorithms continue to prioritize engagement over accuracy, leading to inconsistencies in enforcement and effectiveness. Algorithmic transparency remains elusive, and researchers often face barriers in studying the full extent of algorithmic effects on voter attitudes.

Some researchers argue that platform algorithms could be repurposed to break echo chambers rather than reinforce them. Recommender systems that introduce users to diverse viewpoints have shown potential in reducing polarization when carefully implemented. However, such reforms face resistance due to commercial incentives to retain user engagement. As long as outrage generates more clicks than consensus, algorithms are unlikely to shift toward more democratic orientations [62].

4.2 Political influencers and populist elites as disinformation amplifiers

Populist elites often rely on emotional appeals, personal storytelling, and antagonistic rhetoric to bypass conventional media scrutiny and engage directly with fragmented publics. By using platforms such as Facebook Live or TikTok, figures such as Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, and Rodrigo Duterte have constructed a new form of political performance rooted in spectacle and distrust of mainstream institutions. Their messaging typically fuses nationalist themes with populist tropes of “us versus them,” targeting elites, the press, and minority groups to galvanize a loyal digital base. This media strategy also creates a recursive information loop where falsehoods are echoed back by supporter communities, giving the illusion of grassroots legitimacy.

Influencers and populist leaders reinforce disinformation by constructing “parallel realities” that are strategically distanced from institutional truth claims. For instance, during the 2020 U.S. elections, Trump’s claims of electoral fraud were parroted and magnified by international populist actors, demonstrating how influencer rhetoric cascades across borders [55]. Their amplification tactics depend on symbolic storytelling and performative authenticity, both of which are resistant to correction by fact-checkers. As noted by Kissas (2022), the performative populism of influencers blurs the line between political identity and entertainment, allowing them to evade the traditional forms of democratic accountability [65]. Consequently, the architecture of social media boosts such figures by design, privileging emotional content over factual accuracy.

Case studies from the Global South underscore how populist influencer strategies are increasingly localized and culturally embedded. In the Philippines, Bongbong Marcos Jr.’s campaign heavily relied on YouTube vloggers and TikTok content creators to rehabilitate the Marcos family’s image and whitewash historical memory through emotionally resonant storytelling [66]. Similarly, research from Indonesia reveals how Islamic populist leaders leverage digital sermons and charismatic performances on Instagram to mobilize identity-based support and propagate anti-democratic narratives. These examples illustrate that the success of populist disinformation does not only depend on message content, but also on the esthetics, affect, and local

socio-political dynamics embedded in digital performances. This phenomenon necessitates a rethinking of global disinformation strategies to accommodate regional nuances and digitally mediated charisma.

4.3 Boost and fake account as the digital infrastructure of electoral disinformation

Bots and fake accounts represent a foundational layer in the architecture of electoral disinformation, operating as silent yet effective actors in the manipulation of public discourse. These entities are typically automated programs designed to mimic human behavior, with the capacity to amplify specific messages, drown out dissenting voices, and fabricate the perceptions of public consensus. Their deployment during elections is strategic, often coordinated across networks that simulate grassroots support or opposition—what scholars term “astroturfing” [67, 68]. These operations are difficult to detect in real time due to their scale, adaptability, and the rapidity with which content circulates on digital platforms.

Empirical studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of bots in reshaping online political debates. For instance, during the 2017 French presidential election, the MacronLeaks disinformation campaign was found to involve a significant number of foreign-operated bots, with clear ideological motivations to disrupt electoral integrity. Similarly, in the 2020 Singaporean general election, researchers identified that over 26% of active political accounts were likely bots, many of which contributed to divisive or abusive political narratives. Such findings indicate that while bot networks do not always succeed in swaying electoral outcomes directly, they significantly distort the deliberative quality of democratic discourse and inflate the visibility of extreme views.

Beyond election-specific contexts, the persistent infrastructure of bots is maintained and updated to serve future campaigns. Investigations into Twitter data have uncovered networks of dormant or “resurrected” accounts that become reactivated during politically sensitive events. These accounts are often used in “followback loops,” “comment flooding,” or the artificial boosting of hashtags and keywords designed to trend on platforms. This manipulation of platform dynamics creates a feedback loop wherein visibility breeds perceived legitimacy, and bots masquerading as real users shape narratives with minimal resistance [69, 70].

Bots operate with remarkable efficiency due to their capacity to automate repetitive tasks at scale, such as retweeting, liking, or replying to political content. This creates an illusion of widespread support or opposition, often referred to as “computational propaganda” [71]. During electoral periods, these automated agents amplify polarizing hashtags or divisive narratives, crowding out moderate or evidence-based perspectives. Because many bots are designed to mimic human language and behavior patterns, they are often indistinguishable from real users, particularly in fast-moving discussions. This realism enhances their influence while undermining platform transparency.

Fake accounts complement bots by serving as long-term assets in disinformation campaigns. Unlike bots, which operate primarily through automation, fake accounts are often managed by human operators—sometimes part of organized “troll farms”—to add nuance and credibility to false narratives. These sock-puppet accounts often engage in interactive discussions, build rapport with real users, and strategically inject misleading content into trusted networks. Their impact is magnified in closed groups, such as encrypted WhatsApp channels or Facebook community pages, where fact-checkers and researchers have limited access.

5. Disinformation's impact on electoral integrity

The integrity of electoral processes is a cornerstone of democratic governance, ensuring that citizens' voices are fairly translated into political representation. However, in recent years, the global rise of disinformation has posed an acute threat to the credibility and legitimacy of elections, especially in developing democracies. This phenomenon undermines trust in electoral institutions, manipulates public perception, and distorts democratic deliberation [72]. As disinformation becomes more sophisticated—spread *via* social media, bots, influencers, and coordinated campaigns—the threat it poses is no longer peripheral but systemic.

One of the most visible effects of electoral disinformation is the erosion of public trust in election management bodies. When false narratives are left unchecked, they delegitimize even the most credible institutions and processes. Evidence from numerous contexts suggests that disinformation creates lasting doubts about voter rolls, ballot security, and the impartiality of electoral commissions. This type of information disorder often leverages existing political grievances and polarization, deepening the divide between citizens and electoral authorities.

At the societal level, disinformation acts as a catalyst for polarization and the formation of echo chambers. These digital silos reinforce existing beliefs while filtering out opposing viewpoints, a process that severely weakens democratic deliberation and mutual understanding among political communities. Such polarization fosters political tribalism, making it easier for disinformation campaigns to spread and harder for factual corrections to penetrate partisan bubbles.

Most alarmingly, disinformation has shown the capacity to provoke direct challenges to democratic legitimacy, including post-election protests, boycotts, and insurrections. These reactions are often grounded in manipulated or fabricated claims about electoral fraud and vote rigging, creating a fertile ground for anti-democratic movements. This chapter examines the mechanisms through which disinformation undermines electoral integrity in three key areas: public trust in electoral institutions, the intensification of societal polarization, and the erosion of legitimacy in electoral outcomes.

5.1 Declining trust in electoral institutions

Disinformation has played a central role in eroding public trust in electoral institutions across various democracies. Cross-national studies indicate that disinformation campaigns targeting electoral processes generate false perceptions about the integrity of voting and intensify distrust toward the election management bodies [73]. In Brazil, trust in the electoral system has been significantly undermined by the widespread circulation of false content through political messaging groups and social media, which often directly attack electoral authorities. This phenomenon highlights that trust is shaped not only by institutional performance but also by the toxic information environments in which public perception is formed.

Although in certain contexts, such as Australia, disinformation does not immediately destroy public trust, studies show that the effectiveness of electoral authorities' communication strategies in countering disinformation remains limited [74]. Delayed or poorly strategized institutional responses can exacerbate pre-existing skepticism, especially in politically polarized societies. As such, disinformation prevention is not merely a technical issue but is deeply tied to the credibility and effectiveness of institutional communication.

Moreover, disinformation is often weaponized by political actors as a tool of delegitimization, where narratives of electoral fraud are used to sow public doubt about the voting process and the institutions that oversee it. In many cases, these information attacks do not rely on grand lies but on the repetition and exaggeration of minor procedural anomalies that are common in any electoral process. When distrust becomes the dominant narrative, the consequences can extend to a weakened legitimacy of elected governments and an increased risk of post-election conflict.

In the context of Indonesia, declining public trust in electoral institutions has been notably evident during and after the 2019 general election. Allegations of partiality against both the General Election Commission (KPU) and the Election Supervisory Board (Bawaslu) sparked widespread skepticism and led to polarized public sentiment. Many citizens perceived election administrators as biased, especially after controversial decisions and delayed vote counting processes. Research highlights that these perceptions were exacerbated by disinformation campaigns that questioned the neutrality and competence of electoral bodies, further eroding public trust. Moreover, institutional conflicts between the KPU and Bawaslu reduced confidence in their ability to manage elections transparently [75]. This erosion of credibility contributed to public protests and political delegitimization, showcasing how fragile electoral legitimacy can be when institutional trust is compromised.

5.2 Polarization of public opinion and the formation of echo chambers

The rise of digital media ecosystems has significantly altered how individuals engage with the political content, often reinforcing existing biases and reducing exposure to diverse viewpoints. Polarization deepens when algorithms continuously feed users with like-minded information, a process known as echo chamber formation. These digital silos facilitate a social media environment in which disinformation thrives, as users rarely encounter content that challenges their worldview. This insulation exacerbates hostility toward opposing perspectives and erodes common ground for public deliberation.

Echo chambers are particularly potent in periods of electoral competition, where emotions are high and identity politics dominate discourse. For example, sentiment analysis in Mexico's 2018 presidential election showed that candidates' support bases became more ideologically extreme due to algorithm-driven content reinforcement. Similar findings have been observed in the U.S., where exposure to partisan media during the 2016 election doubled the degree of political segregation online [76]. Rather than encouraging deliberation, social platforms increasingly incentivize emotional, tribal, and reactive content, entrenching affective polarization.

In Brazil, echo chambers have become particularly influential in shaping public attitudes during elections. Research has shown that during the 2018 and 2022 presidential elections, supporters of Jair Bolsonaro and his opponents occupied highly segregated online spaces, reinforcing divisive narratives and eroding trust in electoral authorities [13]. These digital echo chambers became fertile grounds for conspiracy theories about electronic voting fraud, despite lack of evidence, and directly contributed to post-election unrest in 2023. Similarly, in the U.S., the 2020 election saw intense online polarization that culminated in the January 6 Capitol riot, demonstrating how affective polarization and algorithmic curation can threaten the democratic stability. These cases reveal that echo chambers are not merely theoretical constructs—they have material consequences for democratic legitimacy.

5.3 Delegitimization of electoral results

Delegitimization of electoral outcomes has emerged as a key consequence of disinformation, especially when false narratives are strategically deployed to undermine confidence in vote counting and result certification. Disinformation not only fuels suspicion but can also incite organized resistance against perceived fraud, irrespective of empirical evidence. In numerous cases, losing political actors deploy claims of stolen elections as post-fact rationalization for defeat, fostering civil unrest and obstructing peaceful democratic transitions.

In both the Global North and South, this pattern manifests through post-election protests, boycotts, or parallel power assertions. For instance, in Serbia's 2022 snap elections, long-standing erosion of inter-party dialog and distrust in electoral institutions led to the opposition boycotting elections and intensified public demonstrations [77]. In the U.S., false narratives following the 2020 presidential election precipitated the Capitol riot and lingering doubts among millions of citizens, threatening electoral legitimacy and fostering dangerous precedents for future cycles [78].

Post-election protests and boycotts can take many forms, including refusal to recognize governing bodies or disrupt formal democratic processes. These acts often derive strength from echo chambers of disinformation that reinforce narratives of elite manipulation or foreign interference. In Burundi's 2010 election, opposition parties boycotted the electoral process and refused to recognize the results, citing systemic manipulation and marginalization, which threatened long-term democratic consolidation. Delegitimization not only creates immediate instability but can have long-lasting institutional damage, eroding voter confidence in future elections.

In sum, electoral disinformation often transcends mere information warfare; it functions as a political strategy to contest legitimacy and mobilize opposition. By distorting public perceptions of fairness, such tactics directly threaten the peaceful transfer of power and foster conditions for democratic erosion. When embedded in broader populist or authoritarian strategies, these delegitimization campaigns not only contest specific outcomes but challenge the electoral system itself.

6. Conclusions

The phenomenon of electoral disinformation represents one of the most complex and persistent threats to the integrity of democratic governance in the contemporary digital age. It operates not merely through the dissemination of falsehoods, but through a constellation of sociotechnical processes that exploit structural vulnerabilities in media systems, political institutions, and civic cultures. The impact of such manipulation is not confined to isolated events; rather, it reverberates across electoral cycles, gradually eroding the foundations of trust, accountability, and informed participation that define democratic legitimacy.

Crucially, the interplay between technology, political actors, and communicative infrastructures reveals that electoral disinformation is not an accidental byproduct of digital connectivity, but a strategically mobilized instrument of influence. Its efficacy lies in its ability to fragment public opinion, distort electoral deliberation, and normalize cynicism toward democratic institutions. These dynamics disproportionately affect emerging democracies, where regulatory asymmetries, uneven digital access, and institutional fragility create fertile conditions for the weaponization of information.

Addressing this crisis demands more than reactive regulation or isolated fact-checking interventions. It requires a sustained and coordinated commitment to normative democratic values, supported by transparent institutional reforms, inclusive media literacy initiatives, and ethical governance of digital technologies. Building societal resilience against disinformation is an inherently political act—one that entails recognizing the systemic nature of the threat and rejecting its normalization as an inevitable feature of modern politics. Such recognition must inform both local and transnational strategies, ensuring that electoral processes remain not only procedurally valid but substantively democratic.

Ultimately, the struggle against electoral disinformation is a test of democratic endurance. It challenges societies to reaffirm the moral and epistemic foundations upon which democratic authority rests. While the tools of manipulation evolve with increasing sophistication, the defense of electoral integrity must evolve with equal resolve, grounded in principles of transparency, pluralism, and the unwavering commitment to truth as a public good.

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Notes

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Nomenclature

AI	artificial intelligence—algorithms such as platform recommender systems and deepfakes
Bawaslu	Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum—Indonesia’s election supervisory agency
CIB	coordinated inauthentic behavior—networks of bots/trolls that disguise identity to manipulate online conversation
EU	European Union—supranational political and economic union of 27 European states
KPU	Komisi Pemilihan Umum—Indonesia’s general elections commission
MIL	Media and Information Literacy—critical ability to access, evaluate, and create information
TSE	tribunal superior Electoral—Brazil’s superior electoral court
Digital information equality	Canadian regulatory principle ensuring voters receive relevant electoral information simultaneously
Echo chamber	Online discussion space that amplifies homogeneous beliefs and limits exposure to different views
Disinformation/misinformation/malinformation	see detailed definitions in Appendix A

Appendixs

See **Tables A1** and **A2**.

Category	Brief definition	Example (electoral context)	Potential impact
Disinformation	Deliberately false or misleading information intended to harm.	Deepfake video of a candidate delivering a racist speech.	Erodes voter trust in candidates and institutions.
Misinformation	False information shared without harmful intent.	Viral post giving the wrong election date.	Confuses voters; may suppress turnout.
Malinformation	Genuine information shared out of context to cause harm.	Leaked emails from years ago republished on election eve.	Negative framing; delegitimizes the process.

Table A1.
Typology of information disorder with illustrative examples.

Country & year	Dominant platform	Principal actors	Narrative theme	Institutional response
Brazil 2018	WhatsApp	Pro-Bolsonaro influencers & bots	“Electronic voting machines are rigged”	TSE partnered with fact-checkers and tip-lines.
Nigeria 2019	Facebook/WhatsApp	Party elites & troll farms	Fake quick-count results	INEC launched digital-literacy campaigns.
Indonesia 2019	Facebook/Twitter	Online volunteers & micro-influencers	“KPU servers hacked”	KPU issued real-time clarifications.
Philippines 2022	YouTube/TikTok	Political vloggers	Historical revisionism of Marcos era	COMELEC coordinated collaborative debunks.

Table A2.
Selected case studies of electoral disinformation in the Global South.

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Audience Perception of the Reportage of 2023 Presidential Elections in Nigeria: An Analysis of Facebook Posts of Selected Newspaper Organisations

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Abstract

News reports on election enjoy wide readership among audience groups. This perhaps is because of the important role elections play in leadership architecture of democratic societies. The study employed content analysis and the study's population comprises all comments made under *Punch*, *Premium Times*, and *Leadership* newspapers regarding the outcomes of the 2023 presidential election. The analyses comprised comments from 18 posts, 6 posts from each of the three newspapers. The selected posts spanned from 20 October 2022 to 30 May 2023, covering reports on pre-election activities and post-election reactions and litigations. We adopted the manual content analysis of the Facebook comments (N = 5059) extracted from the selected posts from *Punch* (n = 3262), *Premium Times* (n = 1000), and *Leadership* (n = 797), after deleting irrelevant comments. Facebook was considered for this study because of its popularity among Nigerian news seekers. One hundred comments were randomly selected, and each of our four evaluators solely sorted the comments into our content categories. Results showed the inter-rater agreement was high ($\alpha = 74\%$) and values suggested good reliability. Findings indicate that most of the comments expressed under Facebook posts of newspaper organisations regarding the 2023 presidential elections were partisan. This was reflected in how these comments aligned with the major political parties participating in the election. The study concludes that Facebook users have not employed the platform to suggest policies to the government and its agencies. Rather they opt for vituperations, lamentations, and vitriol attacks on politicians, government agencies, media, and fellow co-users of the platform with different stances on issues of discourse.

Keywords: audience perception, Facebook posts, newspaper organisations, presidential elections, reportage

1. Introduction

News reports on election enjoy wide readership among audience groups. This perhaps is because of the important role elections play in leadership architecture of democratic societies. Studies have affirmed the popularity of political news among social media users [1, 2]. Political reports are not limited to election coverage; activities such as candidate nomination, campaigning, voting procedures, vote counting, announcement of results voter registration, rallies, and election petitions tribunal are also relevant [3, 4]. Many studies have re-echoed the role mass media play in politics [3]. Journalists, through the language and structural components of news, interpret issues and events around elections and related political activities to give them special attention. However, the interpretation given to these reports by the audience can be premised on the belief that media coverage of elections is substantially influenced by other factors [5].

Elections have a crucial role in democratizing and consolidating states world-wide. It is a mechanism to guarantee a state's smooth transition of government and an essential component of the democracy of the nation. Elections promote democratic governance [6]. According to Mohammed and Ibrahim [7], elections are the most widely accepted way for citizens to select their leaders in a political system. It is widely accepted as the process by which electorate select their leaders. The pluralistic nature of the Nigerian political landscape in terms of culture, values, and lifestyles, has accentuated the need to pay close attention to the yearnings of the electorate.

The advent of social media has extended avenues to political reports. Major news outlets employ Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), and Instagram, among others to share their daily contents with their followers and subscribers [8]. Access to social media has elevated users from mere potential consumers of political information to creators and distributors through their comments and other interactions [9]. The democratization of news as encouraged by social media gives audience members the opportunity to air their views on issues of public concern that have been reported by the media organisations. While individuals have their social media spaces, it appears those of media organisations enjoy more credibility. Peterson et al. [10] in their study found out that individuals are most likely to like, comment, and share political posts that resonate with their political inclinations. This suggests that Facebook posts are triggers whose effects are determined by existing principles and dispositions towards the issues in focus. Social interaction ties, trust, shared languages and aspiration influence individuals' civic engagement behaviour on Facebook [11]. Kaschesky et al. [12] argued that affordable and ubiquitous online communications provide the means for exchange of ideas and opinions, while also playing an increasing role for the transformation and unity of society. However, Yarchi et al. [13] posited that political polarization of the digital sphere poses a real problem to many democracies around the world.

The 2023 Presidential election in Nigeria is one of the most discussed in recent times on the social media. According to Acheampong [14], it is the most technologically driven polls since the beginning of the fourth republic. Election periods in some African countries are usually anticipated with apprehension, because so often they culminate in violence and bloodshed. Nigeria's elections have a history of insecurity due to electoral violence [15, 16]. The interest shown by Nigerians before and after the election underscores the growing political consciousness of the citizens. This consciousness was driven by the key themes that dominated the discourses which

included: ethnicity, religion, regional dominance, age, physical fitness and health, corrupt antecedents, among others. Historically, Nigeria began holding elections in 1964 after achieving republican status in 1963 under the supervision of the Northern People's Congress [17].

Media organisations as key players in the public sphere have over the years evoked responses from their readers *via* posts on social media. These comments though mostly coloured by emotions and sentiments have proved to be reliable in determining audience perceptions of issues of national interest. Even though social media platforms are increasingly changing the agenda setting power of traditional media, how elections are reported by newspapers still profoundly matters in spite of political parties' and candidates' approach to the use of social media for political campaign [18]. Facebook posts on 2023 presidential election by newspaper organisations evoked responses from their followers. These responses highlighted individual dispositions towards the content of the reports. Olayode [19] noted that presidential elections in post-colonial Nigeria have always caused tensions, anxieties, and controversies, particularly among voters. According to Isiaq et al. [20], this has to do with the fact that hate speech is a hallmark of electioneering seasons and typically has an ethnic undertone.

Even though many studies have explored Facebook posts of individuals, political actors, and institutions for postelection reactions, not many have explored those of newspaper organisations. In recent times, Facebook has been a prominent platform used by media organisations to share their contents with their subscribers. The choice of Facebook posts of print media organisations for this study is closely knitted to the relative trust that media organisations enjoy among the audience. More so, investigating the mechanisms that propel citizens' engagement with news on social media is an important task for political communication researchers [21].

Our study adopts Androutsopoulou et al.'s [22] passive citizen-sourcing paradigm, which focuses on unsolicited comments from news organisations Facebook posts on 2023 general election. These comments were generated freely in response to the news posted by the selected media organisations. Exploring these contents carefully will provide useful information needed in formulating policies capable of resolving established social problems. In addition, the political parallelism of media organisation in Nigeria raises the need to understand how political stories post on Facebook platforms of newspaper organisations and enjoy relative engagements. The public access to Facebook makes its contents open to politicians, government agencies and the electorate. Moving with this consciousness, this study explores Facebook comments under posts related to the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria *via* the following research questions:

1. What are the dimensions of Facebook comments on the Nigerian presidential election of 2023?
2. How did the Facebook users perceive the media reports on 2023 general elections?
3. What are the policy suggestions by Facebook users on the 2023 general election in Nigeria?
4. What is the level of civility expressed in the Facebook comments on 2023 presidential elections?

2. Literature review

2.1 Concept of electoral process

Elections are essential for every country that seeks to uphold democratic concepts such as citizen participation and choice. Nigeria has held multiple elections since moving to civilian administration in 1999, with the most recent in 2023. For an election to be considered free and fair, it must exude transparency, impartiality and inclusion. Problems at any stage can undermine public trust in electoral outcomes and the legitimacy of elected representatives. In Nigeria, recent elections have faced issues such as vote-buying, violence and manipulation of results [23, 24]. This has led to popular dissatisfaction with many residents questioning the process's legitimacy. For example, according to SBM Intelligence [25], only 30% of Nigerians are confident that the electoral commission will conduct free and fair elections.

Electoral processes form the foundation of democratic governance. For elections to accurately reflect the will of the people, they must be transparent and hold officials accountable. Perceptions of electoral integrity are shaped by the performance of different components of the process [26]. These include voter registration, campaign conduct, voting procedures, counting/collation of ballots and the announcement of results [27]. Procedural flaws or lack of transparency at any stage tends to breed doubts about the overall fairness of elections. Election outcomes in any democracy should accurately reflect the will of the voting populace. However, in reality, various factors shape how citizens accept or reject results. Research suggests that perceptions of electoral integrity greatly impact public acceptance of outcomes [28]. As predicted by social trust theory, decades of irregularities seem to have severely damaged public faith in the integrity and impartiality of the institution [29]. When processes are seen as fair, transparent and not manipulated, citizens are more likely to acknowledge the expressed will of their fellow voters regardless of preference. However, lack of transparency or visible irregularities undermine these perceptions and fuel rejectionism [30].

Societal cleavages along ethnic, religious or geopolitical lines also influence how Nigerians receive election outcomes. Politicians often exploit such divisions for votes using rhetoric that galvanizes 'in-group' solidarity and 'out-group' suspicion [31]. When results do not favour dominant identity groups in areas, rejectionism is fuelled regardless of integrity. Technological revolution in the media landscape that necessitated the emergence of the internet and the social media has further expanded the meaning of 'audience' beyond the initial conceptualization as passive audience or active audience to what could be regarded as 'participatory audience' [32, 33].

Prior studies suggest that on social media, certain journalistic frames can provoke online behaviours such as clicking news stories, expressing views using the comment box, or sharing the main post across networks [34, 35] in the study by Dutceac Segesten et al. [21]. The announcement of Nigeria's 2023 presidential election results sparked vibrant discussion and diverse reactions across social media platforms. As one of the most populous nations in Africa with over 200 million citizens, Nigerian elections are always highly anticipated events that stir strong emotions [36].

Recently, much scholarship has investigated how social media use affects citizens' political participation, online and offline. For instance, a study by David [37]

examined the link between reliance on Facebook for news, political knowledge, and political engagement in the Philippines. Findings of that study revealed those who rely less on social media as a news source exhibit higher levels of perceived knowledge about politics than those who rely more on it for news. In general, social media use has a positive but weak effect on participation. However, different use types exert a differentiated influence [38].

2.2 Social media: An overview

Social media users are becoming the foremost force in various online public opinion and political expression venues [39, 40]. It has received significant attention from researchers because of its relevance to various sectors of human endeavours. The use of social media for information sharing during critical events as well as for seeking and/or rendering help has also been investigated in prior research [41]. Over the past decade, social media have been transforming how individuals, communities, and organizations create, share, and consume information from each other and from firms. According to Androutsopoulou et al. [22], Web 2.0 and Social Media constitute a 'paradigm shift in communication', which lower the barriers of communication for individuals and groups, and bring new potentials to foster and support e-participation. It has created a participatory cultural environment through collaboration, knowledge sharing and user empowerment.

Government use external resources, taking advantage of the collective intelligence and wisdom of online publics in the process of solving problems or obtaining innovative ideas. These individuals are involved in all processes in politics [42]. The desire of electorate to be included in all the processes of the governance, the desire of the government to understand the demands and the needs of the consumers, and their inclusion in governance accelerated the transition to open innovation. The ideas, opinions, suggestions and content created by the masses online can be adopted to solve identified problems. Social media such as Facebook provides politicians and citizens a platform to present their views, and such views influence the voters' decision, policy initiation and implementation [43]. They are spaces where news about politics is co-exist with personal, entertainment and lifestyle-oriented content [21].

2.3 Facebook and news

Social network sites (SNS) like Facebook have become a fundamental part of accessing news [39, 44]. While Kumpel [45] opined that most users come across news on Facebook *via* incidental exposure, Kalsnes and Larsson [1] argued that Facebook is increasingly becoming an important platform for news distribution. Traditional and alternative media organisations are making frantic efforts to adapt their services to fit with the affordances made available by digital intermediaries. The rise of the internet as a significant communication medium has considerably changed the existing patterns of information and news consumption [46]. Gbasha et al. [47] noted that social media platforms have become integral to the daily lives of Nigerians, influencing not only social interactions but also shaping the way people consume news. The adoption of social media by media houses and news agencies as a news dissemination medium is becoming noticeable. Facebook was the most popular platform used for news consumption in Nigeria [48].

Some citizens overly rely on platforms to deliver news to them and have disengaged from news-seeking altogether. News items on Facebook appear in posts that can be liked, commented or shared by users. A like represents a positive feedback on a news item. A share indicates a desire to make available a news item to friends. A comment can have multiple features and meanings and can generate collective debate. The likes, shares and comments on Facebook posts present a heavy-tailed distribution [49].

Mainstream media organisations in Nigeria need to create more social media platforms for their news stories especially in this era where virtually everyone sources news stories on social media platforms. This would help boost the ratings of such news stories and the social media platforms as well as positively promote the general image of the media organisation globally [2]. Political interest is positively associated with cross-cutting discussion, and this relationship is mediated by the frequency of news consumption on Facebook, suggesting that Facebook use has the potential of exposing the politically attentive to dissonant view [50]. Tran and Ngo [51] remarked that the visitor-generated content is the 'defining feature of participatory websites and distinguishes them from the traditional web'. Reader comments are now attractive forces to online news and have given rise to various forms of interpersonal interactions. Social network sites have become a medium for everyone to share things freely and can provide comments for other SNS users. With easy access and support freedom to express opinions, discussion topics become different, including controversial cases. Controversial cases often attract many people into the discussion, and the use of uncivil comments often occurs [52].

Current studies on user comments suggest there may be many ill-effects like maligning journalists thereby encouraging incivility among commenters [53]. Contrary to popular perceptions, Szabó et al. [54] argued that incivility has not become significantly intensive in election campaign periods. It correlates to the dynamics of interaction that exist between Facebook users and posts emanating from media organisations. While media organisations are expected to be gatekeepers of their online platforms [55], it is important for other stakeholders to quell the astro-nomic incursion of uncivil comments on social media platforms. Gagrčin [56] posited that user intervention against incivility is a significant element of democratic norm enforcement on social media, and feeling personally responsible for acting is a vital prerequisite for intervention.

2.4 Readers' choice

Readers' exposure to online newspaper contents can be influenced by demographic, psychographic and environmental factors. According to Benneth et al. [57], readers have a certain level of expectation before exposing themselves to any content in the online news. Fletcher and Park [58] in a study on the impact of individual trust in the news media concluded that those with low levels of trust tend to prefer non-mainstream news sources such as social media, blogs and digital-born providers, and are more likely to engage in various forms of online news participation.

The need to compare and authenticate news reports have led people to seeking alternative views and attempting to authenticate the credibility of news they are exposed to [58]. On news outlets' websites and social media pages, readers express their opinions, learn the perspectives of other audience members and participate in processes of news production and interpretation [59]. Social media

news consumption is positively associated with people's online political expression. Additionally, netizens' political ideology moderates the relationship between social media news consumption and online political expression [40].

Organisations use social media to track sentiment globally by analysing user-generated content and interactions on social networking platforms to update their business and marketing strategies appropriately [60]. Social media is a platform for public around the world to discuss their issues and opinions. It facilitates the interaction between groups or individuals in which they produce, share and sometimes exchange ideas, images, videos and many more over the internet and in virtual communities [61]. The analysis of data from social media and social networking sites may be germane in achieving a better understanding of human-environment interactions as said by Ghermandi and Sinclair [62].

Social network sites have become a medium for everyone to share things freely and can provide comments for other SNS users. With easy access and support freedom to express opinions, discussion topics become different, including controversial cases. Controversial cases often attract many people into the discussion, and the use of uncivil comments often occurs [52].

2.5 Methodology

The study's population comprises all comments made under Punch, Premium Times and Leadership newspapers regarding the outcomes of the 2023 presidential election. These well-known and extensively read newspapers in Nigeria offer a sample of the general public's responses to the conduct of the election results. Punch was selected because of the popularity of its print and online editions among Nigerians, with 4.5 million followers on Facebook. Premium Times, an online news platform with a vision to help strengthen Nigeria's democracy, has 4.2 million followers, which was considered because of its non-political ties cum ownership. Leadership Newspaper, founded by a politician, was selected for this study check how political parallelism affect reader's perception of news as expressed in their comments on Facebook. The newspaper has 1.2 million followers on Facebook. The analyses comprised comments from 18 posts, six posts from each of the three newspapers. The selected posts spanned from 20 October 2022 to 30 May 2023, covering reports on pre-election activities and post-election reactions and litigations.

The selected posts that were highly commented featured pre-election, election, and post-election occurrences. They included stories and reports on qualification and eligibility of candidates, election conduct, legal fireworks, party issues and comments by other stakeholders on the election outcome. We adopted manual content analysis of the Facebook comments ($N = 5059$) extracted from the selected posts from Punch ($n = 3262$), Premium Times ($n = 1000$) and Leadership ($n = 797$), after deleting irrelevant comments. Facebook was considered for this study because of its popularity among Nigerian news seekers [63].

Interrater reliability was performed for each of the three online publications using Krippendorff's. It is a reliability coefficient created to measure the agreement among coders. It is also a measuring instrument that draws distinctions among typically unstructured phenomena or assigns computable values to them [64]. One hundred comments were randomly selected, and each of our four evaluators solely sorted the comments into our content categories. Result showed the inter-rater agreement was high ($\alpha = 74\%$) and values suggested good reliability (**Table 1**).

s/n	Post headline/date	Media	Comments
1	You are the best for the job, Buhari Congratulates Tinubu (1 March 2023)	Punch	218
2	Atiku, PDP apply for live coverage of court proceedings 55 comments (8 May 2023)	Punch	40
3	APC asks US govt to ignore election petition (3 April 2023)	Punch	498
4	INEC IReV Portal showed Peter Obi did not win 2023 Presidential Elections in 19 States (9 March 2023)	Punch	1256
5	Just in: Fear in Tinubu's camp as Oyegun chairs APC presidential screening panel (30 May 2022)hg	Punch	618
6	Only two presidential aspirants mean well for Nigeria – clergyman /(21 April 2022)	Punch	632
7	Breaking: INEC declares APC's Bola Tinubu winner of Nigeria's presidential election (1 March 2023)	Premium Times	91
8	Thabo Mbeki tells President-Elect Tinubu: Do not Forget African Continent (3 March 2023)	Premium Times	15
9	Presidential Elections: You are 'shameless sore losers', Lai Mohammed replies opposition (1 May 2023)	Premium Times	307
10	'I must be President of Nigeria', Peter Obi insists (14/21 May 2023)	Premium Times	259
11	Swearing in: Supreme court dismisses PDP's suit against Tinubu, Shettima's candidature (26 May 2023)	Premium times	95
12	Obidients dominate as Tinubu, Atiku face domestic problems (2 October 2022)	Premium Times	233
13	Tinubu, Shettima Get National Honours	Leadership	58
14	Photonews: APC presidential candidate, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu, receives in audience representatives of the ECOWAS Election Monitoring Team, led by former Nigeria's President, Goodluck Jonathan, &former President of Ghana, Mr. John Mahama at his residence I Abuja, on Tuesday (28 February 2023)	Leadership	52
15	Nigeria presidential election results by state (28 February 2023)	Leadership	93
16	Presidential Poll: Tinubu inaugurates 49 SANS as Legal team (9 March 2023)	Leadership	90
17	PDP presidential candidate for the 2023 elections, Atiku Abubakar, visits Rivers State governor and former presidential aspirant, Nyesom Wike (20 May 2022)	Leadership	124
18	Obasanjo demands cancelation of election results where BVAS malfunctioned (27 February 2023)	Leadership	335

Source: (Authors computation, 2025).

Table 1.
List of selected posts.

3. Results and discussions

3.1 Research question one: What are the dimensions of Facebook comments on the Nigerian presidential election of 2023?

For this research question, 5014 comments reviewed for this study are relevant. These comments were categorized using four sub-categories that were partisan, apolitical, ethnicity and religion. Partisan comments have the most significant percentage with 75.9%, followed by apolitical comments with 15.7%, ethnicity with 4.9% and

Variables	N	%	Sample comments
Partisan	3841	75.9	• Unstoppable Jagaban • Truth is bitter.... You better wait till 2031 after Tinubu tenure • Atiku is the answer and ready for governance...insha Allah.
Apolitical	793	15.7	• Congratulations your excellencies • May God guide and direct him to do things that pleased Nigerian. • May Almighty Allah select the best leader who truly love Nigerians and Nigeria among them.
Ethnicity	250	4.9	• Dominate where? Eastern Nigeria? • For not chosen an Easterner as the flagbearer is an act of wickedness. • Congratulations for northerners massive voting, we are good pple and we assure it to Yoruba, go and rule us.
Religion	175	3.5	• Useless pastor • Muslim victory • So that means CAN is no longer relevant? I thought they have already taken their stand...who are the Christian leaders?...Something is fishy
Total	5059	100	

Source: (Authors computation, 2025).

Table 2.
Dimensions of Facebook comments.

religion with 3.5%. The aforementioned categories were the dominant issues that characterized the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria (**Table 2**).

3.2 Research question two: How did the Facebook users perceive the media reports on 2023 general elections?

The second research question addressed Facebook users' perception of media reports on the 2023 presidential election as expressed in their comments. To address this, we explored the sampled comments and identified 1042 comments where media organizations or journalists were mentioned. Comments that expressed perceived partisanship had the most significant percentage with 80.6%. Comments correcting errors in media reports had 5.7%, ownership/regional influence had 2.6%, verbal attacks had 10.8%, and comments commending the media reportorial prowess had 0.2% (**Table 3**).

Variable	B	%	Sample comments
Appreciation of the media	2	0.2	• Very smart writeup, premium times. The nation newspaper is still copying and pasting stuffs from Reno mockery. They should learn from you guys. • The best headline of the year. Peter Obi taking the lead.
Perceived partisanship	840	80.6	• Punch Newspaper belongs to tinubu and they are full of lies News • This newspaper is too bias, never report public opinion. So, you never see Kwankwaso as one of the presidential candidates, even though he continues to gather crowds greater than Obi, Atiku and Jagaban. • Just pay the Nigeria journalist well and see them glorifying the devil

Variable	B	%	Sample comments
Errors in media reports	60	5.7	• Please premium times it peter not petr, spell the name of our incoming president correctly • February 26? You people are sick in the head. Rubbish paper. • Leadership newspaper, why are you confusing Nigerians?
Ownership/ regional influence	27	2.6	• What do you expect from Tinubu group organization?? An organization full of belle faces road people. Food is ready now, they can come up many things. • Nearly all Nigerian news media are been controlled by cabal I no surprise. • I think PT newspaper has turn to be an IPOB agent recently. • Nearly all Nigerian news media are being controlled by cabal I no surprise.
Verbal attack	113	10.8	• Gutter media with gutter news • Do not mind this cash and carry journalist, abi gutter journalist. A system that has been compromised abinitio. Mad people everywhere in Nigeria. They have been paid to set another tune to shape their mischief and deceit • Punch Newspapers if you have be paid to give fake news God will punish you
Total	1042	100	

Source: (Authors computation, 2025).

Table 3.
Perception of media reports on 2023 presidential elections.

3.3 Research question three: What are the policy suggestions by Facebook users on the 2023 general election in Nigeria?

Results show that 16 comments out the 5059 sampled comments expressed policy suggestions on electoral activities. Electoral reforms had the highest suggestions with 62.5%, comments on the fusion of religion into politics were four representing 25%, while suggestions about media coverage of election had two comments representing 12.5% (**Table 4**).

Variable	N	%	Sample comments
Electoral Reforms	10	62.5	Nigerians must insist that the tribunal and the supreme court must deliver judgement on the presidential election before May 29....
Media coverage of elections	2	12.5	February 25 or 26. Could fact check the correct date.
Politics and religion	4	25	Church and mosques should focus more on prayers for success of next general election and allow electorate decide the fate of the aspirants, we do not need meet the church or meet imam. Irrelevant warnings and prophecies rather than productive culture cannot help us out of the present challenges. Ethnicity and religion play role in this election.
	16	100	

Source: (Authors computation, 2025).

Table 4.
Policy suggestions by Facebook users.

3.4 Research question four: What is the level of civility expressed in the Facebook comments on 2023 presidential elections?

With this research question, we examined the sampled Facebook comments with a view to determining the civility pattern. Uncivil comments comprised of abusive, attack, rude or ill expression deployed while reacting to news reports posted Facebook. Uncivil comments had a significant representation with 80.7%, while civil comments had 19.4% (Table 5).

Variables	N	%	Sample comments
Attack/uncivil comments	4081	80.7	May God punish all of you for suffering Nigerians Rest in peace Punch Newspaper What is wrong with the old man. Please go and sit down, your time has passed.
Issue-based comments	978	19.4	Atiku is the answer and ready for governance. Insha Allah Obi has the best manifesto So since the results are yet to be uploaded where did INEC got the results that made them announce Tinubu the winner?
	5059	100	

Source: (Authors computation, 2025).

Table 5.
Expression of civility in Facebook comments.

3.5 Discussion of findings

The findings here suggest that majority of the comments expressed by Facebook users in respect of the 2023 presidential election were partisan. These comments expressed support to candidates and vituperations against candidates in the opposition. The dominance of partisan comments is an indication of the keen contest that produced the eventual winner of the election [65]. Partisanship was vociferously expressed during the presidential election with social media platforms becoming a theatre of actions featuring loyalists and traducers of political candidates and parties. Al-Rawi et al. [66] identify themes such as hyper-nationalism and state-sanctioned abuse in some uncivil comments online, indicating that these attacks are often inspired by political interests.

Previous studies have emphasized the close association between politics and uncivil comments [67–69]. Online political incivility may threaten democratic norms, contribute to polarization, and also come from a minority of users [70] based on perceived marginalization in the polity [70]. Stances on ethnicity and religion featured among the reviewed comments. Ethnicity slant reflected in comments where Facebook users raised concerns about marginalization of some ethnic nationalities in politics and governance. Previous study by Moshood and Orunbon [71] and Adewale et al. [3] indicated that ethnicity, religious, and regional identity influence political behaviour and electoral outcomes in Nigeria. Religious stances raised questions about individuals of same faith contesting on a joint ticket thereby downplaying the religious diversity of the country. Over the years, concerns are being raised on the pervasive influence of ethno-religious factors in Nigerian politics. Our finding here aligns with Salahu [72] who concluded that more than ever before and more than any other factor, religion to a large extent determines ‘who gets what, when and how’ and

by extension varies the outcomes of elections in Nigeria. Similarly, Chris-Sanctus [73] posited that the 2023 election results signalled the risk of future ethnic bloc voting. Overall, this study agrees with Maigari [74] who observed that the continual division of Nigerians along ethnic and religious lines is because religious leaders have become active in politics.

This study corroborates the active audience notion as comments showcased the awareness level of Facebook audience about political developments in the society. Politics has assumed an importance role in social order and as such there is rising interest in its related activities and engagements. Media audiences are largely aware of the itineraries of politicians, including their antecedents, programmes and limitations. News on politics enjoys wide readership and attention because politics drives socio-economic development of the people. Based on this, there is the need for media organisations to double check their facts and figures before making them available to the public. Karlsson et al. [75] in their study concluded that citizens have strong expectations that news media publish correct information and they have little tolerance for errors.

Curses and threats to boycott newspaper titles were the dominant incivility expressed by some Facebook users. Our study also showed that media reports on the 2023 presidential election were perceived to be politically influenced. Majority of the comments suggested that politicians influence news for political gains. The study also showed that perception of media independence is a ruse if media contents do not align with the political stance of the audience. Our study further shows that the majority of the comments expressed in respect of the 2023 presidential elections were uncivil. The incivility was expressed to the reporters, publishers of the newspapers, newsmakers featured in the story and perceived opponents. Reporters and publishing outfits were exposed to uncivil comments because of reportorial errors, perceived partisanship and alleged influence by political actors. Taking a cue from the study of Holton et al. [76] on types of harassment meted out on journalists online, the uncivil comments expressed towards journalists in our study were the acute harassment that features generalized verbal abuse. This is possible because the design of social media platforms allows for the rapid dissemination of damaging narratives, reinforcing existing power dynamics and legitimizing attacks on journalists [77]. Also, Robertson et al. [78] submitted that the adoption of negative words in headlines increased news consumption rates, while also bringing about negative reactions from readers.

Online harassment has risen in recent years *via* comment sections under online news articles barraging journalists' emails and social media accounts with defamatory, threatening, demeaning or even pornographic material [79]. The study by Harlow and Brown [80] highlights the emergence of new actors, such as social media provocateurs, who actively engage in mob censorship against journalists. This negates the position of [81] who argued that publicly shared evaluations and judgements of journalistic text and actors on various digital platforms are injurious to journalism. The newsmakers, politicians and non-political actors like a religious leader and an election observer, featured in the selected news posts, were lampooned by commenters. The finding here aligns with Kuru and Neyazi [82] whose study showed that for those who found the election outcome unfavourable, increased social media exposure resulted in a greater loss of trust in the government and allied institutions.

Social media platforms are probable sites where the populace can contribute to societal developments through their comments on issues of public interest. This study has revealed the Nigerians are not maximizing the benefits Facebook offers in contributing to policy suggestions. Rather than suggesting solutions to identified gaffes

in the system, they resort to uncivil comments that are capable widening the cracks. Perhaps the reason Rosenberg [83] also agreed that news comments lack the rationale that would account for an online deliberative space is because of the spate of uncivil comments under political reports. For Lee [84], digital network technology should encourage the predisposed to participate in civic conversations, along with online news consumption, while expanding the opportunity for diverse users to become civically informed.

Chris-Sanctus et al. [73] observed that Nigeria exhibits lower overall levels of electoral integrity compared to other world regions. While the number of PRSO-policy posts not significant considering the total posts sampled, the few suggested are germane to the electoral body, media and religious leaders. A good portion of the uncivil comments were targeted at the electoral umpire and the judiciary, while the media was also not spared because of perceived partisanship and errors in their reports.

4. Conclusion

The 2023 presidential elections in Nigeria generated significant public interest and engagement, particularly on digital platforms such as Facebook, where traditional newspaper organisations increasingly disseminated news and election-related content. As one of the most contested elections in Nigeria's recent history, characterised by heightened political tensions, youth participation and disinformation, the media's role in shaping narratives and influencing public opinion became more pronounced. Newspaper organisations used their online platform not only to report news but also to engage with readers, set agendas and frame the electoral process. This shift reflects the convergence between traditional journalism and interactive digital media, where audience feedback, comments and shares influence the visibility and interpretation of news.

In this contestation, the findings show that most of the comments expressed under Facebook posts of newspaper organisations in respect to the 2023 presidential elections were partisan. This was reflected in how these comments aligned with the major political parties that participated during the election. Similarly, sampled Facebook comments showed that media audience believed media organisations are partisan and are tied to the apron strings of politicians *via* ownership and other forms of patronage. Facebook users have not employed the platform to suggest policies to government and her agencies. Rather they opt for vituperations, lamentations and vitriol attacks on politicians, government agencies, media and fellow co-users of the platform with different stances on issues of discourse. Perhaps this was responsible for the dominance of uncivil comments among those reviewed for the study.

Based on the findings, the study recommends that there should be a clear distinction between ownership and editorial interest in media organization management. This will have a positive influence on how media organizations are perceived by the members of the public. Media organizations should make conscious efforts to verify claims expressed in their reports to avoid misinforming the public. Political reports, because of its sensitive nature, must be devoid of errors, or language that promotes partisanship, ethnic or religious interests. Media audience should utilize Facebook and other social media platforms for contributing positively to government policies, activities and programmes. Views and opinions shared on these platforms can contribute positively to societal causes.

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Chapter

Trust for Electoral Management Bodies

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Abstract

Electoral fraud and integrity challenges in transitional democracies have contributed to the institutionalization of election observation as a global norm. Election observation helps reduce the incidence of electoral fraud and manipulation and, by so doing, provides an independent third-party verdict of the level of freeness and fairness of elections in which they were involved. The continuous participation of election observers in the electoral processes of transitional democracies is supposed to increase the capacity of electoral management bodies (EMBs) and consequently increase trust in EMBs. Yet very little is known about the relationship between election observation and the perception of trust for EMBs. This paper examines this relationship using data from the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers in Ghana and the Afrobarometer Survey Round 7 of Ghana. We find that a higher share of observed polling stations in a district correlates negatively with the level of trust for EMBs. This means that an increase in the number of polling stations observed in a district leads to a decrease in the trust levels respondents have for EMBs. This result does not hold in all types of polling stations. For competitive polling stations, levels of trust for EMBs increase as the number of observed polling stations in a district increases.

Keywords: electoral management bodies, election observers, trust, Ghana, non-proportional ordinal logistic regression

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, election observation has become an international norm, especially for countries in transition [1]. International organizations and civil society groups spend millions of dollars every election year to monitor elections in new democracies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Elections are the primary avenue through which citizens can express their voice on individuals who should govern the state. However, elections in new democracies have been characterized by disputes and contestations that sometimes lead to conflicts or civil wars [2]. One of the reasons for these electoral disputes is that incumbent governments are often not willing to provide a fair and even environment for credible elections to take place. Incumbent governments can manipulate election outcomes when electoral management bodies are not independent and cannot supervise free and fair elections.

To prevent conflicts and deepen the democratic processes of nascent democracies, the United Nations began deploying election observers and monitors to provide a

third-party judgment on whether an election was free and fair [3]. Since then, election observation has become a common feature of electoral processes in many countries and incumbent governments often have high motivations to invite observers to monitor elections [1]. Different studies have found that pronouncements and reports by election observers as neutral parties affect the credibility of election outcomes produced by election management bodies. By providing information from non-interested parties about how an election was conducted, voters can update their beliefs about the credibility of the outcome of elections [4]. Positive information to the effect that an election is free and fair leads to a significant increase in the belief of credibility in election outcomes according to an experiment conducted in Tunisia [4]. This finding is confirmed by a different study carried out in Tunisia, which found that the activities of electoral observers affect the local beliefs about the credibility of election outcomes [5].

In tracing the history of the emergence of election observation in new democracies, the literature continuously points to the need for the international community - via the United Nations - to shepherd newly created institutions in Africa to ultimately gain the necessary credibility and technical know-how to conduct elections in a manner that will be accepted by all interested parties [6]. One such institution is Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs). Surprisingly, the literature on election observers has been silent on the effect of election observation on election management bodies.

In this paper, we aim to shed light on how election observation and the presence of election observers moderate the perception of trust in election management bodies. Using the case of Ghana and relying on data from the Afrobarometer Surveys and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), we find that the increase in the share of observed polling stations in a District is associated with a decrease in the level of public trust in the Ghanaian Electoral Commission (EC).

The results contribute to understanding how perceptions of EMBs are formed and how they can be changed. We contribute to the literature on election observers by explaining the relationship between election observers and citizens' perception of the main institution in charge of organizing and managing elections. Previous studies have been more focused on the perception of the outcome of elections itself and paid very little attention to the institutions involved in supervising and managing elections [4, 7, 8]. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to analyze the relationship between these two main variables. The findings show that contrary to logical expectations, the presence of election observers does not engender trust in EMBs, rather it can confirm pre-existing biased views of the credibility of EMBs. In addition to this, we show in this paper that the relationship between election observers and EMBs is not homogeneous across all the different categories of polling stations. We therefore further contribute to the literature on election observation and EMBs by providing a nuanced view of the relationship between the two variables. The findings are also significant for policymakers and professionals interested in projects that aim to enhance the image of critical democratic institutions to enhance democratic development in new democracies. Policymakers are confronted with the necessity of reevaluating the approach to election observation, with particular emphasis on the selection of polling stations to be observed, based on the desired outcomes of such observations. This reconsideration is imperative when the objective is to ensure the attainment of free and fair elections or to cultivate enduring confidence in EMBs.

This imperative stems from the recognition that conducting election observation in certain polling stations may inadvertently undermine trust in EMBs, even if it guarantees the realization of free and fair elections. Conversely, directing election

observation efforts towards competitive polling stations yields dual advantages, as it fosters increased trust in EMBs and enhances the likelihood of realizing free and fair elections. Hence, policymakers must carefully assess and prioritize their election observation activities to align with the overarching goals of promoting trust in EMBs and facilitating the achievement of transparent and equitable electoral processes.

2. The purpose of election observation

Across many new democracies, maintaining trust in EMBs is essential to enhancing election integrity and ultimately regime legitimacy [9]. Therefore, it is crucial to conduct a systemic analysis of how election observation shapes citizens' attitudes towards EMBs and how these attitudes vary over time.

The practice of election observation has become widespread, with many developing countries inviting observers to monitor and assess the quality of their elections [10]. This trend began in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when many autocratic regimes were transitioning to democracies. Elections in these transitional democracies attracted international attention for good reasons. First, elections in these countries were a litmus test of a regime's commitment to democratic values. Second, elections presented an opportunity for voters and other stakeholders to weaken the hold of authoritarian regimes [3].

3. Theoretical framework

We present two different theories that lead to divergent expectations of the relationship between the presence of election observers and trust in electoral management bodies. The first one is the social influence theory. Social influence theory, suggests that individuals' attitudes and behaviors can be shaped by two types of social influence: normative and informational. Normative influence pertains to the desire to conform to the social norms and expectations of a group, while informational influence pertains to the desire to gain knowledge and make accurate judgments based on the information available [11].

In the context of election observation, the presence of observers can exert both normative and informational influences on the public's perception of electoral management bodies (EMBs). These influences can shape the level of trust citizens have in these institutions.

Normative Influence: The normative influence of election observers arises from the symbolic signal they send about the election management body's openness to scrutiny and commitment to transparency. The presence of observers, particularly those seen as independent third parties, conveys that the EMB adheres to widely accepted norms of accountability and transparency. Election observers typically produce reports that assess the fairness and integrity of the electoral process.

Public perception of these reports carries significant weight, as observers are perceived to have an impartial stance. When observers' evaluations are positive, the public may infer that the EMB has fulfilled its responsibilities effectively. This alignment with social norms and expectations can enhance trust in the EMB. Conversely, if observers report irregularities or malpractice, trust in the EMB may decline due to the perception that it has failed to uphold transparency and fairness.

Informational influence occurs when election observers provide credible, accurate, and detailed information about the electoral process. Through their monitoring,

observers identify irregularities, assess the integrity of electoral activities, and communicate their findings to the public. The flow of information extends beyond the direct communication of observer reports. In communities where multiple observers are present across different polling stations, the volume and circulation of information increase through informal channels such as chats and discussions among community members. These conversations amplify the spread of observer findings, potentially reinforcing public awareness and perceptions of the election process. The presence of many observers can create a networked flow of information, fostering a broader communal understanding of electoral integrity or irregularities.

The level of trust for EMBs based on the informational flow from election observers can also differ based on the types of polling stations election observers are located. In competitive areas, where the stakes of the election are high, the informational flow is likely to be more intense. Here, community members may engage in more frequent and vigorous discussions, and sharing anecdotes from multiple polling stations. This heightened exchange can either bolster or diminish trust in the EMB depending on the consistency and positivity of observer findings.

In stronghold areas, where one party or candidate dominates, the informational flow may be less dynamic. However, observer reports that challenge the dominant narrative can spark significant discussions, potentially shifting public perceptions. Conversely, reports that align with expectations may reinforce existing trust in the EMB but generate less widespread discourse.

The backfire effect theory is a psychological phenomenon that suggests presenting evidence or information contradicting an individual's existing beliefs can actually strengthen their initial beliefs, rather than changing them [12, 13]. This theory, also known as the boomerang effect [14] or backlash effect [15] is typically observed when corrective actions or information inadvertently reinforce misinformation or skepticism.

Applied to election observation, the backfire effect provides an alternative perspective on trust in EMBs. While observers aim to promote transparency and integrity, their presence may unintentionally decrease trust in EMBs under certain conditions:

Cognitive dissonance: When individuals hold pre-existing doubts about the electoral process, the presence of observers may confirm their suspicions rather than alleviate them. Observers' reports on irregularities or fraud may serve as a reminder of systemic flaws, reinforcing skepticism about the EMB.

Partisan Bias: In politically polarized environments, strong partisan affiliations may shape how individuals perceive observers. For instance:

- *Competitive polling stations:* In competitive areas, voters may interpret observer presence as an indication of potential bias or irregularities that could sway close results. This perception might deepen mistrust among partisans who fear that observers favor one side.
- *Stronghold polling stations:* In areas dominated by opposition parties, individuals might interpret observer activities as a sign of bias or undue interference, further eroding trust in the EMB.

Media framing: The way observer reports are framed by the media can influence public perceptions. Negative framing, such as emphasizing irregularities, may amplify the backfire effect by fostering mistrust in the electoral process and its management.

Over-monitoring: An excessive presence of observers might signal to voters that the electoral process is fraught with issues requiring constant oversight, inadvertently undermining confidence in the EMB's ability to manage elections independently. Based on the theories discussed, the following hypotheses are proposed:

We formalize these hypotheses below:

H1: *Districts with high percentages of observed polling stations will have a positive (higher) level of trust in EMBs.*

H2: *Districts with high percentages of observed polling stations will have a negative (lower) level of trust in EMBs.*

H3: *Districts with high percentages of competitive polling stations observed will have a negative (lower) level of trust in EMBs.*

H4: *Districts with high percentages of stronghold polling stations observed will have a negative (lower) level of trust in EMBs.*

4. The case of CODEO

Ghana returned to multiparty democracy in 1992 after several years of authoritarian regimes. To help combat electoral malpractices and enhance the credibility of the electoral processes, a group of domestic civic organizations came together to observe the 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections. In the 2000 elections that followed, activities of this group were formalized with the formation of the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) [16]. This organization has led domestic election observation since the 2000 elections. CODEO is widely seen by Ghanaians as non-partisan and independent, and there is broad acceptance of their activities in Ghana's electoral processes [17]. CODEO recruits election observers from different regions and districts and trains them during election cycles. Observers also receive formal accreditation from the Electoral Commission. Once accredited, observers are granted the right to access and observe proceedings at any polling station or collation center. Observers are placed at different polling stations based on CODEO's categorization of polling stations. They observe from the opening to the close of the polls, including the public vote count that takes place at the end of the day at each polling place. CODEO observers wear standard blue and white vests with the words "CODEO Observers" embossed at the back of the vest and a logo and the word "CODEO" embossed at the front of the vests. The vest and accreditation tags worn by CODEO officials make them conspicuous to voters and distinguish them from other observation groups such as the Commonwealth group of observers and ECOWAS and AU groups of observers. Observers usually position themselves away from the EC officials and yet close enough to the officials and ballot boxes to have a good view of all activities taking place. Observers are expected to report irregular activities and disruptions through provided communication devices.

The endeavors undertaken by CODEO in Ghana provide a compelling context for investigating the impact of election observers on public trust in the EC. This case study is particularly noteworthy due to CODEO's extensive and consistent involvement in monitoring elections over a span of approximately 28 years. Secondly, CODEO unlike many international observer groups have the local knowledge and context to appropriately situate their findings. Additionally, CODEO is able to cover a higher fraction of polling stations than any of the international election observers in Ghana. These capabilities of CODEO enhances their image in the eyes of the public and their findings are more believable compared to international monitoring groups

[5, 18]. Furthermore, Ghana is widely acknowledged as a democratic nation. These two critical factors enhance the validity and relevance of our case study.

The first reason for the relevance of this case study is that the frequency with which respondents have encountered election observers can potentially shape their levels of trust in an EMB. Given CODEO's long-standing presence in election monitoring, respondents may have been exposed to their activities on multiple occasions, which could influence their perceptions of the EC and their trust in its processes.

The second reason pertains to the nature of the political regime within which election observation occurs, as it may also impact respondents' trust levels in EMBs. Ghana's democratic status serves as an important contextual element in understanding how election observation and the accompanying democratic framework shape public trust in the EC. Different types of political regimes, such as authoritarian or hybrid systems, may engender varying levels of trust in EMBs, making it crucial to consider the specific democratic context in which election observation takes place.

5. Data and descriptive statistics

5.1 Data

This study relies on two data sources. The first data source, which is the primary data, is the Afrobarometer (AFROB) which measures public opinions and attitudes towards democracy, governance, the economy, and society in over 30 African countries on a regular series. The AFROB survey uses a multi-stage, clustered, and stratified random sampling technique with probability weights generated to correct for over or under-sampling and non-responses from the households to create nationally representative samples. We use the Ghana Round 7 wave (2017), which has a sample size of 2400 adult Ghanaians, a margin of sampling error of no more than $\pm 2\%$ at a 95% confidence level, and recorded cooperation and response rates of 82.1 and 78.7%, respectively. In addition, AFROB conducts face-to-face interviews in the six major languages in Ghana (English, Akan, Ewe, Ga, Dagbani, and Damari).

The second data source is the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) report.¹ The CODEO document contains information that states the exact constituencies in which election observers were placed to monitor the elections.

5.2 Descriptive statistics

5.2.1 Dependent variable

Table A.2 presents the summary statistics for adult Ghanaians interviewed at the time of the survey. We stratify the summary statistics table by the perception of public trust in the Electoral Commission (EC). The dependent variable which captures individual perception of institutions (i.e., electoral management bodies in this case), was sourced from the AFROB Ghana Round 7 wave. In the survey respondents were

¹ CODEO's establishment took place in the year 2000, under the auspices of Ghana for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana). For more details on the report, click (CODEO 2016).

asked: *How much do you trust [the Electoral Commission], or have not you heard about them to say?* On a scale of 0 (not at all) to 3 (a lot), the average degree of trust in the EC of Ghana is approximately 1.63, which lies between the range of “just a little” and “somewhat”. When studying public trust levels, it is imperative to consider the timing of the survey fieldwork and election dates. The fieldwork for Round 7 in Ghana was conducted from September 9 to 25, 2017 following the December 2016 national presidential and parliamentary elections. Thus, the modest recorded trust level may largely be correlated with activities just prior to, during, and after the national elections. For example, prior to the December 2016 general elections, the EC of Ghana was directed by the judiciary to conduct a full-scale audit of the voter list [2]. After the audit was completed, many inaccuracies in the voter list were found and Ghanaians were startled and concerned as to whether the electoral commission will have time to correct these inaccuracies by December 2016. These occurrences potentially could impact public confidence in the EC as existing weakness are revealed.

Figure 1 shows the time trend of public trust in the EC over multiple rounds of the AFROB Ghana survey. The figure reveals that public trust in Ghana’s EC has fluctuated. In the Round 4 (2008) wave, 11.4% of sampled adult Ghanaians said they had no trust in the EC, while 42.3% expressed a lot of trust in the EC. Total mistrust in the EC grew marginally by 3.2 percentage points from Round 4 (2008) to Round 5 (2012). However, We witness a sudden spike in public mistrust in the EC to conduct free and fair elections in the Round 6 (2015) survey, representing a 24.1 percentage points growth in public mistrust in the EC. It is worth noting that the Round 6 (2015) survey was conducted following the controversial presidential and parliamentary election in 2012. According to [19, 20], in the period leading up to Ghana’s general elections on December 7, 2012, an implausibly large number of names appeared on the voter register. To curtail this situation, the EC adopted biometric technology to aid in voter

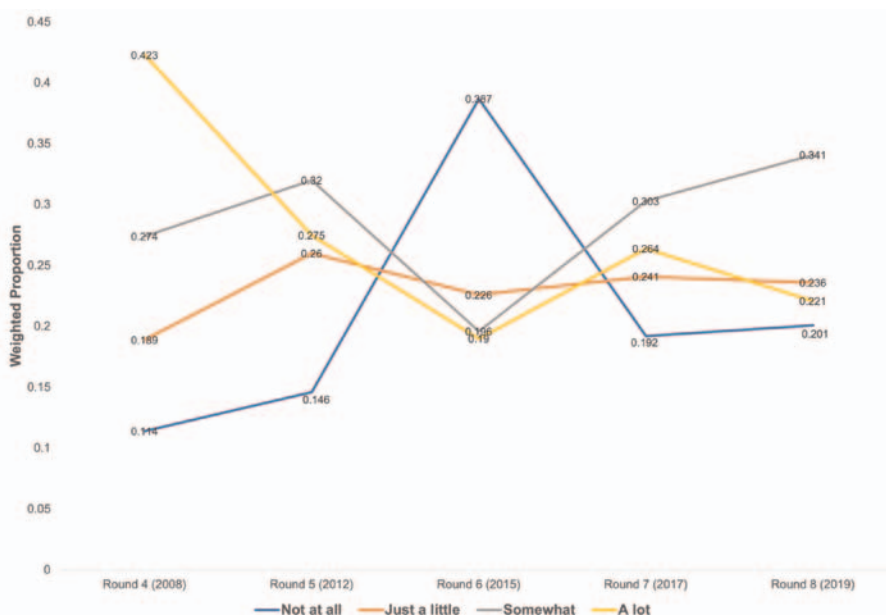


Figure 1.
 Trend in public trust in national electoral commission (EC).

card registration, de-duplicate data, reduce the incidence of multiple registrations, and authenticate voters' identities on Election Day [21].²

To prepare for Election Day, the EC distributed biometric verification machines to the country's 26,000 polling stations and 7500 backup machines in case of equipment failures [20, 21]. As promising as it sounded in theory as a way to reduce fraud, the practical implementation of the technology verification system faced a series of problems. Some verification devices failed to identify voters' biometric data, and some machines failed due to battery overheating and exhaustion [21]. As a result of the malfunction of the machines, some voters could not vote. The EC, therefore, extended voting to the next day. In addition to biometric authentication problems, the general public raised credibility issues regarding vote-tallying, recording, and ballot stuffing. These election irregularities were more common in polling stations affected by the malfunctioning of the biometric verification machines relative to those that did not suffer from these machine breakdowns [20, 21].

The incumbent National Democratic Congress (NDC) party's flagbearer at the time, John Dramani Mahama, was declared the winner with marginal votes. However, the main opposition party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), led by Nana Akufo-Addo, accused the EC of results tampering and filed a petition at the Ghanaian Supreme Court to review the election outcome [20]. The election petition led to significant changes in Ghana's electoral system that helped ensure a higher level of transparency and legitimacy in collating the results of the 2016 elections. The ambitious move by the EC to improve on the existing technology before the next general elections may have partly instilled some level of public trust, evidenced in the drop in mistrust of the EC in the Round 7 (2017) wave.

5.2.2 Main independent variables

We obtain our primary independent variable of interest from the CODEO report [16], which states the exact constituencies and districts in which CODEO placed election observers. These observers consisted of diverse ordinary Ghanaian citizen groups (typically school teachers and college students) and the selection of constituencies to place election observers was based on four main criteria: (1) regional representation based on the number of constituencies in each region, (2) constituencies whose margins of victory for the three previous elections (2004, 2008, and 2012) portended a keenly contested polls in December 2016, (3) constituencies that have a record of a high incidence of violence and areas identified as violence-prone, and (4) constituencies that are traditional strongholds of competing political parties. Based on this deployment criteria, 7000 non-partisan CODEO observers were deployed to 275 constituencies and 28,992 polling stations to observe and monitor the general elections across the country. Out of the 7000 observers recruited, 1500 were assigned to CODEO's parallel vote tabulation (PVT) sample polling stations. Another 2500 observers were assigned to a general sample of polling stations, and 1500 observers were assigned to a sample of flashpoint polling stations selected from constituencies identified by the EC as prone to violence. Also, 750 observers were deployed to

² The EC utilizes biometric machines to verify voters' identities at polling stations on election day. However, voters still cast their votes using paper ballots. The electoral management body identified roughly 8000 double registrations, of which 6000 were found to be deliberate, during the 6-week biometric registration process in the spring of 2012 [20, 22].

randomly selected polling stations in constituencies where the NPP and the NDC traditionally held seats. Another 750 more observers were deployed to polling stations in competitive constituencies, based on data from the 2008 and 2012 elections, where neither party could maintain a seat for more than one election cycle. The observers were required to file their observation reports at five different periods during the election day – from arrival through to the opening of the polling station, voting, counting, and declaration of results. We provide the observer deployment statistics in **Table A.1** in the appendix.

We merge the CODEO data with the AFROB data at the district level for the analytical study.³ We generate five primary independent variables. The first is *Observed Polling Station (% total polling stations)*, which is equal to the aggregate polling stations with CODEO observers (i.e., PVT + General/Over sampled + Flashpoints + Competitive + Strongholds Polling Stations) divided by the total number of polling stations in the respective districts. Aside from accounting for the differences in the size of districts, dividing this variable by the total polling stations in each district captures the share of total polling stations with CODEO observers rather than the number of CODEO observers in each district. We pooled all the categories of polling stations as our first main independent variable to have a broad picture of the relationship between the presence of election observers with public trust in the EC irrespective of the type of polling station.

We constructed the second main independent variable which is the *Non Purposive Polling Station (% total polling stations)*, by summing up PVT Polling Stations and General/Over Sampled Polling Stations divided by the total number of polling stations in the respective districts. We combined the two categories of polling stations because CODEO used comparable sampling techniques to deploy election observers in both groups. Moreover, aggregating the two groups of polling stations increases the likelihood of respondents being in a district with an election observer that falls under one of the deployment criteria.

The third main independent variable is *Stronghold Polling Stations (% total polling stations)*, which is equal to CODEO observed stronghold polling stations divided by the total number of polling stations in each district.

The fourth is *Competitive Polling Stations (% total polling stations)*, which is equal to CODEO observed Competitive polling stations divided by the total number of polling stations per district. The last primary independent variable is *Flashpoint Polling Stations (% total polling stations)*, which is equal to CODEO observed flashpoint polling stations divided by the total number of polling stations per district.

We constructed these other four primary independent variables because the first primary independent variable may obscure significant variations in the trust in the EC because of its highly aggregated nature. Local electoral competition significantly shapes the response of political actors to election observers and consequently could determine the attitudes towards the EC [7]. For instance, competitive, stronghold, and flashpoint polling stations have distinct characteristics and dynamics that differentiate

³ We merged the two datasets at the district level because the AFROB data does not identify respondents at the polling station or constituency levels. The district identifier is the identifying variable that joins the CODEO data to the AFROB data. We note here that, out of the 216 districts in Ghana, the AFROB survey covered 171 districts in the Round 7 wave. We recorded a 100% success matching rate between the two datasets.

them from each other. Therefore, the perception of voters in these polling stations could be significantly different.

In **Table A.2**, approximately 1 out of every 4 polling stations (25%) in Ghana had CODEO observers. The share of non-purposive polling stations observed by CODEO stood at 14 percent. Additionally, roughly 1 out of every 20 polling stations (5%) and 3 out of every 100 polling stations (3%) were flagged as flashpoint polling stations and stronghold and competitive polling stations, respectively, and CODEO observers were deployed to these hotspots.

5.2.3 Covariates

Socio-demographic, socio-economic, civic engagement, political climate, and other sample-related characteristics of the respondents pertinent to our investigation are also presented in **Table A.2**. The aggregate sample shows that the distribution of male-to-female respondents is almost equal. Tabulating gender by their responses to the perception of public trust in the EC shows that the average male respondent is more likely to express “a lot” of trust in the EC than the average female respondent. Additionally, rural dwellers are more likely to be in “a lot”, “somewhat”, “just a little”, and “not at all” trust categories, 34.66, 21.33, 13.61, and 13.38% respectively. On the other hand, urban dwellers are less likely to express trust towards the EC.

In measuring political interest, We rely on the AFROB question that asks respondents how often they discuss political matters with friends or family. In the sample, most Ghanaians responded to occasionally discussing politics with friends or families (49.49%), while about 17.64% of Ghanaians responded to frequently discussing politics with friends or families. These statistics suggest that politics is a topic of interest and discussion for most Ghanaians. Even though they are occasional, discussions about politics are likely to occur within the context of personal relationships and social networks. In terms of the dependent variable, respondents who frequently discuss politics with their social networks are more likely to report “no trust” in the EC (22.77%) than having “somewhat” or “a lot” of trust in the EC. In essence, Ghanaians who are more politically engaged hold the EC to a high-performance standard and may be critical of their evaluation of the EC.

We consider the economic well-being of respondents in this study. The literature highlights that income is an essential determinant of trust. However, the AFROB data does not capture the income variable of respondents. Therefore, we rely on respondents’ present living conditions as an alternative measure of income. In the aggregate sample, the majority of Ghanaians (51.78%) described their present living conditions as bad. In contrast, 38% described their present living conditions as good, with only 10.22% reporting neutral present living conditions. These numbers suggest that the average Ghanaian is experiencing difficult living conditions, such as food insecurity or even lack of access to healthcare at the time of the survey.

Table A.2 shows that most Ghanaians are satisfied with the current democracy. For example, 4 out of 5 Ghanaians are satisfied with democracy in Ghana (79.96%), while only 1 out of 5 is dissatisfied. These results indicate a relatively high level of satisfaction with democracy in Ghana, particularly compared to other countries in the sub-region. Not surprisingly, about 81.02% of respondents who are satisfied with Ghana’s democracy expressed strong legitimacy for the EC relative to 18.98% of the dissatisfied respondents. Along the lines of political affinity, we find that roughly 67.82% of sampled respondents voted for the New Patriotic Party (NPP), while 29.60 and 2.58% of sampled respondents voted for the National Democratic Party (NDC) and Other political parties, respectively, in the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections. Within the “a lot”

trust category, it can be seen that supporters of the winning party (NPP) expressed much trust in the EC compared to the NDC supporters and supporters of other political parties. Contrary to our expectations, a look at political affinity across the public trust categories, we find that the average respondent who voted for NPP and other political parties is most likely to have no trust in the EC.

According to the AFROB data, most Ghanaians perceive the EC of Ghana to be at least somewhat corrupt. Specifically, roughly 1 out of 10 Ghanaians (9.84%) do not see EC officials as corrupt, while 3 out of 5 Ghanaians (60.47%) argue that some of the EC officials are corrupt. In contrast, just 9.74% of Ghanaians (roughly 1 out of 10 respondents) see all the EC officials as corrupt. We also find that among Ghanaians who perceive all EC officials as corrupt, the majority of them expressed “just a little” (7.29%) to no trust (25.93%) in the EC. These statistics suggest that the perception of corruption within the electoral management body could alter or influence the public’s trust in the institution.

We also account for the legitimacy and credibility of the national elections in our study. In the sample, approximately 7 out of 10 respondents said they believed the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections were completely free and fair, with only 3 out of 10 disagreeing. Also, most respondents are of Akan ethnic background (52.09%), followed by Other Ghanaians (28.95%) and the rest of the ethnic groups. Dagombas and Ewe/Anglos are more likely to fall in the “a lot” trust category, with Akans and Others more likely to fall in the “not at all” and “somewhat” trust categories, respectively. Additionally, we consider the region that the respondents originate from in Ghana. As expected, most respondents come from the southern region of Ghana, followed by the Northern and Volta regions. The average respondent in the sample is roughly 38 years old, with older respondents expressing much trust in the EC. Additionally, the educational level of respondents is inversely related to the public trust levels. Respondents with higher educational levels are likely to mistrust the EC. Likewise, respondents belonging to the “not at all” trust category had the most exposure to media news (**Table 1**) (on average 6.14).

	Not at all		Just a little		Somewhat		A lot		Aggregate	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Total observers (% total polling stations)	0.26	0.07	0.24	0.07	0.24	0.07	0.25	0.078	0.25	0.08
Non purposive observers (% total polling stations)	0.14	0.02	0.14	0.01	0.14	0.01	0.14	0.01	0.14	0.01
Flashpoint observers (% total polling stations)	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.05	0.07
Stronghold observers (% total polling stations)	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05
Competitive observers (% total polling stations)	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03
Age	36.74	15.14	37.05	14.25	36.68	14.51	39.23	16.23	37.82	15.26
Education	3.76	1.92	3.64	2.00	3.59	2.28	3.21	2.30	3.46	2.18
Media	6.14	2.79	5.99	2.80	6.04	2.77	5.71	2.84	5.86	2.86

Notes: This is an abridged version of the summary statistics. The full summary statistics are presented in A.2 in the appendix.

Table 1.
Summary statistics by trust level for the EC of Ghana.

6. Empirical framework

This research aims to empirically investigate the relationship between the presence of election observers at polling stations and citizens' degree of trust in the EC. For the model, we employ the ordinal logistic estimator primarily because of the ordinal nature of the response variable. We treat the response variable as ordinal under the assumption that the levels (or degree) of trust respondents have in the EC have a natural ordering ($0 = \text{Not at all}$, $1 = \text{Just a little}$, $2 = \text{Somewhat}$, $3 = \text{A lot}$), but the distances between adjacent levels are unknown, thus validating the choice of our estimator [23]. However, the ordinal logistic estimator imposes a strong assumption called the proportional odds (also called parallel lines or parallel regressions) assumption on the data [24].⁴ We apply the generalized ordered logistic model (also called partial proportional odds model) because not all variables met the proportional odds assumption.⁵

In general, the ordered logit specification begins with a latent variable measure. For this purpose, the latent variable is the true unobserved measure of the individual's trust in the EC. This can be specified as:

$$Y_i^* = \beta^* X_i + \epsilon_i \quad (1)$$

Where Y_i^* is a latent continuous variable measuring the actual trust level of the i th individual. X is a vector of explanatory variables which include individual and district level characteristics, β^* is a vector of unknown parameters, and ϵ_i is the random error term. The observed trust levels are modeled as follows:

$$Y_i = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{if } -\infty < Y_i^* < \delta_1 \text{ Not at all} \\ 1 & \text{if } \delta_1 < Y_i^* < \delta_2 \text{ Just a little} \\ 2 & \text{if } \delta_2 < Y_i^* < \delta_3 \text{ Somewhat} \\ 3 & \text{if } Y_i^* > \delta_3 \text{ A lot} \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

Where δ_k are unknown thresholds to be estimated. When the proportional odds assumption holds, it implies that the relationship between any pairs of trust levels is the same. This also means that the thresholds are fixed for all the explanatory variables in vector X . Some of the variables violate this assumption thereby validating the use of a generalized logit model. Since ϵ_i follows a logistic distribution, the probability of Y^* greater than any threshold δ_k is written as:

$$P(Y_i^* > \delta_k) = \frac{\exp(X'_{1i}\beta_1 + X'_{2i}\beta_{2j} - k_j)}{1 + \exp(X'_{1i}\beta_1 + X'_{2i}\beta_{2j} - k_j)} \quad k = 0,1,2,3 \quad (3)$$

⁴ The proportional odds model is a special case of the generalized model, which assumes that the coefficient of the explanatory variables does not change with the point at which the categories of the response variable are dichotomized. In other words, the coefficients of the explanatory variables remain constant across categories (except for the intercept) [24].

⁵ In this study, We used the Brant test to test for the proportional odds assumption. Some of the variables violated this assumption, demonstrating the need for the generalized ordered logit model. See [23–25] for more thorough details on the methodology.

Where β_1 is a vector of parameters for variables (X_{1i}) that follow the proportional odds assumption and β_{2j} is a vector of parameters that vary at different levels of trust for the vector of variables X_{2i} that violate the proportional odds assumption.

7. Results and discussion

Before presenting the results, we begin with a graphical presentation of the distribution of the presence of CODEO observers and the perception of trust for the EC by districts. **Figure 2** displays the average Total Observers (% total polling stations) for each district, while **Figure 3** shows the average public trust in the EC at the district level.

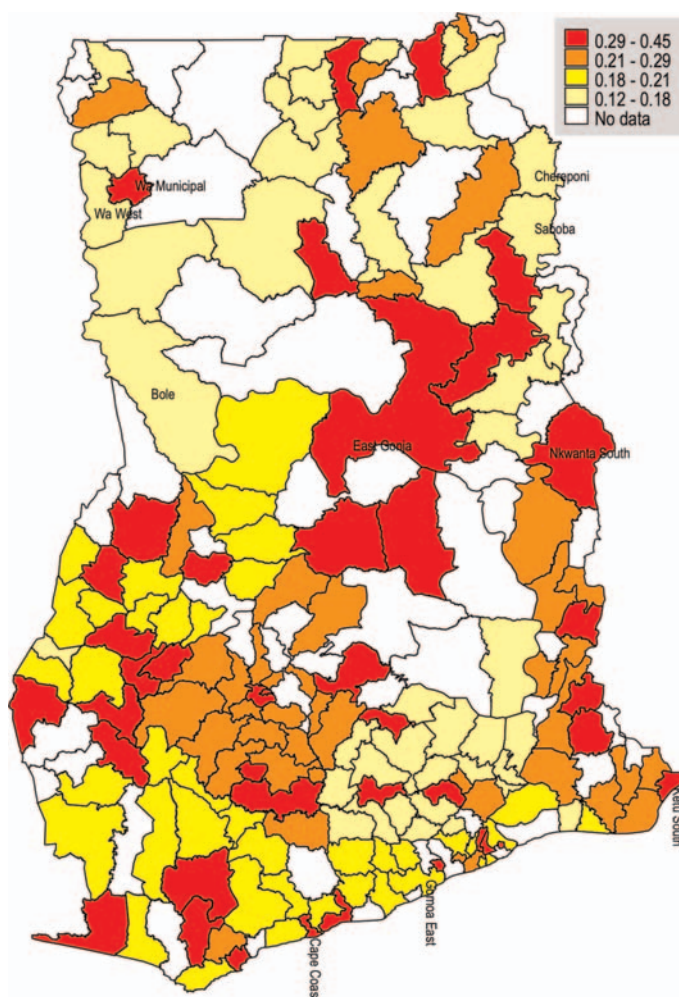


Figure 2.
Spatial distribution of the share of total observed polling stations per district. We normalize the data by taking the percentage of the total polling stations with CODEO observers in each district for analytical and direct comparison. The unshaded areas represent the districts not covered by the AFROB survey. Thus, the unshaded areas fall outside the scope of this study. From the figure, we observe a modest level of dispersion around the mean, with a few districts having a high percentage of polling stations with CODEO observers.

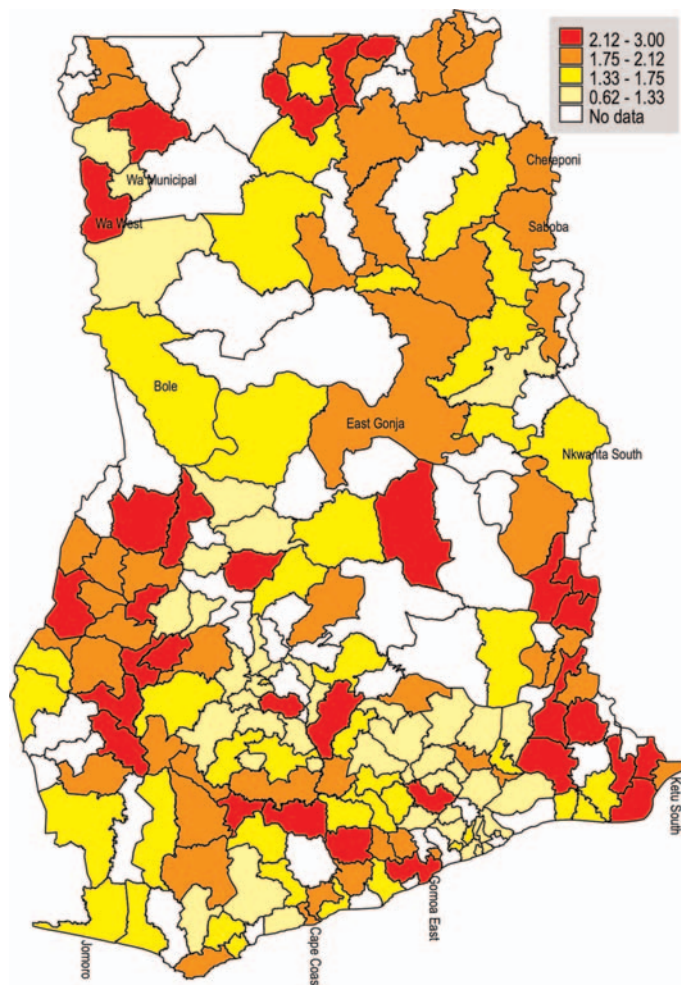


Figure 3. Spatial distribution of average trust levels for EC by district. The unshaded areas represent the districts not covered by the AFROB survey. Thus, the unshaded areas fall outside the scope of this study. From the figure, we observe a modest level of dispersion around the mean, with a few dotted districts having a high level of trust for the EC of Ghana.

From **Figure 2**, we observe a modest dispersion of Total Observers (% total polling stations) around its mean, with a few districts having a high share of polling stations with CODEO observers. We see much variation in the perception of trust at the district level in **Figure 3**. Comparing **Figures 2** and **3** reveals an interesting pattern. In districts with high shares of observed polling stations, the average respondents also reported having lower trust in the EC. For example, districts like Wa Municipal, Nkwanta South, Jomoro, and Cape Coast had a high share of observed polling stations (see **Figure 2**). However, the average respondent living in the same districts perceived the EC as an untrustworthy electoral institution (see **Figure 2**). There is a sharp contrast in the color scheme when we compare the two figures. We note here that this pictorial evidence does not account for other individual-level characteristics, so they only provide a limited understanding of how the presence of election observers is associated with the perception of trust in the EC. We present the empirical results and offer detailed discussions.

The estimation of the generalized ordered logit model produces estimates of log odds. However, we only report the respective marginal effects for ease of interpretation. Abridged versions of the marginal effects are presented in **Tables 2–6**.⁶ The marginal effect measures the change in the probability of not trusting the EC conditional on observed characteristics. The generalized ordered logit model results can be thought of as collapsing the outcome variable into two categories and a series of binary logistic regressions are run. For the sake of brevity and to conveniently illustrate the direction of the primary independent variables, we present only estimates that compare the state of no trust in the EC to any level of trust (“Not at all” is compared to “Just a little”, “Somewhat”, and “A lot” (0 vs. 1 + 2 + 3)).⁷ This implies that the state of any level of trust in the EC is the reference category for the marginal effects reported. Hence, a positive marginal effect will imply an increase in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC, and a negative marginal effect implies a decrease in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC.

All regressions include ethnicity and regional fixed effects to account for any variations that may arise from the regional and ethnic distribution of the data. We also cluster the standard errors at the district level. This level of clustering is necessary because although the Afrobarometer data is at the individual level, we measure election

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Observed polling stations (% total polling station)	0.005*** (0.002)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.001)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	–0.000 (0.001)	–0.000 (0.001)	–0.000 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	–0.043*** (0.015)	–0.040*** (0.014)	–0.039*** (0.014)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.049** (0.022)	0.036*** (0.020)	0.036* (0.020)
Educational level	–0.005 (0.006)	–0.007 (0.006)	–0.007 (0.006)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District

Notes: This is an abridged version of the marginal effects. The full results are presented in A.3 of the appendix. The reference category is the state of any level of trust in the EC (1,2,3). A positive value implies an increase in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$

Table 2.
Share of total observed polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

⁶ The full estimates of the marginal effects are contained in **Tables A.3–A.6** in the appendix.

⁷ Full estimation results can be made available upon request. However, the conclusions we make are symmetrical to the remaining series of binary logistic results.

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Non-purposive polling stations (% of total polling stations)	0.010** (0.005)	0.012*** (0.004)	0.012*** (0.004)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	-0.043*** (0.015)	0.039*** (0.014)	-0.038*** (0.014)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.049** (0.022)	0.034* (0.020)	0.034* (0.020)
Educational level	-0.004 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
<i>Notes: This is an abridged version of the marginal effects. The full results are presented in A.4 of the appendix. The reference category is the state of any level of trust in the EC (1,2,3). A positive value implies an increase in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC. Standard errors are in parentheses.</i> *** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$			

Table 3.
Share of observed non-purposive polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

observation at the district level. Hence the variation in the dependent variable is at the district level, necessitating the clustering of the standard errors at the district level. This accounts for any within-district correlations which can cause an underestimation or overestimation of the standard errors. It is also intuitive to note that since we do not observe the exact polling stations where respondents voted, what we are measuring is the likelihood of exposure to election observation rather than actual exposure.

Table 2 presents the result for the first primary independent variable, the share of total observed polling stations. In the first column of the table, we control for demographic characteristics of respondents such as age, gender, residency, and level of education. All else equal, a 1% increase in the share of total observed polling stations is associated with a 0.5 percentage points increase in distrust in the EC. In column 2, we control for additional covariates including respondents' exposure to the media, living conditions, interest in political issues, perception of how corrupt the electoral commission officials are, and respondents' view on the credibility of the last election. The primary finding largely remains unchanged after controlling for these covariates. This implies that the results are not significantly driven by variations in any of these observed covariates. In column 3, we also control for a respondent's political affiliation. Again, the substantive findings remain the same.

The empirical results support the second hypothesis, positing that districts with higher shares of polling stations with election observers will have a lower level of trust in EMBs.

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Stronghold polling stations (% of total polling stations)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.002)	0.011*** (0.002)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	-0.001* (0.006)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	-0.042* (0.014)	0.038*** (0.013)	-0.036*** (0.013)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.050** (0.022)	0.035* (0.019)	0.043** (0.019)
Educational level	-0.005 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.004)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District

Notes: This is an abridged version of the marginal effects. The full results are presented in A.5 of the appendix. The reference category is the state of any level of trust in the EC (1,2,3). A positive value implies an increase in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC. Standard errors are in parentheses.
*** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$

Table 4.
Share of observed stronghold polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

We attempt to unmask the heterogeneity in the baseline model by re-running the set of specifications in **Table 2** on the four disaggregations of the primary independent variable.⁸ **Table 3** provides the results for the first disaggregated main independent variable, *Non-Purposive Polling Station (% total polling stations)*. Column 1 of the table shows that a 1% increase in the share of observed non-purposive polling stations is associated with a 1 percentage point increase in the probability of respondents mistrusting the EC, controlling for demographic characteristics. The coefficient of the key variable is statistically significant at the 5% significance level. Turning to columns 2 and 3, we find that the coefficient on *Non-Purposive Polling Station (% total polling stations)* marginally increases by 0.2 percentage points in the more saturated models indicating that public mistrust in the EC tends to grow in districts with higher shares of observed non-purposive polling stations when we account for other important variables.

Table 4 presents the result for the share of observed stronghold polling stations. In column 1 where we control for the demographic characteristics, a 1% increase in the share of stronghold polling stations with election observers is associated with a 1.1% percentage points increase in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC. The coefficient reduces slightly to 0.9 percentage points when more controls are added in columns 2 and 3. In areas known as “stronghold” polling stations, a specific political

⁸ In the estimation output for **Tables 4–6**, we included dummy variables to account for sampled districts that have stronghold, competitive and flashpoint polling stations respectively.

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Competitive polling stations (% of total polling stations)	–0.016*** (0.005)	–0.012*** (0.005)	–0.009* (0.008)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	–0.001 (0.001)	–0.000 (0.001)	–0.001 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	–0.041* (0.014)	0.036*** (0.013)	–0.036*** (0.013)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.047** (0.022)	0.033* (0.020)	0.039** (0.019)
Educational level	–0.005 (0.006)	–0.007 (0.006)	0.002 (0.004)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
<i>Notes: This is an abridged version of the marginal effects. The full results are presented in A.6 of the appendix. The reference category is the state of any level of trust in the EC (1,2,3). A positive value implies an increase in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC. Standard errors are in parentheses.</i> *** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$			

Table 5.
Share of observed competitive polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

party has a long-standing dominance. It is often observed that individuals, particularly those from opposing parties, suspect that the electoral commission might be favoring the dominant party in such areas. The hypothesis suggests that the presence of election observers might reinforce this perception, leading to reduced levels of trust in the EC.

Next, we present the results for the share of competitive polling stations with election observers in **Table 5**. In contrast to the previous findings, we discover that the share of observed competitive polling stations is negatively associated with mistrust in the EC. In the first column where we control for demographic characteristics, a 1% increase in the share of competitive polling stations with election observers is associated with a 1.6 percentage points decrease in the relative probability that respondents do not trust the EC. The coefficient decreases (in absolute terms) slightly to 1.2 percentage points when more control variables are added in columns 2 and 3. This means that for the competitive polling stations, the results align with the first hypothesis that a high percentage of polling stations with election observers is associated with higher levels of trust in the EC. Competing political parties keenly follow and monitor election activities in competitive polling stations as these polling stations often play a crucial role in determining election outcomes. Candidates representing the two dominant political parties in Ghana have a fair chance of winning majority votes in a constituency if the polling stations in a constituency are competitive. In such areas, there is a higher incentive for political actors to engage in fraudulent electoral activities and the belief is that these activities cannot be committed without the complicity of the officials of the EC. It is logical to assume that respondents in such

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Flashpoint polling stations (% of total polling stations)	0.001 (0.010)	0.000 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.000 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	−0.043*** (0.015)	−0.036*** (0.014)	−0.037*** (0.013)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.049** (0.022)	0.035*** (0.020)	0.038* (0.019)
Educational level	−0.004	−0.007	0.001
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
Notes: This is an abridged version of the marginal effects. The full results are presented in A.7 of the appendix. The reference category is the state of any level of trust in the EC (1,2,3). A positive value implies an increase in the relative probability of mistrust in the EC. Standard errors are in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$			

Table 6.
Share of observed flashpoint polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

stations might have a certain degree of mistrust towards the EC. In this context, the presence of election observers may contribute to building trust in the Electoral Commission. The results emphasize the heterogeneous relationship between the activities of election observers and EMBs.

Lastly, we estimate the model for the share of observed flashpoint polling stations in **Table 6**. Flashpoint polling stations are polling stations that are prone to electoral violence and other malpractices, making them significantly different from other polling stations. As shown in **Table 6**, we find the coefficient on *Flashpoint (% total polling stations)* not statistically different from zero.

Results from the control variables follow the literature. All else equal, the results show that males are more trusting of the Electoral Commission than females. This aligns with the general belief that women are less trusting than men [26]. The findings of Houston and Harding [27] also show that men are generally more trusting of public administrators than women. Urban dwellers are also less trusting of the EC compared to rural dwellers. This aligns with the findings of McKay et al. [28] that for countries with low levels of development, urban dwellers have lower levels of political trust. Also, belonging to volunteering associations is generally associated with a greater level of trust in the EC. This corresponds to the findings of Van Ingen and Bekkers [29] that civic engagement generally makes people more trusting. Bekkers [30] however disagrees and argues that trust is higher among volunteers because of selective attrition. That is, persons with low trust levels are more likely to quit volunteering. We also find that the perception that officials of the EC are corrupt is associated with lower levels of trust in the EC. Finally, respondents' view on the credibility of the 2016 general

election is positively associated with trust in the EC. That is the more respondents believe the election was credible the more they trust the Electoral Commission.

8. Conclusions

This study aimed to examine the relationship between trust in electoral management bodies and the presence of local election observers. Our main finding, based on data from the AFROB survey Ghana Round 7 and CODEO 2016 election observers data, showed that public trust in the Electoral Commission of Ghana declines as the share of polling stations with local election observers increases, *ceteris paribus*.

This finding is however not homogenous to all categories of polling stations in Ghana. We segmented our analysis into four different types of polling stations namely; non-purposive, stronghold, competitive, and flashpoint polling stations. We found that whereas the probability that respondents' level of trust in the Electoral Commission of Ghana decreases in response to a percentage increase in the share of polling stations with election observers in non-purposive and stronghold polling stations in a district, the story is the converse in competitive polling stations. In competitive polling stations, an increase in the share observed polling stations in a district is rather correlated with an increase in the levels of trust for the EC. For flashpoint polling stations (violence-prone polling stations), our results are statistically insignificant. Our main finding is contrary to popular expectations by policymakers and international donors who believe that the continuous use of election observers as a way of checking electoral fraud and reducing electoral-related violence will consequently increase perceptions of trust for EMBs.

Our results provide a further variation on the relationship between election observers and public perception of electoral management bodies which brings into question the level of homogeneity of the effects of election observation on the free and fairness of elections, electoral fraud, and electoral violence in previous works.

In light of these findings, it is essential for policymakers to re-examine their strategies for building trust in electoral management bodies. It may be more effective to focus on improving the institutional capacity of electoral management bodies by investing in training, resources, and technology, rather than relying solely on election observers. Additionally, there may be a need to explore alternative methods of election observation that could provide more meaningful feedback and foster greater public trust in the electoral process.

Appendix

These appendices are intended as a supplement to the paper to be published online in some form: Either on the journal's server or on the author's personal web pages.

A.1 CODEO Observers Report

This appendix tabulate both the number of CODEO observers deployed on election day, as indicated in the CODEO 2016 final observation report, and the observers retained in the sample after merging the AFROB survey with the CODEO dataset.

See **Table A.8** for the description of variables.

Observer category	Observers deployed (CODEO report)	Observers deployed (sample)
PVT polling stations	1500	1186
General/over sampled polling stations	2500	1973
Flashpoint polling stations	1500	1211
Competitive polling stations	750	590
Stronghold polling stations	750	612
Total	7000	5572

Notes: We report the number of observers deployed on election day in column two, as indicated in the CODEO 2016 final observation report. Column three shows the observers deployed in the sample after merging the AFROB survey with the CODEO dataset. The discrepancy between the two columns is primarily because the AFROB survey only covers some of the districts reported in the CODEO data.

Table A.1.
CODEO observers deployed on election day.

	Not at all		Just a little		Somewhat		A lot		Aggregate	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Male	50.23	214	46.07	264	51.01	354	54.48	316	50.51	1148
Female	49.77	212	53.93	309	48.99	340	45.52	264	49.49	1125
Rural	13.38	57	13.61	78	21.33	148	34.66	201	21.29	484
Urban	86.62	369	86.39	495	78.67	546	65.34	379	78.71	1789
Discuss politics										
Never	29.11	124	33.33	191	33.00	229	35.52	206	33.00	750
Occasionally	48.12	205	50.09	287	51.44	357	47.07	273	49.36	1122
Frequently	22.77	97	16.58	95	15.56	108	17.41	101	17.64	401
Present living condition										
Bad and very bad	49.30	210	52.10	298	49.86	346	55.61	322	51.78	1176
Neutral	9.86	42	9.62	55	11.24	78	9.84	57	10.22	232
Good and very good	40.85	174	38.29	219	38.90	270	34.54	200	38.00	863
Satisfaction with democracy										
No	23.50	98	19.75	112	19.07	131	18.98	108	20.04	449
Yes	76.50	319	80.25	455	80.93	556	81.02	461	79.96	1791
Political affinity										
Winner (NPP)	73.84	206	67.95	265	65.79	327	66.12	281	67.82	1079
Loser (NDC)	22.58	63	29.49	115	32.19	160	31.29	133	29.60	471
Others	3.58	10	2.56	10	2.01	10	2.59	11	2.58	41
Corrupt EC Officials										
None	4.94	20	4.30	23	7.10	45	23.47	115	9.84	203
Some of them	47.16	191	68.41	366	64.83	411	57.14	280	60.47	1248

	Not at all		Just a little		Somewhat		A lot		Aggregate	
	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N
Most of them	21.98	89	20.00	107	22.40	142	15.10	74	19.96	412
All of them	25.93	105	7.29	39	5.68	36	4.29	21	9.74	201
Credibility of elections										
Not free	4.20	17	3.30	18	3.13	21	1.27	7	2.90	63
Free and fair (major problems)	5.68	23	5.68	31	5.97	40	3.99	22	5.34	116
Free and fair (with minor problems)	21.48	87	23.08	126	23.73	159	18.66	103	21.86	475
Completely free and fair	68.64	278	67.95	371	67.16	450	76.09	420	69.90	1519
Ethnicity										
Other	24.88	106	31.24	179	30.26	210	28.10	163	28.95	658
Akan	62.21	265	55.32	317	48.99	340	45.17	262	52.09	1184
Ewe/Anglo	11.03	47	9.42	54	14.84	103	19.83	115	14.03	319
Dagomba	1.88	8	4.01	23	5.91	41	6.90	40	4.93	112
Region										
Volta	2.35	10	4.54	26	9.94	69	14.14	82	8.23	187
Northern	8.45	36	14.14	81	17.72	123	17.76	103	15.09	343
Southern	89.20	380	81.33	466	72.33	502	68.10	395	76.68	1743
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Total observers (% total polling stations)	0.26	0.07	0.24	0.07	0.24	0.07	0.25	0.078	0.25	0.08
Non purposive observers (% total polling stations)	0.14	0.02	0.14	0.01	0.14	0.01	0.14	0.01	0.14	0.01
Flashpoint observers (% total polling stations)	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.06	0.07	0.05	0.07
Stronghold observers (% total polling stations)	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.05
Competitive observers (% total polling stations)	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03
Age	36.74	15.14	37.05	14.25	36.68	14.51	39.23	16.23	37.82	15.26
Education	3.76	1.92	3.64	2.00	3.59	2.28	3.21	2.30	3.46	2.18
Media	6.14	2.79	5.99	2.80	6.04	2.77	5.71	2.84	5.86	2.86

Table A.2.
Summary statistics by trust level for the EC of Ghana.

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Observed polling stations (% total polling station)	0.005***	0.005***	0.005***
	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.001)

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	−0.000 (0.001)	−0.000 (0.001)	−0.000 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	−0.043*** (0.015)	−0.040*** (0.014)	−0.039*** (0.014)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.049** (0.022)	0.036*** (0.020)	0.036* (0.020)
Educational level	−0.005 (0.006)	−0.007 (0.006)	−0.007 (0.006)
Media exposure		−0.000 (0.003)	−0.000 (0.003)
Living conditions (Baseline: Very bad)			
<i>Neutral</i>		0.008 (0.026)	0.008 (0.026)
<i>Good & very good</i>		0.025 (0.017)	0.024 (0.017)
Voluntary member association		−0.065*** (0.014)	−0.064*** (0.014)
Political interest (Baseline: Never)			
<i>Sometimes</i>		0.003 (0.014)	0.003 (0.019)
<i>Frequently</i>		0.037 (0.028)	0.037 (0.028)
Satisfaction with democracy		−0.013 (0.024)	−0.013 (0.024)
Corrupt EC officials (Baseline: None)			
<i>Some of them</i>		0.051 (0.037)	0.051 (0.037)
<i>Most of them</i>		0.105** (0.052)	0.105** (0.052)
<i>All of them</i>		0.419*** (0.064)	0.421*** (0.064)
Credibility of elections (Baseline: Not free and fair)			
<i>Free and fair, with major problems</i>		−0.051 (0.031)	−0.053* (0.032)
<i>Free and fair, but with minor problems</i>		−0.093** (0.028)	−0.096*** (0.028)

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
<i>Completely free and fair</i>		–0.100**	–0.11**
		(0.045)	(0.048)
Affinity to political party (Baseline: Others)			
<i>NPP</i>			–0.031
			(0.048)
<i>NDC</i>			–0.037
			(0.043)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
<i>Standard errors in parentheses.</i>			
<i>***$p < 0.01$**$p < 0.05$*$p < 0.1$.</i>			

Table A.3.
Share of total observed polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Non-purposive polling stations (% of total polling stations)	0.010**	0.012***	0.012***
	(0.005)	(0.004)	(0.004)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	–0.001	–0.000	–0.000
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	–0.043***	0.039***	–0.038***
	(0.015)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.049**	0.034*	0.034*
	(0.022)	(0.020)	(0.020)
Educational level	–0.004	–0.006	–0.006
	(0.006)	(0.006)	(0.006)
Media exposure		–0.000	–0.000
		(0.003)	(0.003)
Living conditions (Baseline: Very bad)			
<i>Neutral</i>		–0.008	0.007
		(0.025)	(0.025)

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
<i>Good & very good</i>		0.025 (0.017)	0.024 (0.017)
Voluntary member association		−0.064*** (0.014)	−0.063*** (0.014)
Political interest (Baseline: Never)			
<i>Sometimes</i>		0.003 (0.019)	0.002 (0.019)
<i>Frequently</i>		0.038 (0.03)	0.038 (0.027)
Satisfaction with democracy		−0.008 (0.023)	−0.008 (0.023)
Corrupt EC officials (Baseline: None)			
<i>Some of them</i>		0.091*** (0.031)	0.091*** (0.031)
<i>Most of them</i>		0.200*** (0.048)	0.201** (0.048)
<i>All of them</i>		0.465*** (0.065)	0.447*** (0.065)
Credibility of elections (Baseline: Not free and fair)			
<i>Free and fair, with major problems</i>		−0.042 (0.028)	−0.046 (0.028)
<i>Free and fair, but with minor problems</i>		−0.078** (0.026)	−0.081*** (0.026)
<i>Completely free and fair</i>		−0.137** (0.043)	−0.145*** (0.045)
Affinity to political party (Baseline: Others)			
<i>NPP</i>			−0.024 (0.044)
<i>NDC</i>			−0.033 (0.040)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
<i>Standard errors in parentheses.</i>			
<i>***$p < 0.01$**$p < 0.05$*$p < 0.1$.</i>			

Table A.4.
Share of observed non-purposive polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Stronghold polling stations (% of total polling stations)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.009*** (0.002)	0.011*** (0.002)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	-0.001* (0.006)	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.000 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	-0.042* (0.014)	0.038*** (0.013)	-0.036*** (0.013)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.050** (0.022)	0.035* (0.019)	0.043** (0.019)
Educational level	-0.005 (0.006)	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.004)
Media exposure		0.000 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)
Living conditions (Baseline: Very bad)			
<i>Neutral</i>		0.009 (0.026)	0.008 (0.027)
<i>Good & very good</i>		0.021 (0.018)	0.018 (0.019)
Voluntary member association		-0.061*** (0.013)	-0.060*** (0.014)
Political interest (Baseline: Never)			
<i>Sometimes</i>		0.004 (0.019)	0.001 (0.019)
<i>Frequently</i>		0.034 (0.026)	0.033 (0.027)
Satisfaction with democracy		-0.006 (0.022)	-0.008 (0.023)
Corrupt EC officials (Baseline: None)			
<i>Some of them</i>		0.088*** (0.031)	0.100*** (0.033)
<i>Most of them</i>		0.198*** (0.049)	0.207** (0.051)
<i>All of them</i>		0.448*** (0.065)	0.466*** (0.064)
Credibility of elections (Baseline: Not free and fair)			
<i>Free and fair, with major problems</i>		-0.050* (0.027)	-0.055* (0.030)

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
<i>Free and fair, but with minor problems</i>		−0.085*** (0.025)	−0.095*** (0.027)
<i>Completely free and fair</i>		−0.147*** (0.044)	−0.100*** (0.047)
Affinity to political party (Baseline: Others)			
<i>NPP</i>			−0.017 (0.051)
<i>NDC</i>			−0.019 (0.051)
<i>District with stronghold polling stations</i>			−0.024 (0.016)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
<i>Standard errors in parentheses.</i>			
<i>***$p < 0.01$**$p < 0.05$*$p < 0.1$.</i>			

Table A.5.
Share of observed stronghold polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Competitive polling stations (% of total polling stations)	−0.016*** (0.005)	−0.012*** (0.005)	−0.009* (0.008)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.000 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	−0.041* (0.014)	0.036*** (0.013)	−0.036*** (0.013)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.047** (0.022)	0.033* (0.020)	0.039** (0.019)
Educational level	−0.005 (0.006)	−0.007 (0.006)	0.002 (0.004)
Media exposure		0.000 (0.003)	−0.001 (0.003)
Living conditions (Baseline: Very bad)			
<i>Neutral</i>		0.013 (0.023)	0.011 (0.025)

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
<i>Good & very good</i>		0.022 (0.018)	0.018 (0.018)
Voluntary member association		–0.061*** (0.014)	–0.062*** (0.013)
Political interest (Baseline: Never)			
<i>Sometimes</i>		0.002 (0.019)	–0.002 (0.019)
<i>Frequently</i>		0.036 (0.026)	0.032 (0.026)
Satisfaction with democracy		–0.002 (0.021)	–0.001 (0.021)
Corrupt EC officials (Baseline: None)			
<i>Some of them</i>		0.093*** (0.031)	0.101*** (0.030)
<i>Most of them</i>		0.203*** (0.049)	0.209** (0.047)
<i>All of them</i>		0.455*** (0.065)	0.471*** (0.063)
Credibility of elections (Baseline: Not free and fair)			
<i>Free and fair, with major problems</i>		–0.055* (0.027)	–0.050* (0.030)
<i>Free and fair, but with minor problems</i>		–0.079*** (0.026)	–0.087*** (0.026)
<i>Completely free and fair</i>		–0.137*** (0.043)	–0.091** (0.045)
Affinity to political party (Baseline: Others)			
<i>NPP</i>			–0.006 (0.048)
<i>NDC</i>			–0.009 (0.048)
<i>District with competitive pooling stations</i>			–0.042 (0.028)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
Standard errors in parentheses. *** $p < 0.01$ ** $p < 0.05$ * $p < 0.1$.			

Table A.6.
Share of observed competitive polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
Variables	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]	[0 vs. 1, 2, 3]
Flashpoint polling stations (% of total polling stations)	0.001 (0.010)	0.000 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Demographic characteristics			
Age	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)	−0.000 (0.001)
Gender (1 = Male, 0 = Female)	−0.043*** (0.015)	−0.036*** (0.014)	−0.037*** (0.013)
Residency (1 = Urban, 0 = Rural)	0.049** (0.022)	0.035*** (0.020)	0.038* (0.019)
Educational level	−0.004 (0.006)	−0.007 (0.006)	0.001 (0.004)
Media exposure		−0.000 (0.003)	−0.001 (0.002)
Living conditions (Baseline: Very bad)			
<i>Neutral</i>		0.009 (0.025)	0.008 (0.025)
<i>Good & very good</i>		0.027 (0.018)	0.019 (0.018)
Voluntary member association		−0.063*** (0.014)	−0.059*** (0.014)
Political interest (Baseline: Never)			
<i>Sometimes</i>		0.002 (0.019)	0.003 (0.026)
<i>Frequently</i>		0.036 (0.028)	0.032 (0.026)
Satisfaction with democracy		−0.008 (0.023)	−0.010 (0.022)
Corrupt EC officials (Baseline: None)			
<i>Some of them</i>		0.091*** (0.031)	0.095*** (0.031)
<i>Most of them</i>		0.200*** (0.048)	0.191** (0.047)
<i>All of them</i>		0.463*** (0.066)	0.452*** (0.063)
Credibility of elections (Baseline: Not free and fair)			
<i>Free and fair, with major problems</i>		−0.041 (0.028)	−0.089 (0.026)

	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)	Not at all (0)
<i>Free and fair, but with minor problems</i>		–0.078** (0.026)	–0.089*** (0.0263)
<i>Completely free and fair</i>		–0.136*** (0.042)	–0.095** (0.045)
Affinity to political party (Baseline: Others)			
<i>NPP</i>			–0.016 (0.051)
<i>NDC</i>			–0.020 (0.046)
<i>District with flashpoint pooling stations</i>			0.027*** (0.004)
Observations	1417	1417	1417
Ethnicity and region fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Level of clustering of standard errors	District	District	District
<i>Standard errors in parentheses.</i>			
<i>***p < 0.01**p < 0.05*p < 0.1.</i>			

Table A.7.
Share of observed flashpoint polling stations on trust levels for the EC (marginal effects).

Variables	Definition and transformation	Data Source
Gender	1 for male and 0 for female	AFROB survey
Age (in years)	Respondent's age	AFROB survey
Residency	1 for respondent coming from an urban area and 0 for rural area	AFROB survey
Educational level	No formal education (0) to postgraduate education (9)	AFROB survey
Exposure to mass media	Sourced from the question "How often do you get news from the following sources: Radio? Television? Newspapers?" Scale is the row summation of the responses to the 3 questions	AFROB survey
Living conditions	Present living conditions: very bad and bad (1), neutral (2), good and very good (3)	AFROB survey
Voluntary member	Dummy for member/official leader of some other voluntary or community group	AFROB survey
Political interest	Sourced from the question "When you get together with your friends or family, would you say you discuss political matters". Never (0) to Frequently (2)	AFROB survey
Satisfaction with democracy		AFROB survey

Variables	Definition and transformation	Data Source
Corrupt EC officials	Sourced from the question “ <i>how many of the following people do you think are involved in corruption: Officials of the Electoral Commission (EC):</i> None (0), Some of them (1), Most of them (2), All of them (3)	AFROB survey
Credibility of elections	Sourced from the question “ <i>how would you rate the freeness and fairness of the last national election, held in 2016</i> ”: not free and fair (1) to completely free and fair (4)	AFROB survey
Affinity to political party	Sourced from the question “ <i>which party’s presidential candidate did you vote for in the recent 2016 presidential elections?</i> ” 0 = voted for New Patriotic Party (NPP), 1 = voted for New Democratic Party (NDC), 2 = Voted for others	AFROB survey
Ethnicity	Ethnicity dummy coded as Other, Akan, Ewe/Anglo, Dagomba	AFROB survey
Region	Coded into North (Northern, Upper West, or Upper East Region), South (Brong Ahafo, Ashanti, Western, Central, Eastern, or Greater Accra Region), and Volta region	AFROB survey
District	Dummy for residing in a particular district	AFROB survey
Observed polling stations (% total polling stations)	All CODEO observed polling stations as a share of total polling stations per district	CODEO
Non purposive polling station (% total polling stations)	CODEO Observed PVT and General/Over Sampled polling stations as a share of total polling stations per district	CODEO
Stronghold polling stations (% total polling stations)	CODEO Observed Stronghold polling stations as a share of total polling stations per district	CODEO
Competitive polling stations (% total polling stations)	CODEO Observed Competitive polling stations as a share of total polling stations	CODEO
Flashpoint polling stations (% total polling stations)	CODEO observed Flashpoint polling stations as a share of total polling stations	CODEO

Table A.8.
Compact glossary of variables used in this study.

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Social Media, Economic Well-Being and Satisfaction with Democracy in Africa

Mathieu Juliot Mpabe Bodjongo and Moustapha Fofana

Abstract

This chapter aims to examine the effect of social media and economic well-being on citizens' satisfaction with democracy in Africa. The analysis focuses on a sample of 35,590 people living in 34 African countries, drawn from data collected by Afrobarometer (2019). The econometric results, obtained using an ordered probit model with an endogenous variable, show that following news *via* social media significantly reduces satisfaction with democracy. Furthermore, people with a high level of objective or subjective economic well-being are less likely to be satisfied with democracy.

Keywords: social media, poverty, satisfaction, democracy, Africa

1. Introduction

This chapter examines the influence of social media and economic well-being on citizens' satisfaction with democracy in Africa. To achieve this objective, an ordered probit with an endogenous covariate is used and applied to the Afrobarometer 2019 data. The rationale for this study is the importance of citizens' satisfaction with democracy in assessing the success of a democratic system in implementing effective public policies to improve people's welfare [1]. Sen [2] considers democracy as an end in itself (intrinsic view) or as a means to improve social welfare (instrumental view). Traditionally, the notion of democracy has been associated with individual freedom, civil liberties and electoral competition. Democracy is supposed to a tool for improving the quality of public goods and services by making politicians respond to the expectations of their constituents in order to secure their re-election [3]. Other authors have shown that democracy contributes to improving of people's living conditions and life satisfaction [4–6].

Mbembe [7] denounces the poor progress made by African countries in terms of democracy. However, Sindjoun [8] argues that it is important not to overlook the contradictory dynamics of the construction of new political legitimacies issues in several African states. According to Afrobarometer (2019), about 68.01% of Africans absolutely support democracy, 12.98% think that democracy is not preferable in some situations, while 14.43% are totally opposed to democracy. In addition, some 44.51%

of Africans are fairly or very satisfied with democracy. At the same time, some 34.31% of Africans consider their personal living conditions to be fairly or very good, while only 13.70% of Africans do not live in poverty.

In addition, about 34.39% of Africans have access to the Internet and 34.72% are subscribers to social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and TikTok. The media is an important source of political information and a bridge between governments and citizens, as most people get their political information through different types of media use. This political information in the media can penetrate interpersonal political discussions and change people's interest in politics, thus influencing citizens' assessment of democracy. With the development of information technology, politics is increasingly mediated through different types of media use [9]. As Boulianne [10] points out, different types of media use (e.g. newspapers, television, radio and Internet) have different relationships with political interest because of differences in the effort required to use information sources, their ability to share information and the diversity of their content.

The literature has focused on the factors that explain citizens' satisfaction with democracy [11–23]. Among these factors, some studies have focused on the influence of economic well-being [11, 13–16, 18, 19]. Others have focused on the impact of the Internet [17] and, to our knowledge, only one study has examined the influence of information gathered through social media [12]. However, their findings show some differences, indicating that the debate on this topic is still ongoing.

In terms of geographical coverage, while these studies have been conducted in Asian countries and Europe, very little attention has been paid to African countries. There is often heterogeneity between these regions in terms of culture, population, language and economic and human development indicators [24]. The few studies that have examined at the explanatory factors of satisfaction with democracy in Africa [3, 25] have not examined the influence of social media or economic well-being. Moreover, Wantchekon and Taylor [3] used a sample of 16 countries from the 2005 Afrobarometer database and concluded that their results do not “allow conclusions to be drawn about how citizens of countries with autocratic regimes or civil wars would have reacted to democracy if it had been installed in their country”. Indeed, it should be noted that the authors excluded from their analysis countries that are not democracies or that are in a situation of political crisis or civil war. However, they acknowledge that “one cannot exclude a priori the existence of latent national characteristics that influence the establishment of a democratic regime and the appreciation of democracy by the average citizen once it is established”. Bratton and Mattes [25] based their study on survey data from three African countries: South Africa in 1997, Ghana in 1999 and Zambia in 1996.

To fill this gap, we will use the 2019 Afrobarometer database, which consists of 34 countries, for our study. It offers a diverse range in terms of democracy, including countries with low levels of democracy and countries in political crisis or civil war. Our sample is fairly representative of all African countries (63%) and the population size of the countries in our sample represents more than 70% of Africa's total population.¹ Economically, the GDP per capita in our sample is USD 5680 in purchasing power parity terms, while the average for sub-Saharan Africa is USD 4069.² Furthermore, our study uses the ordered probit model with an endogenous covariate to

⁹⁸ Read Mpabe [24]. Estimate based on World Bank statistics (2022): Look at **Table A1**.

² Read Mpabe [24]. Estimate based on World Bank statistics (2022): Look at **Table A1**.

correct for endogeneity bias in the relationship between economic well-being and satisfaction with democracy.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social media and satisfaction with democracy

Monnoyer-Smith [27] reminds us that every new communication technology has been seen as a potential way to mobilise citizens and modernise institutions. Seminal studies on the political Internet have tended to focus on the “impact” that new information and communication technologies (NICTs) could have on democracy, justified by the fact that “the role of the Internet as a tool for monitoring, dissemination and mobilisation (circulation of information, increase in petitioning practices) is indeed increasingly central to the functioning of democracy” [28]. NICTs are often seen as a solution to the crisis of representation [29]. Social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, allow citizens to directly question politicians, who can then interact with them directly [30]. Social media are thus potentially a very rich place for debate, even if the reality is often very different. Social media allow citizens to express themselves in a very horizontal way, to bring to the fore protests that were not heard before, and they are also a tool for emancipation: by taking over the word and the image, it is possible to become a real actor [31, 32].

In the early 2000s, digital technology was hailed for its ability to revitalise democracy. It seemed inconceivable to question the compatibility between social media and democracy. At the time, social media (Facebook and Twitter) were seen as a great opportunity for democratic revitalisation. A few years later, however, pessimism prevails and concerns are growing; digital technology is often strongly criticised for facilitating the spread of false information. Social media can be detrimental to democracy by further polarising opinions, facilitating manipulation and exacerbating tensions [32, 33]. Through its “troll factories”, Russia was able to interfere in the US and French presidential elections. In 2016, more than 126 million Americans were exposed to content from Kremlin propaganda services at least once on Facebook. Governments and opposition political parties around the world have increasingly set up Internet influence services [34].

Disinformation campaigns conducted *via* social media often seek to change citizens’ perceptions of their government’s policies. Their primary aim is to sow confusion in people’s minds, undermine trust in democratic institutions, and incite social unrest and violence [33]. They also often encourage the spread of conspiracy theories, creating “epistemological disorder” and exhausting the critical mind by making truth and lies indistinguishable. Fake news spreads faster than real information and continues to circulate even after being contradicted by the mainstream media.

It is important to remember that when we talk about social media, we are talking about private platforms whose aim is to make a profit and therefore to maximise engagement and interaction. The business model of these platforms is based on advertising; the challenge is to maximise engagement and interaction. To do this, these private platforms have an incentive to favour those speeches that provoke the most epidermal reactions and, consequently, the “virality” of the content. The aim is not to promote a calm debate based on well thought-out ideas. Moreover, it is the audience that gives credit on social media. It is the audience that gives content visibility and places it at the heart of the network. But what gives content this visibility

is not so much its relation to a truth based on empirical evidence or verification, but rather purely quantitative criteria. And when people respond to a tweet, or even repost it, it is not necessarily because they agree with it, it is sometimes to denounce or mock content that is considered grotesque, absurd or outrageous, but this gives it even more visibility and, therefore, more credit. It is, therefore, not easy to construct quality democratic debates when epidermal passions dominate and the truth is, in a way, devalued.

Some authors [35, 36] have been able to classify computer propaganda campaigns into three categories. The first is aimed at polarising citizens on specific issues, such as immigration, racism, terrorism and homosexuality. The aim is to get groups of voters to confront each other in anger on social media and in the streets. The second is to promote or discredit particular politicians. Any public figure on the national stage can either be attacked by or benefit from highly automated or fake social media accounts. The third is to discourage citizens from voting. Voter suppression is a common messaging strategy that targets voters who are likely to support a particular candidate in an election. For example, voters may be informed that polling day has been postponed, that they can vote by text message or that their polling station has been moved.

Empirically, Boulianne [37] shows that social media contributes to increasing citizens' political participation. Bailard [17] confirms the clear, consistent and significant impact of the Internet on democratic satisfaction. However, the Internet is correlated with higher satisfaction in advanced democracies and is associated with lower satisfaction in countries with weak democratic practices. Ceron and Memoli [12] find that Internet use per se has no effect on satisfaction with democracy. Chang [1] also finds that satisfaction with democracy declines significantly with Internet access. The study by Ceron and Memoli [12] is one of the few that highlights the influence of social media on satisfaction with democracy. However, they argue that social media has a negative effect on satisfaction with democracy.

2.2 Economic well-being and satisfaction with democracy

At the macroeconomic level, some studies have shown that an increase in GDP significantly improves the democratisation of a country's political environment [38]. In contrast, Wagner et al. [39] provide evidence to the contrary. At the micro-level, the debate is less clear-cut. Bratton and Mattes [25] show that improvements in citizens' current living conditions significantly increase their satisfaction with democracy. The economic well-being indicator is also subjective as it measures satisfaction with current living conditions. To measure satisfaction with democracy in South Africa and Ghana, individuals are asked: "How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy is working?". In Zambia, satisfaction with democracy was measured by averaging satisfaction scores for specific attributes of democracy such as political freedoms, elections and the performance of elected representatives. These indicators do not appear to be equivalent and the authors acknowledge the value of standardising the measurement of satisfaction with democracy. This standardisation has been carried out in the Afrobarometer 2019 database.

Using the 2005 Afrobarometer database, Wantchekon and Taylor [3] do not measure the direct impact of economic well-being on satisfaction with democracy. Using an ordered logit, they show that objective economic well-being, in contrast to subjective well-being, does not significantly affect the instrumental view of democracy. According to these two authors, the instrumental view is measured by the importance of democracy in promoting the values of (i) peace and national unity, (ii)

development, (iii) solidarity, reciprocity and cooperation, (iv) good governance, (v) autonomy and independence and (vi) respect for human rights. It is negatively related to satisfaction with democracy. It should be recalled that to measure subjective economic well-being, respondents were asked how they perceived their economic situation in relation to that of others in their social environment. To measure objective economic well-being, respondents were asked whether they had gone without food one or more times in the past year.

Outside Africa, Anderson and Guillory [40] found that individual income as a group had a positive and significant effect on satisfaction with democracy in a sample of 11 European countries. On the other hand, in a country-by-country analysis, these two authors found that individual income had a positive and significant effect on satisfaction with democracy in only three countries. Furthermore, the overall economic performance of the country significantly increased satisfaction with democracy, whether analysed globally or on a country-by-country basis.

Harmel and Tan [15] also found, using the OLS method, that an increase in individual life satisfaction significantly increased support for the one-party system in China. Chinese people are currently enjoying material satisfaction. However, this influence on life satisfaction is insignificant when the variable to be explained is the individual's perception that multipartyism creates chaos and crisis in the country.

Using an ordered logit model, Zhai [18] showed that citizens' economic satisfaction has mixed effects on political satisfaction in China. In fact, on the one hand, improving economic satisfaction significantly increases satisfaction with civil liberties and political rights. To measure satisfaction with civil liberties and political rights, respondents were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with the right to vote, the right to participate in any type of organisation, the right to assemble and demonstrate, the right to be informed about the work and functions of the government, freedom of expression and the right to criticise the government. On the other hand, an increase in economic satisfaction has no significant effect on satisfaction with the current level of democracy in China. Economic satisfaction is a composite index derived from three indicators: satisfaction with housing, satisfaction with living conditions and satisfaction with household income.

Using a logit model, Zhai [19] finds that economic status does not significantly affect satisfaction with democracy in China. The author measures the economic status of individuals using an indicator that captures the ability of income to cover needs satisfactorily. Kang [16] found similar results for South Korea, using probit with Heckman selection bias correction. He used this method because of the endogeneity bias that exists between satisfaction with democracy and satisfaction with the welfare system.

3. Methodology

3.1 Data

Data for this study comes from the Afrobarometer database (2019). Information was collected from 34 African countries,³ comprising 45,824 individuals. As our study focused on individuals who responded to questions about satisfaction with democracy and participation in elections, the sample size was 35,590 individuals.

¹⁰¹ **Table A1** presents the list of countries in the sample.

Afrobarometer uses national probability samples, which are designed to be representative of all citizens of voting age in a given country. The aim is to give every adult citizen an equal and known chance of being selected for an interview, which is achieved by (i) using random selection methods at each stage of the sampling process and (ii) sampling at all stages with a probability proportional to the size of the population, as far as possible, to ensure that larger (i.e. more populous) geographical units have a proportionally higher chance of being selected in the sample [24].

The sample universe normally includes all citizens aged 18 and over. People living in institutions, such as students in halls of residence, patients in hospitals and people in prisons or old people's homes, are usually excluded. Sometimes, people living in areas considered inaccessible due to conflict or insecurity are also excluded. The sample design is a multi-stage, stratified, clustered regional probability sample. Specifically, the sample is first stratified by the main sub-national government unit (state, province, region, etc.) and by urban or rural location [41].

The Afrobarometer network is an independent, non-partisan research project carried out by CDD, IDASA and MSU. Implemented through a network of national partners, Afrobarometer measures economic conditions and the political atmosphere in African countries [41]. The questionnaire is standardised to facilitate cross-country comparisons. The countries covered by the 2019 surveys are listed in **Table A1** in the Appendix.

3.2 Econometric model

To identify explanatory factors of satisfaction with democracy in cross section, some studies have used ordered logit or probit models [11, 13, 14], simple logit or probit models [19] and the probit with Heckman selection bias correction [16]. However, these models do not account for endogeneity or simultaneity bias between variables. Therefore, given the nature of the variable that captures satisfaction with democracy, our econometric model was chosen to be an ordered probit with an endogenous covariate. This model has the advantage of accounting for the endogeneity and simultaneity bias between economic well-being and satisfaction with democracy. The data we have do not provide information on the timing of these two behaviours. For example, it is not known whether economic well-being precedes satisfaction with democracy. However, the expression of direct simultaneity between these two behaviours requires that this question be answered. The endogeneity of explanatory variables is often a problem in behavioural econometrics. Theoretically, in the presence of endogeneity, the expectation of the error term conditional on the explanatory variable is non-zero, and the usual estimators are subject to bias [41].

The model is as follows:

$$SDEM = Y_i = v_h \text{ if } k_{h-1} < X_i\beta + W_{bjh}\beta_C + \varepsilon_i \leq k_h \quad (1)$$

$$SDEM = Y_i = \begin{cases} 0 & \text{There is not a democracy} \\ 1 & \text{not at all satisfied with democracy} \\ 2 & \text{not very satisfied with democracy} \\ 3 & \text{Quite satisfied with democracy} \\ 4 & \text{Very satisfied with democracy} \end{cases} \quad (2)$$

SDEM is the variable that captures the individual's level of satisfaction with democracy. We note that h takes the values 0, 1, 2, 3 and 4. Also, we note that $v_h < v_m$ for $h < m$. k_0 takes the value $-\infty$ and k_H takes the value $+\infty$. X is the vector of exogenous variables.

The level of economic well-being (*EW*) of an individual is captured through two indicators: *BEO* and *BES*. The first is an objective economic well-being indicator calculated from a composite poverty index. It takes the value 0 if the individual is not poor, 1 if their poverty level is low, 2 if their poverty level is moderate and 3 if their poverty level is high. The second is an indicator of subjective economic well-being, which informs about individual's perception of their living conditions. It has a value of 0 if living conditions are very bad, 1 if they are fairly bad, 2 if they are neither bad nor good, 3 if they are fairly good and 4 if they are very good. The endogenous multinomial variable is *BE*:

$$BE = W_{bjh} = v_{bjh} \text{ if } k_{bj(h-1)} < Z_{bji}\alpha_{bj} + \epsilon_{bji} \leq k_{bjh} \quad (3)$$

The values $v_{bj1} \dots v_{bjB}$ are real numbers so that $v_{bjh} < v_{bjm}$ for $h < m$. k_{bj0} takes the value $-\infty$ and k_{bjB} takes the value $+\infty$. Z is the vector of exogenous variables. The errors $\epsilon_{b1i} \dots \epsilon_{bBi}$ follow a multivariate normal distribution with mean 0 and covariance:

$$\Sigma_b = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & \rho_{b12} & * & * & \rho_{b1B} \\ \rho_{b12} & 1 & * & * & \rho_{b2B} \\ * & * & * & * & * \\ * & * & * & * & * \\ \rho_{b1B} & \rho_{b2B} & * & * & 1 \end{bmatrix} \quad (4)$$

PGECON is a variable that measures the economic performance of the current government. It is an index constructed from seven indicators: (i) good management of the economy, (ii) improvement of living conditions, (iii) job creation, (iv) price stability, (v) reduction of income inequality, (vi) construction and maintenance of roads and bridges and (vii) provision of electricity. It takes the value 0 if the performance is low, 1 if it is medium and 2 if it is high.

PGSOS is the variable that provides information about the social and security performance of the current government. It is an index constructed from five indicators: (i) meeting the expectations of young people, (ii) improving basic health services, (iii) meeting education needs, (iv) providing water services and (v) increasing food availability. It takes the value 0 if the performance is low, 1 if it is medium and 2 if it is high.

PGINST is the variable that provides information on the institutional performance of the current government. It is an index constructed from seven indicators: (i) control of corruption, (ii) prevention of violence during elections, (iii) prevention and resolution of community conflicts, (iv) prevention and fight against terrorist attacks, (v) promotion of women's rights and opportunities, (vi) reduction of crime and (vii) protection of human rights. It takes the value 0 if it is low, 1 if it is medium and 2 if it is high.

TELE is the variable that informs whether the individual informs themselves through television. It takes the value 1 if yes and 0 if no.

DAY is the variable that indicates whether the individual gets information from the print media. It takes the value 1 if yes and 0 if no.

SOME is the variable that informs whether the individual is informed on social media. It takes the value 1 if yes and 0 if no.

INT is the variable that provides information on the individual's access to the Internet. It has a value of 1 if the individual has access to the Internet and 0 if they do not.

SEX is the variable that informs about the sex of the individual. It takes the value 1 if they are male, and 0 if they are female.

ZON is the variable that provides information on the individual's place of residence. It has a value of 1 if they live in an urban area and 0 if he/she lives in a rural area.

AGE is the variable that captures the age of the individual. It takes the value 0 if he is young (age between 18 and 35) and 1 if they old (over 35).

EDU is the variable that makes it possible to assess the level of education of the individual. It has a value of 0 if they are illiterate, 1 if they have primary education, 2 if they have secondary education and 3 if they have higher education.

REL is the variable that informs about the religious affiliation of the individual. It takes the value 2 if they are Muslim, 1 if they are Christian and 0 in the opposite case.

4. Results

Table 1 shows that 48.10% of citizens are either fairly or very satisfied with the level of democracy in their country. The government's performance is rated positively by 5.2% of people for economic issues, 10.60% for social issues and 16.20% for institutional and security issues. In addition, poverty is widespread in Africa, with only 14.20% of people escaping its grip. Finally, it is noted that 32.10% of people are subscribed to social media.

The econometric results are analysed in **Table 2**. The correlation coefficient ρ (*BIECO*, *SEMO*) between the satisfaction with democracy equation and the economic well-being equation is statistically significant at the 1% threshold level. Some unobservable individual characteristics simultaneously affect a citizen's chances of having a high level of economic well-being and of being satisfied with democracy. This suggests that the probability of having a high level of economic well-being positively affects the probability of being satisfied with democracy and vice versa. There are thus complementary relationships between economic well-being and satisfaction with democracy. It therefore seems useful to estimate these two equations simultaneously.

Improving the economic, social and institutional performance of the government contributes significantly to increasing the economic well-being of individuals. Several studies have shown that economic well-being increases with reduced corruption [42], maintenance of national security [43], social protection [44] and infrastructure [45]. Men and Christians are relatively less likely to have high levels of economic well-being. However, Tekka et al. [46] show that men are more willing to have higher incomes than women. Levels of economic well-being are relatively and significantly higher among those living in urban areas, the elderly and the educated people. With regard to residence, Castaneda et al. [47] find that 80.10% (respectively 75.70%) of people living in extreme poverty (or moderate poverty, respectively) live in rural

Variables	Average	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
SDEM				
The country is not a democracy	0.017	0.131	0	1
Not at all satisfied with democracy	0.221	0.415	0	1
Not very satisfied with democracy	0.281	0.450	0	1
Quite satisfied with democracy	0.326	0.469	0	1
Very satisfied with democracy	0.155	0.362	0	1
PGECO				
Very bad	0.623	0.485	0	1
Quite bad	0.325	0.468	0	1
Fairly good or very good	0.052	0.222	0	1
PGSOS				
Very bad	0.387	0.487	0	1
Quite bad	0.507	0.500	0	1
Fairly good or very good	0.106	0.308	0	1
PGINS				
Very bad	0.294	0.455	0	1
Quite bad	0.545	0.498	0	1
Fairly good or very good	0.162	0.368	0	1
SEX				
Woman	0.477	0.499	0	1
Male	0.523	0.499	0	1
ZON				
Rural area	0.558	0.497	0	1
Urban area	0.442	0.497	0	1
AGE				
Young person	0.487	0.500	0	1
Elderly person	0.513	0.500	0	1
EDU				
Illiterate	0.194	0.396	0	1
Primary education	0.295	0.456	0	1
Secondary education	0.357	0.479	0	1
Higher education	0.155	0.361	0	1
REL				
Other religions	0.109	0.312	0	1
Christians	0.566	0.496	0	1
Muslims	0.324	0.468	0	1
BEO				
High level of poverty	0.175	0.380	0	1

Variables	Average	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Average poverty level	0.311	0.463	0	1
Low poverty level	0.372	0.483	0	1
Not poverty	0.142	0.349	0	1
BES				
Very bad	0.216	0.412	0	1
Quite bad	0.259	0.438	0	1
Neither good nor bad	0.192	0.394	0	1
Fairly good	0.269	0.444	0	1
Very good	0.064	0.245	0	1
TELE				
No	0.401	0.490	0	1
Yes	0.599	0.490	0	1
DAY				
No	0.657	0.475	0	1
Yes	0.343	0.475	0	1
SOME				
No	0.678	0.467	0	1
Yes	0.322	0.467	0	1
INT				
No	0.547	0.498	0	1
Yes	0.453	0.498	0	1

Table 1.
Descriptive statistics.

areas worldwide. Regarding education, Teka et al. [46] show that educated people are more likely to escape the poverty trap. With regard to age, Castaneda et al. [47] find that 74.60% (respectively 67.80%) of people under 35 years of age live in extreme poverty (respectively moderate poverty).

Only three variables do not significantly affect satisfaction with democracy in Africa, namely gender, age and religious affiliation of the individual. With regard to gender, our results contradict empirical work that argues that women are less likely to be highly satisfied with democracy [48–50]. With regard to age, it contradicts studies showing that satisfaction decreases significantly with age [11, 50, 51].

5. Discussions

The coefficients of the variables “*BEO*” and “*BES*” are negative and significant, indicating that individuals’ satisfaction with democracy decreases with economic well-being. This result is contrary to that of Kang [16] and Zhai [19]. This result can be

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient	Standard deviation	Coefficient	Standard deviation
Equation of satisfaction with democracy				
PGECO (ref: very bad)				
Quite bad	0.328***	0.044	0.421***	0.032
Fairly good or very good	0.609***	0.090	0.730***	0.073
PGSOS (ref: very bad)				
Quite bad	0.298***	0.038	0.283***	0.033
Fairly good or very good	0.440***	0.068	0.444***	0.062
PGINS (ref: very bad)				
Quite bad	0.142***	0.038	0.195***	0.033
Fairly good or very good	0.243***	0.062	0.289***	0.051
SEX (ref: Female sex)	−0.020	0.028	−0.023	0.027
ZON (ref: Rural area)	−0.010	0.051	−0.102***	0.028
AGE (ref: young)	0.042	0.027	0.001	0.027
EDU (ref: Illiterate)				
Primary education	0.098*	0.057	0.001	0.040
Secondary education	0.155**	0.075	0.017	0.040
Higher education	0.256**	0.117	0.122**	0.052
REL (ref: Other religions or no religion)				
Chétien	−0.019	0.058	0.042	0.055
Muslim	0.043	0.056	0.045	0.054
BEO (ref: high poverty level)				
Average poverty level	−0.407**	0.188		
Low poverty level	−0.801**	0.355		
Not poverty	−1.293**	0.555		
BES (ref: Very bad)				
Quite bad			−0.489***	0.093
Neither good nor bad			−0.770***	0.146
Fairly good			−1.139***	0.207
Very good			−1.667***	0.310
TELE (ref: No)	−0.121***	0.031	−0.082***	0.027
DAY (ref: No)	−0.006	0.028	−0.018	0.025
SOME (ref: No)	−0.107***	0.036	−0.092***	0.032
INT (ref: No)	0.001	0.032	−0.003	0.029
Economic well-being equation				
PGECO (ref: very bad)				
Quite bad	−0.001	0.033	0.266***	0.032

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coefficient	Standard deviation	Coefficient	Standard deviation
Fairly good or very good	0.014	0.073	0.398***	0.072
PGSOS (ref: very bad)				
Quite bad	0.252***	0.034	0.195***	0.033
Fairly good or very good	0.374***	0.063	0.353***	0.062
PGINS (ref: very bad)				
Quite bad	−0.030	0.034	0.127***	0.034
Fairly good or very good	−0.067	0.052	0.091*	0.051
SEX (ref: Female sex)	−0.064**	0.027	−0.060**	0.026
ZON (ref: Rural area)	0.226***	0.028	−0.035	0.027
AGE (ref: young)	0.051*	0.027	−0.045*	0.026
EDU (ref: Illiterate)				
Primary education	0.268***	0.041	0.016	0.040
Secondary education	0.418***	0.039	0.054	0.038
Higher education	0.711***	0.044	0.288***	0.043
REL (ref: Other religions or no religion)				
Christian	−0.107*	0.057	0.059	0.056
Muslim	−0.027	0.056	0.008	0.055
SDEM				
cut1	−2.334	0.081	−2.336	0.078
cut2	−0.809	0.172	−0.936	0.107
cut3	−0.052	0.237	−0.244	0.148
cut4	0.956	0.327	0.679	0.210
BE				
cut1	−0.501	0.068	−0.605	0.067
cut2	0.467	0.068	0.176	0.067
cut3	1.668	0.070	0.636	0.067
			1.790	0.069
ρ (BE, SDEM)	0.501***	0.164	0.624***	0.082

NB: ***, ** and * represent significance at 1%, 5% and 10% respectively.

Table 2.
Result of the ordered probit model in panel data.

explained by the social comparison mechanism and the coping mechanism. In terms of social comparison, individuals tend to compare their income with that of socially close individuals. They are satisfied with democracy when the comparison is in their favour and not satisfied when they envy the income of others. In terms of coping mechanisms, a person who experiences an increase in income may be immediately satisfied with

democracy, but after some time, they get used to their new income, and their satisfaction with democracy returns to its original level. Graham and Pettinato [52] show that in Latin America, the rich people are relatively more supportive of democracy, while the poor people are less willing to support the political transition. The poorest, most marginalised and most vulnerable people in developing countries are the most resistant to change [53]. The difficulties in achieving democracy are thus said to result from the induced effects of poverty, as the vital need to satisfy basic needs first pushes “higher” needs, such as political freedoms and autonomy, into the background. Poor people are characterised by a lesser predisposition to the virtues of individual freedoms (especially the freedom to choose their representatives) due to their lack of financial and material resources [54, 55]. Poor people are said to be more conservative and attached to traditional institutions (state, family) and the moral principles they promote (authority, discipline, etc.).

The sign of the variable “*SOME*” is negative and significant at the 1% level, indicating that satisfaction with democracy decreases among people who subscribe to social media. Our result highlights the negative influence of social media, which do not promote increased political knowledge, political awareness [56, 57], or participation in elections [58]. Furthermore, social networks can lead to the radicalisation of some citizens [59].

The sign of the variable “*TELE*” is also negative and significant at the 1% level, suggesting that citizens with access to television news are less likely to be highly satisfied with democracy. This result contradicts Ceron and Memoli [12], who show that satisfaction with democracy increases, and Chang [1] who argues that television does not significantly affect satisfaction with democracy. Despite the existence of media regulatory bodies in Africa, television media are increasingly being accused of breaching of professional standards and publishing of misinformation, which may be detrimental to the growth of democracy.

The modalities of the variables “*PGECO*”, “*PGSOC*” and “*PGINS*” are positive and significant at the 1% level, indicating that the economic, social and institutional performance of the government is conducive to a significant increase in satisfaction with democracy. This result highlights the role of the government’s economic, social, institutional and security performance. Foa et al. [60] show that economic exclusion is an important driver of dissatisfaction in developed democracies. Higher levels of unemployment and wealth inequality are associated with increased dissatisfaction in both absolute and relative terms, that is, a growing gap between younger and older people’s assessment of democratic functioning. Several other studies have shown that high GDP, lower income inequality and satisfaction with the country’s economic situation favour higher satisfaction with democracy [11, 13, 14, 49, 50, 61]. Lühiste [50] shows that satisfaction with a country’s welfare system significantly increases satisfaction with democracy. Bauer [51] finds that in the Netherlands and Switzerland, unemployed people are less likely to have high levels of satisfaction with democracy. Christmann and Torcal [13] find a similar result for Spain. Finally, Kang [16] shows that unemployment has no significant effect on satisfaction with democracy.

Some empirical work [39, 61] confirms that control over corruption, for example, increases satisfaction with democracy. Stockemer and Sundström [62] find that an individual’s perceptions of police and judicial corruption influence satisfaction with democracy. Ariely [63] argues that satisfaction with democracy rises significantly as the quality of public administration improves. However, the same finding does not hold for general indicators of macro-level corruption; macro-level corruption does not significantly affect satisfaction with democracy. Norris [64] shows that satisfaction with democracy decreases significantly as electoral malpractice increases, as measured

by the following factors: (i) preventing certain opposition leaders from running, (ii) threats of violence against voters during the election, (iii) electoral corruption and (iv) state media favouring only the ruling party.

The coefficients of the modalities of the variable “*EDU*” are positive and significant, indicating that satisfaction with democracy increases with the level of education. Several empirical studies [13, 16, 48–51, 61] have shown that satisfaction with democracy increases significantly with the level of education. As education allows individuals to develop a critical awareness of the world around them, to assert themselves as actors in this world, and to become aware of socio-environmental realities that need to be transformed, a politically educated or literate population is more inclined to live and thrive in a democracy [65].

The sign of the coefficient on the variable “*ZON*” is negative and significant in model 2, indicating that people living in urban areas are less likely to be highly satisfied with democracy. Norris [64] argues that satisfaction with democracy increases significantly with the degree of urbanisation.

In order to analyse the robustness of our results, we have divided the sample into two parts: former French colonies on the one hand and countries not colonised by France on the other. Using the same econometric model, the results in **Table A2** are largely similar to those in **Table 2**.

6. Conclusion

This study highlights the influence of social media and economic well-being on citizens’ satisfaction with democracy in Africa. Methodologically, we used descriptive statistical techniques and an ordered probit model with an endogenous variable using the Afrobarometer (2019) database.

The econometric results show that following news *via* social media significantly reduces satisfaction with democracy, and people with a high level of objective or subjective economic well-being are less likely to be satisfied with democracy.

Social media gives every citizen the impression of being able to speak to the whole world. But in reality, everyone is comforted by their own opinions. It is not a place of democracy. It is not structurally designed for that. Rather, it is a powerful tool that, among other things, allows citizens to be recruited and directed to the websites and other digital platforms of political parties, where a consensual and collective debate can be built. Social media is a medium like any other, an interesting tool for communication, but it is not the place where democracy is lived. States and political parties need to invest in social media to sensitise citizens against the disinformation campaigns that often flood social media.

African countries need to build more inclusive democracies. Democracy can only satisfy the poor if it gives them opportunities to start their own businesses or enterprises. The quality of democratic representation depends in part on the ability of minority social groups (especially the poor) to participate in elections and be represented in political arenas.

Additional information

JEL code: D72, L86, I30, N47, P37, P48

Appendix

Country	Population size	GDP per capita in US dollars
Benin	13,301,694	3649
Botswana	2,350,667	16,304
Burkina Faso	21,382,659	2394
Cabo Verde	589,451	6717
Cameroon	28,524,175	4065
Ivory Coast	29,389,150	5850
eSwatini	1,113,276	9730
Gabon	2,284,912	15,175
Gambia	2,100,000	2281
Ghana	32,372,889	5971
Guinea	1,976,187	2900
Kenya	54,685,051	5211
Lesotho	2,177,740	2521
Liberia	5,214,030	1563
Madagascar	27,534,354	1607
Malawi	20,308,502	1638
Mali	20,137,527	2329
Mauritius	1,386,129	23,035
Morocco	36,561,813	8853
Mozambique	30,888,034	1347
Namibia	2,678,191	10,038
Niger	23,605,767	1303
Nigeria	219,463,862	5408
São Tomé and Príncipe	213,948	4451
Senegal	16,082,442	3840
Sierra Leone	6,807,277	1773
South Africa	56,978,635	14,624
Sudan	45,500,000	4066
Tanzania	62,092,761	2836
Togo	8,283,189	2334
Tunisia	11,811,335	11,282
Uganda	44,000,000	2467
Zambia	19,077,816	3556
Zimbabwe	14,829,988	2329
Total	858,896,174	193,447

Source: World Bank [26].

Table A1.
List and profile of countries in the sample [62].

	Model 3		Model 4		Model 5		Model 6	
	Former Non-French colonies		Former French colonies					
	Coefficient	Standard deviation	Coefficient	Standard deviation	Coefficient	Standard deviation	Coefficient	Standard deviation
Equation of satisfaction with democracy								
PGECO (ref: very bad)								
Quite bad	0.263***	0.063	0.464***	0.056	0.374***	0.054	0.093*	0.050
Fairly good or very good	0.434***	0.104	1.012***	0.126	0.823***	0.165	0.164*	0.097
PGSOS (ref: very bad)								
Quite bad	0.372***	0.045	0.160***	0.057	0.164**	0.075	0.095*	0.050
Fairly good or very good	0.520***	0.079	0.282**	0.111	0.266**	0.134	0.081	0.086
PGINS (ref: very bad)								
Quite bad	0.083*	0.044	0.362***	0.054	0.311***	0.062	0.011	0.044
Fairly good or very good	0.104	0.070	0.457***	0.089	0.477***	0.093	0.055	0.066
SEX (ref: Female sex)	0.001	0.036	−0.047	0.043	−0.056	0.044	0.092***	0.033
ZON (ref: Rural area)	0.025	0.047	−0.105**	0.050	−0.017	0.092	−0.028	0.035
AGE (ref: young)	0.017	0.034	0.060	0.044	0.110**	0.046	0.044	0.034
EDU (ref: Illiterate)								
Primary education	0.137**	0.069	−0.122**	0.056	−0.030	0.087	0.031	0.068
Secondary education	0.135*	0.074	−0.018	0.066	0.063	0.108	−0.020	0.065
Higher education	0.264***	0.099	0.015	0.092	0.176	0.192	−0.224***	0.070
REL (ref: Other religions or no religion)								
Chétien	−0.126*	0.073	0.054	0.093	−0.015	0.111	−0.081	0.069
Muslim	−0.118	0.080	0.166*	0.089	0.278***	0.098	−0.012	0.071

BEO (ref: high poverty level)								
Average poverty level	−0.671***	0.150			−0.254	0.303		
Low poverty level	−1.234***	0.292			−0.656	0.548		
Not poverty	−1.985***	0.448			−1.011	0.866		
BES (ref: Very bad)								
Quite bad			−0.393**	0.188			0.820***	0.055
Neither good nor bad			−0.540*	0.313			1.253***	0.080
Fairly good			−0.963**	0.436			1.893***	0.101
Very good			−1.409**	0.650			2.853***	0.149
TELE (ref: No)	−0.102***	0.036	−0.049	0.044	−0.093*	0.048	−0.065**	0.030
DAY (ref: No)	−0.020	0.030	−0.063	0.048	−0.029	0.052	−0.020	0.027
SOME (ref: No)	−0.076**	0.039	−0.106*	0.060	−0.120*	0.064	−0.075**	0.033
INT (ref: No)	0.034	0.035	−0.063	0.055	−0.066	0.058	0.026	0.031
Economic well-being equation								
PGECO (ref: very bad)								
Quite bad	−0.064	0.043	0.362***	0.051	0.088*	0.051	0.218***	0.042
Fairly good or very good	0.015	0.091	0.636***	0.122	−0.060	0.124	0.284***	0.089
PGSOS (ref: very bad)								
Quite bad	0.215***	0.045	0.208***	0.051	0.279***	0.053	0.173***	0.044
Fairly good or very good	0.299***	0.081	0.394***	0.100	0.446***	0.102	0.311***	0.079
PGINS (ref: very bad)								
Quite bad	0.019	0.045	0.237***	0.053	0.019	0.055	0.075*	0.044
Fairly good or very good	−0.062	0.067	0.080	0.081	0.034	0.083	0.102	0.065
SEX (ref: Female sex)	−0.059*	0.034	−0.031	0.042	−0.052	0.043	−0.077**	0.034

ZON (ref: Rural area)	0.180***	0.035	−0.003	0.047	0.290***	0.048	−0.051	0.034
AGE (ref: young)	0.019	0.035	−0.037	0.041	0.116***	0.042	−0.053	0.034
EDU (ref: Illiterate)								
Primary education	0.143**	0.070	−0.024	0.054	0.242***	0.055	0.033	0.069
Secondary education	0.270***	0.066	0.101*	0.057	0.359***	0.059	0.012	0.065
Higher education	0.548***	0.069	0.231***	0.072	0.736***	0.075	0.263***	0.067
REL (ref: Other religions or no religion)								
Christian	−0.209***	0.072	0.002	0.093	−0.230**	0.095	0.070	0.071
Muslim	−0.271***	0.075	−0.012	0.086	0.287***	0.088	0.021	0.073
cut1	−2.495	0.109	−2.409	0.127	−2.307	0.132	−0.363	0.192
cut2	−1.285	0.186	−0.638	0.211	−0.409	0.203	0.711	0.126
cut3	−0.611	0.263	0.094	0.284	0.370	0.279	1.314	0.105
cut4	0.259	0.369	1.115	0.391	1.461	0.394	2.100	0.104
cut1	−0.965	0.100	−0.555	0.101	−0.036	0.103	−0.653	0.098
cut2	0.062	0.099	0.291	0.101	0.904	0.103	0.088	0.098
cut3	1.276	0.101	0.811	0.101	2.122	0.108	0.512	0.098
cut 4			2.075	0.107			1.612	0.100
ρ (BE. SDEM)	0.680***	0.128	0.545***	0.163	0.418*	0.256	−0.763***	0.051

NB: ***, ** and * represent significance at 1%, 5% and 10%, respectively.

Table A2.

Result of the ordered probit model in panel data: former French colonies vs. countries not colonised by France.

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Chapter 6

Moroccan Legislative Elections: A Problematic Formulation of the Electoral Quotient

Abdelali Adnane and Fatima Azzahrae Adnane

Abstract

The electoral quotient, as a mechanism for the apportionment of seats in systems based on proportional representation, remains a recurrent object of legal and political inquiry. To the best of our knowledge, and pending any verified exceptions, the formula currently applied in Morocco—which calculates the quotient based on the total number of registered voters, rather than the number of valid votes cast—constitutes a normative singularity in comparative electoral law. This specificity warrants a rigorous scholarly investigation into its implications for representative accuracy, vote dilution, and electoral fairness. Rather than offering a prescriptive conclusion, this chapter articulates a research problem grounded in constitutional analysis, seeking to assess how such a method, though framed within a proportional logic, may generate both institutional distortions and symbolic tensions concerning democratic legitimacy.

Keywords: electoral representation, electoral justice, proportional representation, electoral quotient, electoral wastage, democratic legitimacy

1. Introduction

The electoral system structures democratic representation and reflects a conception of the relationship between popular will and political authority, thereby exposing tensions between fidelity, pluralism, legitimacy, and their institutional counterweights. Morocco has undertaken numerous electoral reforms, often presented as efforts to reconcile political representativeness with institutional stability within a multiparty context.

In this regard, the reform adopted in 2021 constitutes a significant inflection point in Morocco's electoral framework. By modifying the method for calculating the electoral quotient—now based on the number of registered voters, rather than solely on votes cast—the Moroccan legislator introduced an unprecedented parameter within the domain of proportional representation.

Presented as a response to voter abstention and political fragmentation, this reform raises substantial questions regarding its actual implications. Should it be interpreted as an attempt to symbolically broaden the representative base by

incorporating all registered voters, including abstainers, into the electoral equation? Or does it rather reflect a strategic effort to redistribute the balance of power among political forces by attenuating the impact of actual votes cast? These questions remain open and merit examination in light of the issues they raise.

The originality of this reform also calls into question its compatibility with generally accepted principles of proportional representation. Does proportionality remain intact when nonvoters are included in the calculation? Can such an approach enhance democratic legitimacy by acknowledging the entire electorate, or does it risk diluting the value of the expressed vote and undermining public trust in the electoral process?

In response to these inquiries, this chapter aims to explore the implications of the reform through a legal, institutional, and comparative analysis. Two main hypotheses structure this reflection. The first posits that using registered voters as the basis for calculating the electoral quotient may weaken representative fidelity by breaking the direct link between votes cast and seat allocation. The second, conversely, considers this choice as a symbolic form of inclusion of abstainers, aiming to redefine the boundaries of political representation beyond active voters alone.

While the political debate was intense—particularly in the lead-up to the September 2021 legislative elections—the scholarly debate remains underdeveloped. Legal and political science literature specifically addressing the effects of this change is scarce, and analyses of its impact on parliamentary representativeness, pluralism, or the equality of suffrage are still largely to be constructed.

This study analyzes how a seemingly technical reform may produce major political effects. It does not purport to offer certainties, but rather to open a critical analysis of the underlying logics and tensions revealed by this singularity.

To grasp the full scope of this unprecedented reform to the electoral quotient, this study unfolds across eight stages. It first revisits the historical and political trajectory of the electoral quotient within the Moroccan system, demonstrating how a technical mechanism has gradually become imbued with major strategic stakes (Section 2). It then examines the normative singularity of using registered voters, which breaks with proportional representation standards (Section 3), before situating this shift within a broader reflection on new forms of electoral participation, and the tensions between inclusion and representative fidelity (Section 4).

This analysis is extended through a study of the doctrinal and political divisions provoked by the reform, which reveal two opposing conceptions of proportional representation (Section 5), and is followed by a theoretical inquiry into the normative and epistemological implications of the change (Section 6). In a second phase, the chapter evaluates the practical and symbolic effects of the new formula, particularly in terms of electoral wastage, representative distortion, and democratic legibility (Section 7), before finally proposing a framework for the empirical objectification of the biases introduced, based on protocols of simulation, comparison, and field inquiry (Section 8). The study concludes with a critical reflection on the relationship between electoral design, representative justice, and democratic vitality (Section 9).

2. Electoral quotient: The contested trajectory of a seemingly technical mechanism

Initially perceived as a technical parameter, the electoral quotient has evolved into a strategic lever with significant legal and political implications. Its development within the Moroccan system illustrates how an ostensibly banal mechanism can

become the locus of deep controversy, fueled both by institutional balancing logics and partisan interests.

The evolution of Morocco's electoral system reflects a continuous dynamic of institutional adjustments, through which the legislator has, over successive reforms, sought to respond to the demands of representativeness, stability, and transparency in the electoral process. Although the calculation of the electoral quotient constitutes a technical operation, it forms an integral part of this dynamic and cannot be dissociated from its legal and historical anchoring.

Until 2002, Moroccan legislative elections operated under a majoritarian system: Seats were awarded to the highest vote-getters, with no application of an electoral quotient. It was with the 2002 elections that proportional representation by party list was introduced for the House of Representatives, marking a decisive shift in the national electoral architecture.

This reform introduced a proportional representation system, based on the largest remainder method, without any electoral threshold, using a quotient calculated on the basis of valid votes cast. The current formula for calculating the electoral quotient in Morocco—based on the number of registered voters—was directly instituted by a legislative reform adopted by Parliament in 2021. This method is expressly enshrined in Organic Law No. 04-21, which amended Organic Law No. 27-11, concerning the House of Representatives.

The 2021 reform emerged from a political compromise, absent both doctrinal consensus and prior technical agreement [1]. Opposition parties supporting the modification justified their stance by invoking the need to strengthen territorial equity and to better account for disparities in electoral participation across constituencies. This justification was, however, vigorously contested by various political actors and observers, who perceived the reform as an instrument intended to diminish the electoral impact of parties with disciplined and highly mobilized voter bases. The Justice and Development Party (PJD), in particular, promptly alleged a violation of the principle of equality in suffrage.

The PJD's opposition materialized concretely during the parliamentary vote of 5 March 2021, in which the aforementioned organic law was adopted by a majority of 162 votes against 104, with a single abstention from the Democratic Left Federation [2]. The text was supported by all other parliamentary groups, including the National Rally of Independents (RNI), the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM), the Istiqlal Party (PI), the Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP), the Popular Movement (MP), the Constitutional Union (UC), and the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) [3], reflecting a strategic consensus among competing parties around a pragmatic redefinition of the electoral rules. This political convergence, although effective, supplanted any doctrinal consensus and institutionalized an unprecedented parameter [4] within Morocco's proportional system.

As part of the *a priori* constitutional review to which organic laws are subject, pursuant to Article 132 of the Constitution, the aforementioned parties exercised their right to submit memoranda to the Constitutional Court. This mechanism, provided for by current legal provisions, allows them to formulate detailed observations concerning the text's conformity with constitutional requirements. The PJD representatives reiterated their opposition, invoking an infringement of the principle of equal suffrage.

In its Decision No. 118/21 of 8 April 2021 [5], the Constitutional Court, which had been automatically seized of the adopted text, held that the method of calculation based on the number of registered voters fell within the discretionary power of the legislator,

and did not contravene any constitutional requirement, given that the Constitution imposes no specific criterion for converting votes into parliamentary seats.

3. Electoral quotient: Technical singularity and normative exception

The organization of legislative elections constitutes, in many political systems, a central component in the legitimization of representative institutions. While electoral systems represent the most visible manifestation of this process, other, more technical parameters—such as district magnitude, electoral thresholds, and methods of vote-to-seat conversion—can have significant impacts on the effective representativeness of assemblies and on citizens' perceptions of the electoral process. Long understudied in classical literature, these dimensions have been the subject of empirical studies demonstrating their profound influence on the quality of representation, the fairness of suffrage, and public trust in institutions [6–9].

The adoption of proportional representation by list for elections to Morocco's House of Representatives has been presented by authorities as a sign of political openness and modernization, particularly in the post-Arab Spring context [10]. This choice may also be interpreted as a strategic orientation aimed at reflecting broader partisan diversity and mitigating certain exclusionary effects characteristic of majoritarian systems [11, 12]. However, the actual implementation of this proportional logic raises a number of questions, particularly regarding the technical modalities that govern its application [13].

Among these modalities, the method for calculating the electoral quotient, *made in Morocco* [14]—occupies a distinctive position. According to Szmolka, analyzing the impact of the most recent reform on Morocco's electoral system is of great interest to comparative political science, insofar as Morocco is the only country where seats are allocated based on the number of registered voters rather than the number of votes cast [15]. Whereas proportional systems typically rely on valid votes, the Moroccan case uses registered voters as the basis.

The author also notes that seat allocation based on the electoral register constitutes an unprecedented case in comparative politics, given that all countries employing the largest remainder method (LR) calculate the quotient using valid votes [15]. Although seemingly formal, this choice could have structural effects on the translation of votes into seats and thus warrants careful scrutiny.

This observation calls for further examination, particularly given that this modification to the numerator of the formula—namely, the use of registered voters instead of votes cast—constitutes a notable departure from proportionality principles prevailing in the majority of comparable electoral systems. The Venice Commission's 2015 report confirms that all countries applying the largest remainder method with the Hare quota base their calculation on valid votes. None use registered voters as the denominator [16]. This total absence of precedent across such an extensive corpus constitutes a particularly robust *argumentum ex silentio*: It suggests that Morocco's 2021 reform introduces a normative and technical rupture, unprecedented in the field of proportional electoral law.

The significance of this Moroccan exception is further confirmed by other major international reference sources. The handbook published by International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) on electoral system design—covering more than 200 global cases—reports no instance of an electoral quotient based on registered voters [8]. Likewise, databases from the Comparative

Study of Electoral Systems (CSES)—a collaborative project gathering electoral data from over 50 democracies—adhere to the methodological principle that proportionality is assessed based on votes cast [17], the only data that enables a comparative assessment of representativeness. Finally, the statistical work of Michael Gallagher, through his distortion and proportionality indices (notably the Least Squares Index), shows that all metrics use valid votes as the sole reference [18]; using registered voters would render these empirical comparisons inoperative.

These sources converge on a shared observation: The absence, in documented electoral practice, of any system using registered voters as the basis for the electoral quotient. This convergence not only provides empirical support for the earlier observation but also reinforces the systemic nature of Morocco's departure from established standards of proportional representation. It is not merely a national specificity; it represents a configuration external to the comparative analytical frameworks commonly mobilized in political science.

From this perspective, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), in its memorandum to the Constitutional Court, expressed fundamental concerns about the normative coherence of the new electoral quotient formula. According to the party, the revised Moroccan formula deviates significantly from what it considers to be a universal and stabilized conception of the quotient, as recognized in electoral science, comparative jurisprudence, and dominant doctrinal constructs. For the PJD, the electoral quotient reflects a rational equation grounded in a direct relationship between valid votes and parliamentary seats.

In this light, the party argued that the current formula breaks with a historically acknowledged methodological logic—including by the Moroccan legislator itself, which, until the reform, used the term “electoral quotient” without ever specifying its method of calculation, thereby presupposing, in the PJD's view, the existence of a tacit consensus regarding its scientific basis and shared character. Consequently, this rupture raised legitimate questions, in the party's eyes, regarding the criteria guiding the elaboration of electoral norms, particularly when they diverge from principles previously regarded as foundational within both national and comparative frameworks [19].

The formulation of the quotient based on registered voters, diverging from the many configurations observed in contemporary electoral systems, may thus warrant a more in-depth analysis, both normatively and in terms of its political effects. While this parameter has not generated sustained academic debate in the doctrinal or legal literature, and has only been superficially addressed in some writings [1], it has nevertheless given rise to notable political controversy, especially during recent electoral reforms.

During the mandatory review of Organic Law No. 04-21 by the Constitutional Court, several parliamentary groups submitted memoranda of observations. The PJD group strongly contested the adopted formula, perceiving it as a violation of the democratic principle of expressed suffrage and a conflation of voters and abstainers [19]. In contrast, the PAM, PI, and PPS welcomed the reform, considering that it enhanced the inclusiveness of the electoral process and corrected certain representational asymmetries linked to abstention [20].

4. Electoral quotient: From the foundation of voluntary expression to the emergence of new forms of participation

In essence, while proportional representation mobilizes a set of techniques and instruments designed to ensure a faithful translation of the popular will, its concrete

implementation remains closely conditioned by institutional choices and the objectives pursued by legislators. According to a well-established body of legal and political doctrine [21], there exists a structural gap between the ideal of formal proportionality—embodied in vote-to-seat conversion mechanisms—and the practical logics of parliamentary majority formation.

This tension, inherent to any electoral system, reveals that proportional representation, far from being a neutral vehicle of representation, is continuously adjusted in light of political constraints and the balances sought by institutional actors. It is within this tension between representational ideal and practical constraints that the debate on Morocco's electoral quotient is situated, a debate explored in the following sections. The quotient is not merely a technical tool for converting votes into seats; it is a fundamental parameter around which balances are negotiated between arithmetic precision, political recognition, and institutional efficiency.

In democracies employing proportional representation, the quotient is calculated based on valid votes cast. This widely adopted approach reflects a logic whereby representative legitimacy is anchored in actual participation. It thus elevates voting as the exclusive foundation of representation [22].

Nevertheless, alternative configurations are conceivable. It may be intellectually stimulating to consider the implications of a formula based on a broader calculation base. Such an approach invites a reconsideration of the very nature of the link between the electorate and representation: Should only those who have cast a vote be represented, or should representation also encompass the broader electorate? Though seemingly abstract, this question raises both normative and practical stakes for any democracy.

While all proportional representation systems calculate the electoral quotient from valid votes—that is, votes cast in favor of lists or candidates—certain national configurations introduce noteworthy variations. The case of Spain is particularly illustrative. Under Article 96.5 of the Organic General Electoral Law (LOREG), blank votes are considered valid, distinct from null votes, and are included in the calculation of the electoral threshold: 3% for legislative elections and 5% for municipal elections. Although these votes are not attributed to any list, they mathematically raise the minimum threshold required for a party to gain representation, thus indirectly reshaping the structure of electoral competition [23]. A similar logic prevails in the Netherlands, where blank votes, included in the count of valid votes, also elevate the eligibility threshold, thereby reinforcing their structural impact on electoral dynamics [23].

The inclusion of blank votes among “validly cast” votes reveals an intriguing tension between formal measurements of electoral participation and representational logic. This configuration leads to a dissociation between the votes that effectively influence seat allocation and the broader set of votes used to establish eligibility thresholds. As a result, there is a logical discontinuity between the variable used to set the threshold (all valid votes, including blanks) and the output variable—seat distribution—which is based solely on votes cast for electoral lists. In other words, some votes—while counted toward the threshold—do not contribute to the actual allocation of mandates. This dissociation invites a reconsideration of the coherence between electoral participation and representativeness.

It also raises deeper questions about the very definition of representativeness in proportional systems: Can the threshold of representation be legitimately based on votes without an electoral recipient? And if so, to what extent does this affect the democratic coherence of aggregating citizens' preferences?

This perspective does not challenge the principle of using valid votes to calculate the electoral quotient; rather, it demonstrates that this variable is not univocal in interpretation, and that its composition may vary depending on legislative intent. The Spanish example, in this sense, broadens the range of conceivable configurations and contributes to a broader reflection on the nexus between the electorate, representation thresholds, and the institutional translation of political preferences.

This diversity of configurations may also be extended to certain institutional practices wherein blank votes—though not expressions of partisan support—appear to influence the formal conditions for accessing representation. While these practices do not directly pertain to proportional systems, they enrich the broader reflection on the foundations and boundaries of democratic representativeness.

In Mongolia, the absolute majority required to elect a president includes blank votes [24, 25]. This rule raises the first-round threshold without involving blank votes in redistribution. Thus, even a limited proportion of such ballots may delay the outcome by preventing any candidate from reaching the required majority. A similar mechanism exists in Switzerland, where certain cantons include blank votes in the calculation of the absolute majority, thereby raising the required threshold [23].

Such practices, though marginal in application, suggest a possible broadening of the forms of participation recognized by electoral institutions. They invite reconsideration of how democratic systems articulate adherence, neutrality, or rejection within the calculus of electoral outcomes, and perhaps envision a more flexible and differentiated conception of what constitutes a politically active vote.

A legislative proposal submitted to the French Senate in 2023 also considered recognizing blank votes in the calculation of the absolute majority, without including them in seat allocation [26]. Should such a mechanism be adopted, it could be seen as an attempt to reconcile, on the one hand, formal recognition of a non-allocative act of participation and, on the other, the preservation of the decision-making efficacy of the representative system. This dissociation supports broader reflection on the plurality of participation forms and their institutionalization.

Beyond the question of the status of blank votes, it is the very architecture of vote-to-seat conversion mechanisms that must be interrogated [27]. Under proportional regimes, this operation rests on a set of technical instruments that combine the type of lists (open, closed, or flexible) with mathematical methods designed to distribute seats based solely on valid votes. This calculation base remains constant, regardless of the method adopted: It underpins the two main families of apportionment methods—largest remainder (Hare, Droop, Imperiali) and highest average (Sainte-Laguë, in its classical, modified, or Hungarian form, d'Hondt, Imperiali HA, Adams, Equal Proportions).

As Kenneth Benoit has shown [28], these formulas, tested across 4000 simulations, produce contrasting effects depending on party size. Each method is based on an electoral quotient—derived from the total number of valid votes—which determines seat allocation and modulates the gap between votes and actual representation. Altering this quotient, or the logic of its calculation, thus amounts to fundamentally transforming the electoral aggregation mechanism and, in doing so, redefining the very conditions of political representation.

Furthermore, it must be recalled that proportional representation is not immune to classic tensions between representative fidelity and governability. Such tensions, well-documented in the literature, were rigorously modeled by Michał Pierzgański [29]. According to him, excessive proportionality can lead to increased political fragmentation, prompting some systems to adopt corrective mechanisms such as electoral thresholds or adjustment bonuses. These devices are designed to preserve a delicate

balance between democratic inclusion and institutional stability, without undermining the core principle of representation based on votes cast.

As Gallagher reminds us, any measure of electoral distortion rests on a rigorous comparison between the actual votes received by each party and the resulting parliamentary allocation [30]. Proportionality can only be defined with reference to votes cast, as any alternative basis would introduce a normative bias in assessing electoral justice. Accordingly, any disjunction between the calculation base (votes) and the institutional outcome (seats) necessitates critical reflection on the legitimacy of the conversion process.

5. The electoral quotient at the heart of a political divide: Two antagonistic visions of representation

The 2021 adoption of an electoral quotient based on registered voters triggered an unprecedented parliamentary controversy in Morocco. Far from being a mere technical dispute, this reform exposed a profound rift in normative conceptions of proportional representation (PR) and in the political objectives ascribed to the electoral system. The debate laid bare the tensions between theories of representation, constitutional norms, pluralism, and partisan strategies.

At the core of the controversy lie two opposing logics. On one side, the Justice and Development Party (PJD), then the majority party, upholds a contractualist and voluntarist conception of representation: Only votes actually cast may legitimately underpin the allocation of seats. The quotient must reflect the act of voting, a *sine qua non* condition for democratic representativeness. On the other side, opposition parliamentary groups (notably the PAM, PI, and PPS) support an inclusive and symbolic approach to suffrage: The electorate is defined as the totality of registered citizens, regardless of their participation. Voter registration signifies civic membership and legitimizes broader representation, including the silent margins of the electorate.

The arguments presented before the Constitutional Court illustrate this polarization. The PJD invoked the principle of effective proportionality and prior jurisprudence centered on respect for actual electoral expression. In contrast, the opposition groups emphasized the legislator's right to adapt the electoral framework, provided it remains consistent with the spirit of pluralism and political inclusion.

A comparative analytical grid highlights this opposition across legal, arithmetical, and symbolic dimensions. The PJD holds that silence is not a vote, while opponents interpret it as implicit civic assent. One defends the centrality of actual voting; the other affirms the ontological meaning of civic registration.

The justifications offered by the respective political actors reflect fundamentally divergent argumentative registers. While the PJD advances deontic and quantitative considerations—emphasizing proportionality, fidelity in representation, and political accountability—opposition parties privilege symbolic, inclusive, and institutional arguments, stressing the need to open representative space to smaller formations, and to reflect the universality of electoral citizenship.

This divide reveals that the conflict is neither merely legal nor partisan but engages two competing political philosophies of representative democracy: One expressive, the other integrative.

Extending this critique, the PJD, in its memorandum to the Constitutional Court, submitted pursuant to Article 25 of Organic Law No. 066.13 on the Court [31]—argues that adopting a quotient based on registered voters constitutes a

fundamentally undemocratic choice. From its perspective, this method unjustifiably conflates the positive act of voting—real and free expression of popular sovereignty—with abstention, which cannot produce equivalent legal effects. By attributing electoral weight to inaction, the reform, according to the PJD, distorts the electorate's actual will and falsifies the expression of suffrage. It artificially neutralizes disparities, favors low vote shares, and weakens the representation of majoritarian lists. Such an approach, the party contends, disrupts the balance between representative fidelity and electoral fairness by weakening the link between electoral effort and actual access to representation.

The PJD also denounces an inconsistency: The reform introduces registered voters as the basis for the quotient, contradicting other electoral rules grounded in votes cast (e.g., local elections). This disparity creates, in its view, an unjustified heterogeneity in the treatment of electoral processes and undermines the principles of unity and predictability in electoral norms. Finally, the PJD argues that the method contravenes Morocco's international commitments, particularly Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which guarantees the equality and effectiveness of the right to vote. By reducing the weight of expressed suffrage in favor of an abstract distributive logic, the reform introduces a structural imbalance among citizens and thereby jeopardizes the foundations of democratic representation [19].

Conversely, opposition parliamentary groups submitted a distinct memorandum to the Constitutional Court in which they defend the legitimacy and timeliness of the new quota formula. Their position relies on a set of constitutional, political, and institutional arguments, structured to demonstrate that the reform is fully compatible with the democratic principles enshrined in the Moroccan Constitution.

The opposition parties begin by noting that the Moroccan constitutional text does not specify the rules governing the choice of electoral system, nor those concerning technical parameters such as districting, the nature of the quotient, or the establishment of thresholds. This silence grants the legislator discretionary power, consistent with parliamentary sovereignty in this domain, provided constitutional principles and objectives are upheld.

In this light, basing the electoral quotient on the number of registered voters constitutes, in the opposition's view, a reform that enhances the democratic legitimacy of the House of Representatives. By broadening the reference base to encompass the entire potential electorate, this approach allows a more comprehensive translation of popular sovereignty and adds coherence to the process of government formation, as the executive is derived from the same chamber.

Moreover, the reform responds to the need to consolidate pluralism and political participation. It seeks to address declining voter turnout in recent years (37% in 2007, 45% in 2011, and 42% in 2016), by encouraging registered voters to fully embrace their right to vote—seen as both a constitutional right and duty. The introduction of a quotient based on registered voters thus expresses a normative recognition of the principle of “engaged citizenship,” which links rights and duties in a participatory democracy.

From the perspective of the party system, the new formula also helps correct imbalances produced by the former method. The previous reliance on votes cast marginalized certain political currents by limiting their parliamentary access. The current formula, by eliminating the threshold and relying on a broader base, ensures fairer access to representation for all parties, thus preserving political plurality—an essential component of democratic legitimacy.

In addition, this new approach strengthens the institutional status of the parliamentary opposition by increasing its chances of representation, thereby enabling a more balanced exercise of institutional roles. It also contributes to realizing the constitutional objective of a “balance between rights and duties,” particularly in electoral matters, through an integrated reading of constitutional provisions.

Finally, opposition parties assert that the new electoral quotient does not undermine the popular will, as it neither cancels nor distorts voters’ choices. It does not alter the distribution of votes but modifies the reference point for allocating seats—an approach consistent with comparative law and principles of electoral justice. It also aligns with the jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court, which has consistently recognized the legislator’s discretion in such matters, provided that fundamental democratic principles are not violated [20].

In Decision No. 118/21 of 7 April 2021, the Moroccan Constitutional Court largely aligned with the position defended by the majority of political parties supporting the reform. By upholding the use of registered voters for calculating the quotient, the Court emphasized that the Constitution prescribes no specific method and that such questions fall within the reserved domain of organic legislation (Article 62). It stressed that its role is not to assess the policy merits of legislative choices but only their constitutional compliance.

In the absence of an explicit constitutional prohibition, the Court found that the use of registered voters is not contrary to the principle of universal suffrage, especially as it fits within a logic of democratic “responsibilization” and broadened representativeness. It further held that the reform does not violate the principles of pluralism, equality among lists, or free electoral competition.

By largely endorsing the justifications advanced by the reform’s proponents—notably the goal of expanding parliamentary diversity—the Court thus validated an unprecedented electoral design choice while refraining from scrutinizing its coherence with the very spirit of proportionality [5].

This posture of normative restraint has, however, prompted criticism. As M.A. Benabdallah pointed out in a doctrinal commentary on the decision [32], the Constitutional Court confined itself to a formal and minimalist reading of the constitutional text, deliberately avoiding any assessment of the reform’s actual impact on the quality of suffrage and representational structure.

By relying solely on the absence of an explicit constitutional ban, the Court, in his view, abdicated its role as guardian of the democratic spirit of the fundamental law. Far from representing institutional neutrality, this abstention amounted to tacit validation of the legislative majority’s strategy, without testing its compatibility with the requirements of equality and proportionality. Such an approach, he argues, weakens the regulatory function of constitutional justice and leaves unanswered the substantive objections raised in the name of electoral fairness.

6. Electoral quotient: Between normative roots and epistemological rupture

The 2021 electoral controversy may constitute a paradigmatic case—understood in the sense advanced by Nadia Urbinati—of a potential tension between representative government grounded in the expression of electoral will and a conception of representation as the configuration of an inclusive political space [33]. In the Moroccan case, this tension materializes through a redefinition of the intended recipients of the

electoral system: Is it meant to represent only voters? Or to reflect the broader structure of the electorate?

The shift toward a quotient based on registered voters thus signals an implicit normative reorientation of the Moroccan model of proportional representation. It departs from a majoritarian (or even strictly proportional) logic and installs a system of extended but diluted representation, wherein the direct correlation between votes and seats is weakened in favor of a more inclusive regulation of the partisan field.

This shift raises critical questions: How far can the representative base be expanded without betraying proportionality? How can pluralism be reconciled with political intelligibility? These open-ended questions invite us to conceive of proportional representation not as a stable norm, but as a precarious equilibrium between fidelity to electoral outcomes and openness of the system.

The controversy surrounding Morocco's electoral quotient is far from a merely technical or conjunctural dispute. It prompts a reexamination of the ends assigned to proportional representation in a hybrid political context. The observed cleavage—between advocates of the expressed vote as the sole foundation of representation and proponents of an inclusive approach based on civic registration—reveals a constitutive tension between two normative models: One procedural, rooted in the act of voting; the other symbolic, anchored in the notion of political community.

From a reflexive standpoint, the 2021 Moroccan electoral reform may resonate with certain integrative theories of representation, notably those developed by Hanna Pitkin [34], Bernard Manin [35], and Michael Saward [36]. These approaches encourage a departure from a strictly procedural reading of the electoral mandate by recognizing the representative's active role in interpreting collective interests, even when not explicitly manifested through voting. In this perspective, representation does not merely reproduce an expressed will but extends to a symbolic integration of silent, dispersed, or structurally marginalized segments of the electorate.

This reading invites us to assess the reform through the lens of a conception of representation grounded as much in civic membership as in voting. The transition from a quotient based on valid votes to one based on the number of registered voters may thus be interpreted—cautiously, as institutional analysis demands—as an attempt to symbolically expand the represented body. By modifying the calculation base, the reform does not alter vote distribution, but redefines the electoral referent upon which vote-to-seat conversion is organized. In doing so, it may reflect, even indirectly, a desire to include within the representative architecture those who, though silent at the ballot box, remain legally part of the electorate.

Such an interpretation aligns with integrative theories of representation, which posit that the representative function entails more than the aggregation of expressed wills and must account for the latent structures of the political abstentionists, marginalized groups, or the socially disengaged. This shift may reflect a more encompassing conception of legitimacy, based on implicit civic inclusion. The critical question remains whether such a theoretical reading finds tangible resonance in practice, or whether it is merely a contingent byproduct of a reform driven by circumstantial motives.

In this light, the 2021 reform cannot be reduced to a standalone technical operation. It must be situated within a broader shift in the criteria of representative legitimacy—one that exposes fundamental tensions between competing conceptions of democratic linkage.

The analysis of parliamentary arguments reveals that this transformation of the electoral quotient is grounded in competing justifications that are legally admissible

but politically irreconcilable. It reconfigures representative legitimacy, where fidelity to the vote gives way to a logic of power-balancing.

This evolution raises a fundamental question: To what extent can an electoral system expand the bases of representation without weakening the link between democratic expression and the selection of governors? In this respect, the 2021 reform does not merely constitute a technical adjustment, but rather a normative turning point that warrants critical scrutiny in light of the principles of proportional suffrage, comparative electoral standards, and the political effects it produces within the partisan landscape.

7. Electoral quotient and representativeness: Assessment of practical and symbolic effects

The decision to base the electoral quotient on the number of registered voters, rather than on validly cast votes, does not constitute a mere technical operation. It introduces structural inertia into the translation of votes into seats, with consequences that are significant both in terms of representative functioning and in citizens' perceptions of the electoral process.

Operationally, this change mechanically increases the quotient by artificially inflating its numerator. The number of votes required to obtain a seat is thereby raised, particularly in constituencies with low turnout. This weakens the electoral yield of each vote, reducing the probability that an expressed ballot will translate into effective representation [37].

One of the most evident effects of this distortion is the partial neutralization of electoral disparities between parties, thereby fragmenting political representation within the House of Representatives [4]. It dilutes the majoritarian effect and reduces the visibility of electoral performance. For instance, during the 2021 legislative elections in Casablanca-Anfa, a party that garnered 41% of the valid votes was represented equally with a party that received only 8%, without this asymmetry translating into seat allocation [38].

This bias benefits parties with weak but widespread national presence at the expense of those with strong local bases. The system thus produces a differential yield between types of parties, inverting the usual logic of electoral reward. This dynamic evokes, in a different context, the mechanical effects identified by Maurice Duverger [39] in majoritarian systems, a structural advantage is conferred upon broadly dispersed parties, even when weak, to the detriment of those with concentrated local support. Here, the dynamic does not result from a single-member system but from a distortion specific to Morocco's proportional system, introduced by the use of registered voters in the quotient formula.

The systemic effect is twofold: On one hand, it alters the competitive balance between political parties by undermining their ability to capitalize on localized electoral strength; on the other hand, it reshapes the overall configuration of the assembly by favoring a more homogeneous distribution of seats, sometimes disconnected from actual vote differentials. Several observers noted, during the 2021 legislative elections, a homogenization of outcomes despite significant variation in electoral mobilization.

This phenomenon directly contributes to the amplification of "electoral wastage," understood as the share of valid votes—distinct from blank or null ballots—that result in no seat. Wastage may stem from several scenarios: Failure to meet the legal eligibility threshold, insufficient votes to reach the required quotient, or the inability

to convert vote surpluses into an additional seat. Recent studies have shown that thresholds, whether explicit or implicit, mechanically deprive a significant segment of the electorate of representation, thereby undermining the proportional logic of the system [40]. Using registered voters as the basis for the electoral quotient artificially elevates this arithmetic threshold, increasing the proportion of unconverted votes. This effect is especially pronounced in low-turnout districts, where remainders, often too far from a second quotient, become unusable, reinforcing the wastage dynamic.

This logic of wastage—already intensified by an inflated quotient—is further exacerbated when combined with the largest remainder method, which allocates residual seats based on vote fractions often too small to be decisive. In a context where the quotient is artificially elevated, these remainders become practically unusable, making the final distribution of seats highly sensitive to minuscule arithmetic differences, sometimes disconnected from actual electoral strength. The result is a distribution that may appear counterintuitive, even arbitrary, fueling a perception of inequity in the representative process. These side effects, well-documented in the literature on the paradoxes of vote-to-seat conversion, undermine the clarity and fairness that proportional representation is expected to guarantee [41].

The effects of a quotient based on registered voters are not confined to arithmetic distortions; they also engage core symbolic and normative dimensions of representational legitimacy. By including all registered voters—abstainers included—in the vote-to-seat conversion, the system sends a paradoxical signal: The voice of a nonparticipant indirectly influences the distribution of legislative power. This dissociation undermines democratic intelligibility and the legitimacy of elected officials. As G. Bingham Powell has shown [42], citizens' perception of the actual influence of their vote is a pillar of democratic performance: When the conversion mechanism appears unresponsive to electoral expression, the very idea of representation is weakened—particularly in high-abstention contexts.

This normative bias may also yield negative behavioral effects. When the system visibly diminishes the weight of the expressed vote, it tends to discourage participation. Skeptical voters—already inclined toward withdrawal—may interpret the diminished efficacy of their vote as confirmation of their political marginality. According to Mark Franklin [43], such mechanisms can engender a vicious cycle of electoral demobilization, in which declining turnout is not met with appropriate institutional responses but instead reinforced by rules that fail to valorize actual voting. Ultimately, this logic undermines a core tenet of representative democracy: The belief that every vote can meaningfully shape political outcomes.

This observation raises a fundamental question: Should an electoral system not incentivize participation? Yet by privileging registered voters over actual voters, the Moroccan system seems to send the opposite signal. It disconnects electoral performance from seat allocation, reducing voters' capacity to influence legislative composition. In doing so, it calls into question one of the foundations of democratic representation: Equality of suffrage, understood not merely as formal equality but as equality in effective political power.

Nevertheless, this issue remains largely absent from Moroccan legal scholarship, which tends to focus on procedural or juridical aspects of the electoral process. This deficit calls for empirical approaches: Simulations, modeling, and comparative studies. Such tools would allow us to move beyond contingent political polemics and produce a more rigorous diagnosis anchored in the structural realities of the representational system.

8. Electoral quotient: Toward an empirical objectification of the effects of the new formula

The preceding analyses have highlighted the structural distortions induced by Morocco's adoption of an electoral quotient based on the number of registered voters. While the mechanical, symbolic, and behavioral effects have been theorized on normative grounds and illustrated through qualitative observations, their validation now requires a more systematic empirical undertaking. The goal is to objectify the biases generated by this calculation rule through a series of simulations, modeling exercises, and comparative inquiries, thus moving beyond isolated findings and transient controversies.

Several analytical avenues may be pursued. The first would be to assess whether using registered voters as the basis tends to diminish the electoral yield of highly mobilizing parties in high-turnout constituencies, compared to a formula based solely on valid votes cast. This approach would allow for testing the hypothesis of a structural disadvantage for parties with disciplined but concentrated electorates. Secondly, it would be necessary to measure the extent to which this rule increases the share of expressed votes that are not converted into seats—in other words, to quantify the scale of electoral wastage induced by the formula.

It would also be pertinent to investigate whether the quotient based on registered voters artificially standardizes seat distribution among parties by narrowing representational gaps between unevenly performing formations. This leveling effect could be measured through dispersion indices and compared against an alternative formula. Another line of inquiry would be to test the effect of turnout on the marginal yield of votes: that is, to verify whether, in high-mobilization constituencies, an expressed vote paradoxically becomes less effective due to the discrepancy between actual turnout and the reference base for seat allocation.

Finally, beyond quantitative modeling, a complementary behavioral approach could explore the effects of this rule on political attitudes. It would be conceivable to conduct a survey or a controlled population experiment to assess whether awareness of the calculation method affects voting intention, perceived vote efficacy, or the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. Such instruments would enable a better understanding of the latent effects of a quotient perceived as unresponsive to actual electoral expression.

Taken together, these hypotheses and protocols aim to equip Moroccan electoral analysis with rigorous diagnostic tools, capable of quantifying the distortions generated by the prevailing rule and of situating the debate on the electoral quotient within a broader problematic: That of the real conditions for an effective, intelligible, and democratically legitimate proportional representation system.

9. Conclusion

The analysis of Morocco's electoral quotient, as reformed in 2021, reveals a structural tension between the normative foundations of proportional representation and the arithmetic logics now governing the conversion of votes into seats. The choice to base the quotient on the number of registered voters, rather than solely on validly cast votes, does not constitute a mere technical variation. It fundamentally reshapes the perimeter of electoral will considered in representation, by incorporating abstainers into the representative calculation and thereby redefining the conditions for political access.

This shift in referential framework produces practical, symbolic, and behavioral effects. It raises the implicit threshold required to obtain a seat, exacerbates electoral wastage, favors certain party profiles, and weakens the clarity of the relationship between electoral expression and legislative power. These documented effects stand in tension with the principles of equal suffrage and representative fidelity.

In the Moroccan context, this formula departs from comparative standards: Democracies employing proportional representation calculate the quotient based on the expressed votes in order to ensure a transparent and performative conversion of political will. The Moroccan exception thus raises questions about the very meaning of electoral citizenship, insofar as it assigns representative weight to abstention, to the detriment of actual participation.

Beyond the formal legality upheld by the Constitutional Court, this choice calls for critical scrutiny from a democratic standpoint. Can a system that diminishes the impact of voting be deemed equitable? Can the imperative of inclusivity justify the dilution of expressed sovereignty?

The lack of in-depth doctrinal analysis on these issues in Moroccan literature underscores the need for renewed approaches. This study has sketched such a pathway by proposing a rigorous problem and avenues for modeling. The objective is not to condemn a particular option, but to evaluate its implications from the standpoint of electoral justice and democratic vitality.

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Section 2

Election Dynamics in Global North

Chapter 7

Political Violence Reported in Media against Candidates for the Senate and Federal Deputies in the 2024 Mexican Elections

Felipe Marañón

Abstract

The Mexican federal election process of 2024 was marked by intense media coverage on radio and television, systematically monitored in a joint effort between the National Electoral Institute (INE) and the Autonomous University of Nuevo León (UANL). This chapter looks specifically at the portrayal of political violence in traditional media, focusing on campaigns to the Senate and the federal deputations. Using the records available on the platform <https://monitoreo2024.ine.mx/home>, we review the mentions and narratives associated with political violence reported in the media. The methodology used includes a descriptive analysis of variables related to political violence, such as: type of violence (symbolic, verbal, physical), gender of the actor affected, party affiliation, and frequency of appearance in news. Patterns were identified that show how certain parties and candidacies were more mentioned in relation to acts of violence, revealing a differential treatment in the coverage that can influence public perception. It also examines the way in which news outlets approached violence from a denunciation or normalization approach. This chapter seeks to contribute to the understanding of the media as active agents in the construction of political discourse, by amplify or minimize expressions of violence within democratic processes. The study is set in a context where political violence is not only a worrying phenomenon in terms of security, but also a variable that impacts the electoral contest.

Keywords: political violence, Mexican elections, senate, federal deputies, media

1. Introduction

Political violence in Mexico has reached a concerning dimension that extends beyond physical harm, manifesting also in symbolic, discursive, and media-driven forms. As electoral processes become more complex, political actors face not only unequal conditions of competition but also threats, aggression, and smear campaigns

designed to hinder their participation. While this issue has gained greater visibility in recent years, the attention has tended to focus on extreme cases—such as assassinations or disappearances—while failing to recognize subtler forms of violence reproduced in media channels. In this regard, it is essential to analyze how political violence is represented, concealed, or amplified in news broadcasts and informational programs during electoral campaigns.

The 2024 federal electoral process provides a critical context for examining this issue, particularly concerning candidacies for the Mexican Congress. As central figures in the legislative system, senators and federal deputies are highly visible in the media—yet their coverage is not always equitable or analytically rigorous. Numerous studies have documented how media outlets often prioritize conflict, strategy, and spectacle over substantive issues, replicating stigmas and hate speech that fuel an exclusionary and violent political culture [1, 2]. When exercised through media discourse, this violence not only delegitimizes political opponents but also erodes public trust in democratic institutions.

By analyzing media monitoring reports produced by Mexico's National Electoral Institute (Instituto Nacional Electoral, INE) during the 2024 electoral cycle, this study seeks to identify how political violence is portrayed in media coverage of federal senatorial and deputy campaigns. The underlying premise is that news coverage is not neutral and that disseminated narratives can either expose or perpetuate forms of exclusion, discrimination, or symbolic aggression, particularly against women, Indigenous individuals, or ideological dissidents [3].

Utilizing a theoretical framework integrating framing theory, gendered political violence, electoral communication, and legislative representation, this study applies content analysis to INE reports. The goal is to establish patterns in coverage, frequency of mentions, and the journalistic tone of political violence cases involving congressional candidates and members. Ultimately, this study aims to provide a critical perspective on the media's role in shaping the symbolic dimensions of political violence in Mexico and its impact on democratic legitimacy and legislative governance.

2. Election campaigns and news coverage

In contemporary democracies, election campaigns serve as pivotal moments of political mobilization. They are also periods of intense media exposure, during which news programs become essential channels of information for millions of citizens. In the Mexican context, television and digital news platforms continue to dominate as primary intermediaries between candidates and the public, though not always from a position of neutrality or substantive focus.

Drawing from theories such as agenda-setting and framing, which examine how media selects and emphasizes certain aspects of reality to construct specific narratives [4], it has been demonstrated that Mexican news programs tend to favor strategic framing. Research confirms that coverage often centers on political competition, focusing on campaign strategies, polls, and confrontations, while suppressing in-depth analysis of policy proposals and programmatic content [5].

This pattern reemerged prominently during the 2024 presidential election. A study by Muñoz [6], based on monitoring by Mexico's National Electoral Institute (INE), found that radio and television prioritized coverage framed around candidate rivalries, followed by personal aspects—such as their public image or trajectory—while substantive ideas and policy discussions remained marginal.

This phenomenon is not new. Similar patterns were observed in the 2012 and 2018 elections, where media outlets reproduced a competitive logic, reducing space for substantive democratic debate [1]. Such dynamics tend to generate negative effects on audiences, including increased political cynicism, distrust in institutions, and greater civic apathy [7].

In 2024, media coverage was also characterized by the personalization of candidates. Claudia Sheinbaum, for instance, received more frequent and extensive coverage than her rivals, on both digital platforms and television [8]. However, much of this coverage revolved around her role as AMLO's political heir, her personal attributes, or isolated controversies rather than her policy platform.

Digital news platforms were no exception to these trends. Milenio, Infobae, El Financiero, and La Jornada displayed uneven coverage, with Xóchitl Gálvez, the PAN-PRI-PRD coalition candidate, receiving less visibility and, in some cases, unfavorable framing [8]. Such treatment influences public perception and may directly impact voting intentions, as suggested by various electoral studies [9].

Despite the growing influence of digital media, television remains the primary source of campaign information for citizens. A 2024 post-election CNEP survey found that 69% of citizens relied on television for news during the campaign, surpassing even social media [10]. Television's sustained viewership primacy underscores the need for critical analysis of news programs as producers of political meaning.

For female candidates, news coverage has perpetuated patterns of underrepresentation and stereotyping. In the 2021 gubernatorial campaigns, for example, women candidates received less coverage, were rarely presented as the main actors, and were more frequently reduced to gender-based narratives [11]. Despite formal parity in candidacies, media coverage did not reflect this equity.

This pattern extends to presidential campaigns. Female candidates' gender is often unnecessarily highlighted, while personal traits—such as motherhood or fashion choices—receive disproportionate attention compared to male candidates. International studies reinforce this observation: Even in Switzerland and Scandinavian nations, where political equality is high, women receive less substantive coverage [12].

Latin American media share structural issues such as corporate concentration and political instrumentalization. A study of Colombia's RCN and Caracol news programs showed that candidate portrayals were shaped by the outlets' ideological affinities, constraining informational pluralism [13]. This mirrors Mexico's landscape, where major television conglomerates have historically maintained ties with incumbent governments.

It is important to note that the effects of news coverage, particularly on television, are not unidirectional. While constant exposure to certain narratives may breed cynicism, evidence also suggests it can foster political engagement, enhancing civic sophistication and strengthening democracy [1, 3]. This highlights the urgency of transforming how news media tackle campaigns.

Mexico presents a paradox: institutional mechanisms like INE monitoring aim to ensure equity; however, media content remains influenced by commercial interests, narrative biases, and formats favoring superficiality. News reporting is far from neutral—it is shaped by editorial decisions that frame reality and mold public opinion.

Simultaneously, audiences are not merely passive recipients. Research by Muñiz [6] demonstrates that citizens can cultivate critical interpretations, particularly when exposed to countervailing information or possessing higher political sophistication. Yet this capacity remains confined to specific demographic segments, while the majority of voters depend on the dominant narratives propagated by news outlets.

Given this landscape, it is imperative to reimagine the role of news media in the democratic ecosystem. This is not merely about monitoring quantitative coverage equity, but about fostering frames that promote deliberation, transparency, and public issue literacy. Citizens deserve information that enables informed decisions—not just political entertainment packaged as poll wars or scandals.

In Mexico, both television and digital news outlets have become pivotal actors in shaping electoral campaigns. However, their tendency to prioritize strategic and personal framing over substantive policy discussions undermines the democratic quality of the process. Without a profound transformation in media logic, the promise of a deliberative citizenry will remain unfulfilled.

3. Elections for Mexican senators and deputies

The Congress of the Union, as the legislative branch of the Mexican state, is periodically renewed through federal elections. Every 3 years, the 500 federal deputies are elected, and every 6 years, the 128 senators make up the upper chamber [14]. This periodic renewal is not only a cornerstone of democratic representation but also a symbolic and media-driven battle in which political parties strive to position their candidates through strategic messaging, polls, and intensive news coverage.

During electoral campaigns, media coverage of congressional candidates tends to focus on conflict, tactics, and competition rather than legislative proposals. Muñiz [5] demonstrated that the logic of competition prevails over substantive policy discussions in media coverage, directly shaping how citizens perceive Congress' relevancy.

In this context, elections for senators and federal deputies become key moments to observe how the media frames the legislative branch. Rather than highlighting its institutional functions, responsibilities, or constitutional relevance, coverage tends to focus on winners and losers, strategic alliances, and campaign scandals [15]. This perpetuates a superficial narrative that fails to deepen public understanding of Congress's role in Mexican democracy.

The Chamber of Deputies consists of 500 legislators—300 elected by relative majority and 200 through proportional representation. The Senate, meanwhile, comprises 128 members: two per state elected by relative majority, one from the runner-up party in each state, and 32 allocated *via* a national list. This design aims to reflect both popular will and the country's territorial composition [14]. However, news outlets and digital media often fail to cover congressional campaigns with the same depth as presidential races.

Before examining their media coverage, it is necessary to define these legislative roles. As Acuña Martínez [16] explains, senators represent their respective states in the upper chamber, exercising authority over legislation, foreign policy matters, and constitutional review. Federal deputies, conversely, serve in the lower chamber through proportional population representation, and holding key responsibilities such as budget approval, fiscal oversight, and lawmaking.

During the 2024 electoral cycle, congressional candidates received less airtime and minimal substantive discussion of their platforms. Digital platforms like Milenio and El Financiero, along with television news programs, prioritized presidential candidates, relegating legislative contenders to brief mentions or partisan controversies [8].

This phenomenon carries troubling democratic implications. As Cappella and Jamieson [7] argue, strategy-focused coverage can fuel cynicism and depress political engagement. When the news outlets neglect to explain what deputies and senators

actually do—or how their decisions affect daily life—they erode the connection between the public and Congress.

Nevertheless, Congress remains vital to democratic governance. Its role extends beyond lawmaking to include oversight, appointment confirmations, and impeachment proceedings. Since the 1824 Constitution, the legislative branch has been a cornerstone of Mexican federalism, embodying popular sovereignty within a system of separated powers [14, 16].

The problem is that this importance is rarely communicated clearly during campaigns. Media coverage often sidelines legislative debate or reduces it to power struggles. For example, a party's seat gains might be framed as a tactical victory without explaining their impact on budgets, oversight, or foreign policy [6].

Moreover, media portrayals of congressional candidates are permeated by stereotypes, particularly for women. Prior research has shown how female candidates in past elections received less visibility or were confined to discussions about personal traits rather than policy positions [11].

In contrast, initiatives like open parliament and the Congressional TV channel were designed to reverse this trend by creating permanent platforms for visibility and dialog beyond election cycles. Godínez Rivera [17] highlights how these mechanisms aim to demystify legislative work and engage citizens—though challenges in accessibility and outreach persist.

The relationship between media and Congress also reflects tensions in Mexico's federal system. While the Senate represents the federal entities, media coverage does not always reflect this plurality and frequently prioritizes actors from the capital or major parties, reinforcing a centralized view of power [18].

The challenge, then, is not just institutional but communicative. For the Congress of the Union to fully fulfill its representative role, an informed citizenry is essential—and this requires media to uphold their public-service mandate. The task is to move beyond spectacle-driven coverage and instead contextualize, explain, and scrutinize legislators, both during campaigns and in office.

Meanwhile, the INE's official website has promoted key information about Congress—its functions, legislator profiles, party composition, and public engagement tools. However, this information rarely reaches voters unless media outlets actively incorporate it into their coverage [14].

Analyzing the Congress of the Union requires understanding how citizens perceive, interpret, and engage with their representatives. Electoral campaigns for senators and deputies play a decisive role in either reinforcing or weakening the connection between legislative institutions and the public. If the media continues prioritizing spectacle over substance, legislative work will remain seen as an empty exercise, detached from the public's real needs [16].

4. Political violence

Political violence in Mexico has evolved from a peripheral concern to a structural phenomenon that undermines the country's democratic development. This violence manifests not only in physical attacks, assassinations, or direct threats but also in symbolic forms perpetuated daily through media channels. Media visibility, however, does not always foster critical understanding of the phenomenon; instead, outlets reproduce narratives that reinforce stigmas, trivialize facts, or obscure the underlying power dynamics [19].

From a critical perspective, media coverage of political violence tends to vacillate between sensationalism and minimization. According to Palazuelos Rojo [15], the growing circulation of violent audiovisual content through digital networks and media has led to a ‘mimeticization’ of violence—an esthetic reproduction of violent acts that ultimately normalizes them in the collective imagination. This trend proves particularly alarming in electoral contexts, where violence not only escalates but is also politically instrumentalized.

In recent electoral processes in Mexico, the media have played a dual role: On one hand, they report on acts of violence linked to candidacies, and on the other, they produce discourses that often stigmatize victims. As Carvajal Larios [19] and Cerna Cerna [20] argue, media outlets tend to frame these events within a ‘crime news’ logic—devoid of political context and devoid of any analysis of the structural causes of electoral violence.

A clear example was the media coverage of candidate assassinations during the 2021 electoral process. Rather than analyzing these killings as symptoms of systemic political violence, many news programs and digital platforms reduced them to criminal narratives tied to drug trafficking or local conflicts. A report by the NGO Causa en Común [21] documented 80 politicians murdered between September 2020 and June 2021—including candidates and incumbents—yet few outlets provided sustained, in-depth analysis of these attacks.

Gender-based political violence has also received limited media attention. Despite legal reforms mandating gender parity in candidacies, women continue to face disproportionate aggression. According to INMUJERES [22], violence against female candidates ranges from public smears in media and online platforms to physical threats. Yet coverage often treats these cases as isolated anecdotes, ignoring the structural dimensions of gender inequality.

Within this context, media-driven hate speech also plays a central role. Ordoñez, Espinoza, and Vizuete [2] argue that mainstream and digital media have served as channels to amplify misogynistic, homophobic, or xenophobic messages targeting diverse candidates. Far from being isolated incidents, these discourses form part of a representational system that reproduces hierarchies and exclusions within the political sphere.

Another critical issue is the absence of ethical protocols for reporting on political violence. Despite existing legal frameworks guaranteeing the right to information and freedom of expression, media outlets do not always operate with principles of social responsibility. As Palazuelos Rojo [15] notes, the digitalization of violence and its circulation through social networks fosters an emotional, immediate consumption logic where sensationalism replaces substantive analysis.

During electoral campaigns, political violence also manifests through the strategic use of misinformation and rumor. Many media outlets—particularly on digital platforms—circulate unverified content that jeopardizes the safety of political actors. This symbolic violence erodes trust, fuels polarization, and can escalate into physical violence, as documented in the Electoral Observatory’s 2023 report [23].

Media outlets also contribute to the invisibilization of certain forms of violence. Attacks against Indigenous political actors, for example, receive minimal media coverage, despite these groups facing specific risks during electoral processes [17]. Carvajal Larios [19] highlights how the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status exacerbates risk factors—yet media rarely address this from an intersectional perspective.

This overview reveals that political violence is not merely a security issue, but also one of representation and narrative. Media’s framing power directly shapes how

society interprets, justifies, or condemns such acts. As Muñiz and Echeverría [1] demonstrate, media frameworks establish the rules of the symbolic game during campaigns—legitimizing or delegitimizing political actors based on how their trajectories and assaults are narrated.

The lack of pluralistic coverage directly contributes to an environment of impunity. When media fail to rigorously investigate or report on these issues, political violence becomes ‘normalized’ and even ‘expected’ within electoral processes [24]. This erosion of accountability undermines the foundations of representative democracy while enabling authoritarian practices under institutional veneers.

For federal senators and deputies, political violence assumes distinct forms, given their high visibility and institutional power. Nevertheless, this does not shield them from being targeted—particularly in the polarized contexts. According to INE [14], multiple federal legislators have reported threats, digital harassment, and smear campaigns during their terms or reelection bids.

Symbolic violence against lawmakers also proliferates through media. Legislators are routinely caricatured, discredited, or ridiculed, while ignoring how such portrayals distort public perception. Blanco Rodríguez and Muñiz Díaz [25] argue this narrative corrodes congressional legitimacy and suppress democratic dialog.

Moreover, legislative campaigns rarely receive substantive coverage. While presidential contenders dominate headlines, policy proposals from senators and deputies go unnoticed. This informational void is filled by rumors, disinformation, and hate speech [5]—creating a terrain where political violence becomes harder to identify and sanction.

For women legislators, political violence takes on distinctly gendered dimensions. Female deputies and senators face not only challenges to their professional competence but also personal attacks across traditional and digital media. As Álvarez-Monsiváis and Tiscareño-García [11] document, this aggression persists even after election victories—proof that access to power does not guarantee its safe or unconstrained exercise.

Combating political violence against legislators demands a radical transformation of media narratives. Outlets must adopt ethical frameworks grounded in human rights, gender perspectives, and intersectionality. Only then can they foster an informational environment that strengthens democracy rather than accelerating its symbolic erosion [10, 18].

5. Methodology

This study employs a predominantly qualitative-interpretative approach, supplemented by descriptive tools, to analyze media coverage of political violence targeting federal senators and deputies during Mexico’s 2024 federal electoral process. It operates on the premise that political violence manifests not only through physical aggression but also through symbolic representations mediated by news discourses that reinforce stigmas, marginalize candidacies, or delegitimize political trajectories.

5.1 Study type

The research constitutes a deductive content analysis based on predefined categories from a codebook developed by Mexico’s National Electoral Institute (INE) as part of its Radio and Television News Monitoring Project, available on its official platform: <https://monitoreo2024.ine.mx/descargas-informes>. This monitoring initiative constitutes part of the INE’s institutional efforts to assess informational equity during

federal electoral processes, in compliance with Article 41 of the Mexican Constitution and Article 160 of the General Law of Electoral Institutions and Procedures.

5.2 Analysis period

The analysis focused exclusively on the federal campaign period, which ran from March 1 to May 29, 2024—the official end date for campaign activities by candidates running for elected office. This three-month timeframe was determined by the electoral calendar approved by the INE's General Council and represents the peak period of media visibility for legislative candidates.

5.3 Study universe

The study universe consisted of weekly monitoring reports pertaining solely to candidates for federal senatorial and deputy positions, excluding all data related to the presidential race or other local elections. The analysis examined mentions recorded in national and regional radio and television news programs, classified by INE according to parameters established in its official methodology.

5.4 Data collection technique

A structured content analysis technique was applied, utilizing variables and dimensions defined in the INE's codebook. This document categorizes each media intervention according to the following: mention type, gender of the individual referenced, journalistic treatment, message intent, content theme, and presence of aggressive or discriminatory language. Data was collected directly from the INE's pre-systematized official reports.

5.5 Variables analyzed

Based on the codebook and aligned with the specific objectives of this study, the following key variables were selected:

- Type of political violence: symbolic, verbal, media-based, institutional, or physical (when explicitly mentioned).

- Media treatment: positive, negative, or neutral.

- Gender of the targeted individual: woman or man.

- Position sought: senate seat or federal deputy position.

- Content theme: security, violence, hate speech, personal attacks, or erasure from coverage.

- Frequency of appearance: number of mentions during the analyzed period.

- Language used: emotional, disparaging, analytical, or sensationalized.

These variables enabled the identification of not only the frequency of political violence but also the narrative frameworks through which it was portrayed in media coverage.

5.6 Analytical categories

Based on the theoretical frameworks of Muñiz [5], Carvajal Larios [19], Palazuelos Rojo [15], and Ordoñez, Espinoza and Vizueté [2], the following analytical categories were established:

Media visibility: The frequency of mentions regarding congressional candidates in media coverage.

Discursive treatment: Whether coverage was neutral, victim-blaming, sensationalized, or contextualized.

News approach: Whether reports emphasized conflict, policy proposals, personal image, or attacks.

Gender-based violence: Identification of gender-biased coverage or content specifically targeting female candidates.

Journalistic framing: Whether reports were framed through competitive, scandal-driven, or policy-oriented narratives [1, 3].

5.7 Analytical process

The analysis was conducted in three phases:

Documentary review: Systematic examination of weekly INE monitoring reports from the campaign period.

Coding and extraction: Identification and classification of relevant mentions of senatorial and federal deputy candidates according to the selected variables.

Critical interpretation: Analysis of results through communication, political, and human rights perspectives, building upon in the previously established theoretical framework.

6. Findings

During the three-month 2024 federal election campaign, INE monitoring recorded substantial coverage of legislative candidates, though notably less coverage than presidential elections. The reviewed reports identified 1972 mentions of Senate and Chamber of Deputies candidates across radio and television news programs, with approximately 12.6% ($n = 249$) directly or indirectly linked to political violence.

Of the total coded political violence mentions, 57% targeted federal deputy candidates and 43% senatorial candidates. The most prevalent forms included media disparagement, aggressive rhetoric dissemination, and systematic erasure of certain candidacies, particularly women and those from politically volatile regions. As Ordoñez, Espinoza and Vizuete [2] warn, such symbolic violence produces effects comparable to physical exclusion: It restricts access to public debate and undermines electoral legitimacy.

Regarding media treatment, 66% of violence-related mentions were classified as negative, while only 8% were positive (i.e., condemning or supporting victims). The remaining 26% received superficial neutral coverage, lacking context or analysis. These findings align with Muñiz and Echeverría's [1] observation that media often reduce political violence to sensationalized anecdotes while ignoring structural causes.

A key finding was the dominance of strategic framing, prioritizing political competition over human rights narratives. For instance, attacks on candidates were frequently presented as electoral "dirty warfare" without explicit condemnation or institutional context. This corroborates Muñiz's [5] thesis about media favoring conflict over substantive policy coverage.

Gender analysis revealed that 61% of politically violent media coverage targeted female candidates. These attacks included remarks about their appearance, intrusions

into their private lives, and misogynistic slurs—in both traditional media and social media mentions amplified by news programs. Notably, outlets frequently failed to identify such content as violence, instead reproducing it without editorial filters. This pattern corroborates Álvarez-Monsiváis and Tiscareño-García's [11] findings on media-enabled revictimization.

National television news programs generated the highest volume of candidate mentions, followed by regional radio broadcasts. However, radio broadcasts exhibited significantly higher proportions of aggressive language or erasure tactics. Entities like Guerrero, Chiapas, Veracruz, and Oaxaca showed greater incidence of politically violent coverage targeting deputy candidates, whereas northern states like Chihuahua and Sonora concentrated media attacks on senatorial races.

An emerging trend involved normalized stigmatizing narratives—labels like “unqualified candidate,” “inexperienced,” or “party puppet” targeting youth and women candidates. As Palazuelos Rojo [15] notes, this reflects media-driven mimetization of exclusionary discourses.

In some cases, INE monitoring reports documented media interventions that constituted omission—the systematic erasure of attacks against candidates, particularly in regions with evident tensions between political parties or local power groups. This form of media silence prevents public awareness of the problem and, consequently, its resolution, as Carvajal Larios [19] previously warned.

Furthermore, smear campaigns targeting legislative candidates were identified across at least eight distinct news programs, featuring pejorative language without clear informational basis [26]. These attacks were disproportionately directed at federal deputy candidates compared to senatorial contenders—likely due to deputies' perceived closer territorial ties and higher visibility in local districts.

Regarding media language, the results reveal high sensationalization: reliance on loaded adjectives, dramatization of events, and ties to ‘danger’ or ‘scandal’ narratives—consistent with Muñiz's [6] documentation of campaign framing patterns. Rather than contextualizing violence as a democratic threat, media outlets trivialize it through emotion-driven, conflict-centric coverage.

In cases that did receive public condemnation, media coverage tended to be brief, reactive, and lacked follow-up reporting. Only 3 out of the 249 documented cases included mentions of institutional protection measures or INE interventions. This underscores journalism's failure to fulfill its social role as a safeguard of violence-free electoral competition.

Finally, it is crucial to note that these results reflect systemic underreporting. While INE's methodology is robust, its monitoring covers only select media outlets and time slots—excluding many forms of media violence, particularly on unmonitored social media and digital platforms. Nevertheless, the findings confirm that political violence against federal legislators in news media remains both persistent and institutionally neglected, by both media systems and policy agendas.

7. Discussion of findings

The findings from INE's 2024 campaign monitoring reveal a structural trend in Mexico's media ecosystem: the persistent reproduction of political violence through news discourses that trivialize, decontextualize, or erase aggression against legislative candidates. The volume of violence-tinged coverage, its predominantly negative framing, and the disproportionate targeting of women candidates (61%) substantiate

Ordoñez, Espinoza and Vizuite 's [2] work about media functioning as channels for reinforcing stereotypes and symbolic exclusion.

Rather than serving as democratic safeguards fostering pluralistic debate, many media outlets operate through a spectacle-driven logic, prioritizing narratives of conflict or scandal. This phenomenon has been extensively documented by Muñiz [1, 6], who argues that dominant electoral framing follows a strategic competition paradigm, marginalizing policy discourse. Such trivialization becomes especially alarming when covering political violence, as it not only misinforms but also risks normalizing these acts socially.

The overrepresentation of violence against women legislators—both in media discourse and through the erasure of their complaints—exposes the limitations of current gender-sensitive reporting. The persistence of stereotypes, sexist language, and the omission of political credentials in favor of personal references reinforce forms of symbolic violence that constrain women's effective exercise of power, as Álvarez-Monsiváis and Tiscareño-García [11, 24] have documented.

Likewise, the disparity in violence representation between senators and deputies suggests a media hierarchy favoring nationally prominent figures. Deputy candidates—more exposed to local and regional contexts—emerge as frequent targets in regional media, where pejorative language is more prevalent and institutional follow-up on reported cases is notably absent. This territorial imbalance aligns with Chaires Zaragoza's [18] findings on federative asymmetries and their impact on political coverage.

Another relevant factor is the way certain media outlets replicate discourse originating from social networks, often without verifying its content or purpose. This convergence between digital and traditional media presents new challenges for the analysis of political violence, as it expands both the reach and the speed at which hostile messages spread. Palazuelos Rojo [15] describes this as a process of mimeticization of violence, in which hate speech is disguised as political criticism and gains legitimacy through its constant repetition in the public sphere.

Moreover, the results reveal a profound disconnect between the constitutional principle of equity in electoral competition and its representation in the media. Although INE rigorously monitors and documents media coverage, there is no direct intervention to prevent or sanction discriminatory, biased, or violent treatment. This creates a gray area in which symbolic violence can operate with impunity, thereby undermining the regulatory framework that governs the electoral processes [12].

Finally, the fact that violent references are not problematized by the media—and are sometimes even reproduced without question—reveals an ethical deficiency in journalistic practice. This omission is not neutral: It contributes to shaping a narrative in which violence becomes a “natural” part of the political game, rather than a violation of fundamental rights to participation and representation [26].

8. Conclusions

Analysis of INE's 2024 federal election monitoring reveals that political violence against senators and federal deputies not only persists but is profoundly mediated by news narratives that reproduce stigmas, distort facts, and systematically erase incidents of aggression. The media, in their role as intermediaries between political actors and the public, have failed to ensure fair, contextualized, and unbiased coverage, thereby contributing to the symbolic normalization of violence within the electoral arena.

The data examined reveal a clear predominance of negative coverage in Ref.s associated with political violence, as well as a high proportion of such references targeting female candidates. These outcomes are not random; rather, they reflect a media structure that reproduces gender inequalities, ideological stereotypes, and delegitimizing narratives that disproportionately affect certain political profiles. As previous studies have argued [2, 5], symbolic violence—when disguised as news coverage—can be even more damaging than direct violence, as it undermines the legitimacy of candidates and weakens the democratic process.

Furthermore, news coverage of political violence against senators and deputies reveals a widespread use of journalistic framing centered on competition and scandal. This logic, which privileges emotion over analysis, obstructs the understanding of violence as a violation of human rights and as a systemic threat to political pluralism. The lack of follow-up, anecdotal framing, and absence of an ethical perspective in media reporting represent a longstanding debt of Mexican journalism to democracy.

The differential media treatment of senators versus deputies reveals a hierarchical bias in public agenda-setting. While senatorial races receive greater national visibility, federal deputy candidates face disproportionately hostile or superficial coverage—particularly in regional media where local power structures exert stronger influence. This disparity underscores the urgent need to strengthen regulatory frameworks for political communication, especially in subnational contexts.

In conclusion, the findings of this study call for reflection on the urgent need to establish a public media policy that promotes journalism grounded in human rights, a gender perspective, and clear guidelines for the coverage of political violence. Strengthening representative democracy will not be possible if media outlets continue to act as vehicles of exclusion and symbolic violence. Ensuring electoral campaigns free from media-driven violence is now an unavoidable task for all democratic institutions—including the media themselves.

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Chapter 8

The Spanish Electoral System: Effects and Proportionality

Francisco José Solano Martínez

Abstract

In the following pages, we will analyze the peculiarities of the Spanish electoral system, which, although it is proportional, is based on the province as a constituency, which has favored regionalist and nationalist parties that concentrate their votes in certain areas to the detriment of those parties that have more votes but spread throughout the national territory. Another element that has generated, in a similar way, a comparative disadvantage is the primacy given to rural and less populated areas over urban and more populated areas, and the reason for this will be analyzed. For both reasons, the electoral system has been criticized for not responding to the real representativeness of the votes cast at the ballot box. These and other issues will be dealt with in depth in the chapter you hold in your hands.

Keywords: constitution, law, electoral, party, congress

1. Introduction

The current Spanish electoral system has its roots in Royal Decree 20/1977 of March 18, on Electoral Regulations, which regulated the holding of the first democratic elections and was also applied to the elections of 1979 and 1982, extending a regulation that had been conceived as provisional. The intention was to replace it with a lasting one, which would be Organic Law 5/1985 on the General Electoral System of June 19 (LOREG) [1], which did not introduce significant changes.

Once the 1977 elections were held, the press of the time echoed the conflicting electoral interests of the parliamentary formations: in the case of the left and the nationalists, they had their votes concentrated in industrial and highly populated areas, and in the case of the Union of the Democratic Centre (Spanish: UCD) and People's Alliance (AP), in rural and less populated areas. Based on this situation, the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) and the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), but especially the socialists, advocated a system in which the number of deputies and inhabitants was proportional. In contrast, AP was the only party that openly opted for a majoritarian system, highlighting that it did not correspond to its partisan interest, since at that time the two major parties were the UCD and the PSOE, while AP was the fourth political force, but it responded to a logic in which two blocks and AP would integrate into the UCD or form a center-right coalition with them. In contrast,

the PSOE was not interested in forming blocs despite being a clear beneficiary of a majority system, as it refused to form a coalition with the PCE and aspired to hold the hegemony of the left.

Another clear point of friction was the constitutionalization of the electoral system, something the PSOE advocated for, in their case, for the proportional system, while UCD and AP advocated for regulating it through a subsequent law because it was a subject of discord.

According to Óscar Alzaga (UCD), later admitted [2], the current electoral system was adopted for reasons of circumstance, since the polls of the time gave the UCD 36–37% of the votes, so the mechanism adopted favored rural areas over industrial areas, where people tended to vote more for the PSOE. Therefore, for the socialists to reap an absolute majority, they required a higher threshold, in the 39–40% of the votes, which was no obstacle for them to achieve it in 1982. Indeed, rural areas tend to be more politically conservative in the sense that they are not very open to new parties and tend to opt for established formations.

2. Regulation of the electoral system

In our constitutional text, the electoral system is regulated by two basic precepts, as outlined in Articles 68 and 69.

Article 68 of the Constitution regulates the key aspects of the election to Congress [3], such as the number of deputies, establishing a range between 300 and 400, a question that is settled in Article 162.1 of the LOREG, which sets a total of 350 deputies, a decision that is not adopted *ex novo* but ratifies the provisions of Royal Decree-Law 20/1977 of March 18 on Electoral Standards [4], thus applying from the first democratic elections of that year. On the other hand, the Constitutional Court ruling 72/1984 of June 14 ruled [5, 6] that the core of the electoral system (who can be elected, who can elect, under what conditions, and how often) would be regulated by an organic law, in this case, the LOREG.

The Constitution establishes that the Congress deputies will be distributed by constituencies, with one deputy corresponding to each autonomous city.

During the Transition, the objective was to prevent excessive fragmentation by limiting the number of parties in the Cortes (Parliament) to avoid impeding legislative and governmental functions. This led to a concentration of political power, resulting in the over-representation of the two main parties, particularly the first one, to the detriment of smaller parties—unless these smaller parties could concentrate their support in specific regions, as seen with regionalist and nationalist groups. In this context, José Ramón Montero argues that the design of the current electoral system favors the “useful vote,” which reduces the number of parties and disadvantages smaller parties whose supporters are scattered across multiple districts. As a result, Montero believes Spain has one of the most disproportional systems among countries with similar electoral frameworks. He points out that parties with widespread electoral support, such as AP between 1977 and 1982, the Democratic and Social Centre (CDS), the PCE (later United Left, IU), and more recently, Union, Progress, and Democracy (UPyD), have been harmed by this system. In fact, the political shift that occurred in 1982 was amplified by the structure of the electoral system. The constituent assembly did not want to establish a purely proportional system, as it was not possible and did not exist in Comparative Law, proportionality being an orientation

or tendency that could be corrected by the system. Accordingly, a legal threshold of 3% of the votes was established to achieve representation.

Article 69 establishes [7, 8] a bicameral structure that is not common in constituent processes, as the Senate was not foreseen in the Law for Political Reform. It was also not one of the central issues of the constitutional debate, despite the discrepancies between the left-wing bloc (more inclined to unicameralism) and the right-wing bloc (more inclined to bicameralism), so it was not a major point of contention. The Senate was structured based on the new model of territorial organization established in Article 2 and Title VIII of the Constitution, that is, as a chamber of territorial representation.

The design of the Senate and its designation as a “chamber of territorial representation” is ambiguous because it does not have clearly territorial powers, as there has been no willingness to provide the means to support that statement. Competencies dealing with the agreements for the provision and management of services specific to the autonomous communities (Article 145.2) or those relating to the Interterritorial Compensation Fund (Article 158.2) may be cited, although in both cases Congress has the final say.

On the other hand, senators will be elected according to a mixed criterion: linear (each autonomous community is entitled to one senator regardless of population, a criterion that applies to autonomous communities with constitutional status, thus excluding Ceuta and Melilla) and variable (they are entitled to another senator for each million inhabitants, with only one in the case of autonomous communities that do not reach one million inhabitants).

It is worth mentioning what is stated in Article 69 [9, 10], which refers to the Upper House, indicating that each province will elect four senators. In the case of the island provinces, each island or group of islands, with a Cabildo or Island Council, will constitute a constituency for the purpose of electing senators, with three corresponding to the larger islands (such as Gran Canaria, Mallorca, and Tenerife) and one to the others: Ibiza-Formentera, Menorca, Fuerteventura, La Gomera, El Hierro, Lanzarote, and La Palma. Furthermore, the autonomous cities of Ceuta and Melilla are each entitled to two senators, and the autonomous communities, through their Legislative Assemblies, elect one senator plus one more for each million inhabitants.

The autonomous community senators will be designated by the Legislative Assemblies or, failing that, by the higher collegiate bodies of the autonomous communities. It is a matter of debate whether their designation should be the responsibility of the autonomous community governments and not the regional Parliaments.

3. A historical overview: Effects, advantages, and disadvantages of the current Spanish electoral system

The Spanish electoral system can be divided into five phases:

- The first phase, from 1977 to 1982, saw the formation of the party system with moderate multi-partyism, where two main parties (UCD and PSOE) dominated but did not surpass 70% of the vote. Smaller parties, such as PCE and AP, along with various regional parties, participated as well. This phase came to an end in 1982 after the collapse of UCD.

- The collapse of UCD marked the beginning of the second phase, which lasted from 1982 to 1993. During this period, PSOE secured consecutive absolute majorities, while AP (which later became the People's Party, or PP) remained a distant second. AP was unable to capture the full center vote that UCD had once commanded, which was instead partly absorbed by the CDS.
- The third phase began when the PP began to consolidate the center-right, leading to a realignment of the party system in 1993. This phase lasted until 2015, characterized by two parties, PSOE and PP, competing more evenly for victory. However, both needed the support of smaller parties, mainly the nationalist Convergence and Union (CIU) and the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV), to secure a majority. IU (United Left), despite being the third-largest party, struggled due to the electoral system, preventing it from playing a kingmaker role in ensuring governability. The absolute majority in this period (2000 and 2011) were largely due to the collapse of PSOE, with PP gaining some of its votes, especially from a volatile and centrist electorate. This group, lacking strong party loyalty, often tipped the balance in favor of one party or the other. Generally, the gap between the two major parties was narrow, as seen in 1996, 2004, and 2008.
- The fourth phase covers the period from 2015, when new formations of medium electoral size have emerged at the national level, such as Podemos, Citizens, and later, Vox. This means returning, with certain nuances, to the scenario of the beginning of democracy (1977–1982), with the difference that these parties have entered with more force, as a result of the disaffection with bipartisanship that arose after the 15-M movement. For this reason, a part of the electorate wanted these new actors to replace the traditional parties, but they were ultimately relegated to the role of kingmakers despite achieving a greater electoral weight than in the Transition, when the best result of these third parties was the 23 seats of the PCE in 1979, which contrasts with the 71 of Podemos in 2016.

A characteristic feature of the electoral system has been that the highest turnout has been recorded in elections that resulted in change (1977, 1982 with the UCD's downfall, 1993 with the realignment of forces, 1996 with the PP's first victory, and 2004 with the PP's loss of government and the PSOE's return), and the lowest turnout, with the exception of the 2011 elections, in continuity elections where the government in power was re-elected (1979, 1986, 1989, and 2000).

The 2015 general elections revealed a change in trend, shifting from an imperfect two-party system to a multi-party system, with four parties capable of forming coalitions. The 2015 elections were the first since the beginning of democracy in which four parties exceeded the 10% threshold of votes without any reaching 30%: PP (28.7%), PSOE (22%), Podemos (20.7%), and Citizens (13.9%), with the difference between the first and fourth parties being narrow, at 15.8% and 83 seats. In turn, these elections marked a new paradigm, with the most voted party (in this case, the PP) having the lowest number of seats (123), and also being the first time that the second party remained below the 100-seat threshold (the PSOE with 90 seats). In the 2016 general elections, this trend was repeated, with a slight increase in the two-party system, as the votes representing PP and PSOE increased by 5%, although the lowest levels of participation in democracy were recorded (66.5%) (**Table 1**).

Legislature	Years	Government	Seats	Percentage	Parliamentary Situation
Constituent	1977–1979	Adolfo Suárez (UCD)	166	34.44	Simple Majority
I	1979–1982	Adolfo Suárez (UCD)	168	34.84	Simple Majority
II	1982–1986	Felipe González (PSOE)	202	48.11	Absolute Majority
III	1986–1989	Felipe González (PSOE)	184	44.06	Absolute Majority
IV	1989–1993	Felipe González (PSOE)	175 ^a	39.60	Simple Majority
V	1993–1996	Felipe González (PSOE)	159	38.78	Simple Majority
VI	1996–2000	José María Aznar (PP)	156	38.79	Simple Majority
VII	2000–2004	José María Aznar (PP)	183	44.22	Absolute Majority
VIII	2004–2008	José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE)	164	42.59	Simple Majority
IX	2008–2011	José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero (PSOE)	169	43.87	Simple Majority
X	2011–2015	Mariano Rajoy (PP)	186	44.63	Absolute Majority
XI	2015–2016	Mariano Rajoy (PP)	123	28.71	Simple Majority
XII	2016–2019 ^b	Mariano Rajoy (PP)	137	33.01	Simple Majority
		Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	85	22.63	Minority
XIII	2019	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	123	28.68	Simple Majority
XIV	2019–2023	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	120	28.25	Simple Majority
XV	2023–	Pedro Sánchez (PSOE)	121	31.68	Minority ^c

^aFelipe González was able to govern thanks to the absence of Herri Batasuna (HB) deputies throughout the legislature.
^bAs of July 2018, through a motion of censure, Mariano Rajoy was replaced in the government by Pedro Sánchez.
^cThe most voted force was Alberto Núñez Feijóo's Partido Popular with 137 seats, but the PSOE gathered the necessary parliamentary support to form a government.

Table 1.
Parliamentary status of the government by legislature.

Some of the notable characteristics of the current electoral system include the size of the Congress. With 350 deputies, it is one of the smallest on the continent in relation to the population, leading it to be labeled “the most stunted chamber in Europe.” Another defining feature is that the division by constituencies is based on the province, despite the fact that the 1978 Constitution grants them a mere role as local entities with a residual function. This is in contrast to the Spanish territorial system, which revolves around the autonomous communities, which hold the bulk of powers, causing the province to lose much of its political and administrative relevance. Added to this is the fact that Spain, along with Italy and Portugal, is one of the few European countries that combines a proportional system with closed and blocked lists, limiting the accountability of deputies.

Spain currently operates under a mixed electoral system in which the Senate follows a majority-based approach. In this system, the list that receives the most votes in a constituency secures 75% of the votes, while the second-highest list receives the remaining 25%. In contrast, the Congress uses a semi-proportional system. According to Article 68 of the Constitution, this system limits the allocation of seats to provincial constituencies and sets a 3% threshold for gaining representation. As noted by Moreno Morcillo, the electorate often perceives that in regions without nationalist

movements, votes tend to “count for less” unless they cast for the major parties, and in smaller constituencies, third parties have historically had little influence on seat distribution (**Figure 1**) [11].

The majority of voters focus their attention on Congress, as it holds the power to oversee and potentially censure the government, as demonstrated in the current legislature. This focus on the Congress often influences voting behavior in the other chambers.

The current electoral formula has been endorsed by the Constitutional Court in its rulings 40/1981 of December 18 [12, 13] and 75/1985 of June 21 [14–16], upholding a proportional system over a majoritarian one, since, in the High Court’s opinion, a proportional system does not imply exact or mathematical proportionality.

The Congress is governed by d’Hondt’s method, and the LOREG (Organic Law on General Electoral System) establishes an electoral threshold with a minimum percentage of valid votes. The Constitution establishes that the Congress will have between 300 and 400 members, with the LOREG setting the figure at 350. Consequently, Ceuta and Melilla will have one deputy each, and the remaining provinces will require a minimum of two deputies, with the number of deputies increasing according to the population of the constituency.

The LOREG saw very few procedural changes during its passage through the Cortes (Parliament), receiving widespread approval and almost unanimous backing during its legislative process. In this regard, Spain has one of the smallest congresses in Europe, especially when compared to the allowance in Article 68.1 of the Constitution, which permits up to 400 deputies. At the same time, the 3% threshold has little practical effect, as seats are typically divided between the top two parties. Contrary to common belief, many parties that exceed this threshold still fail to gain representation.

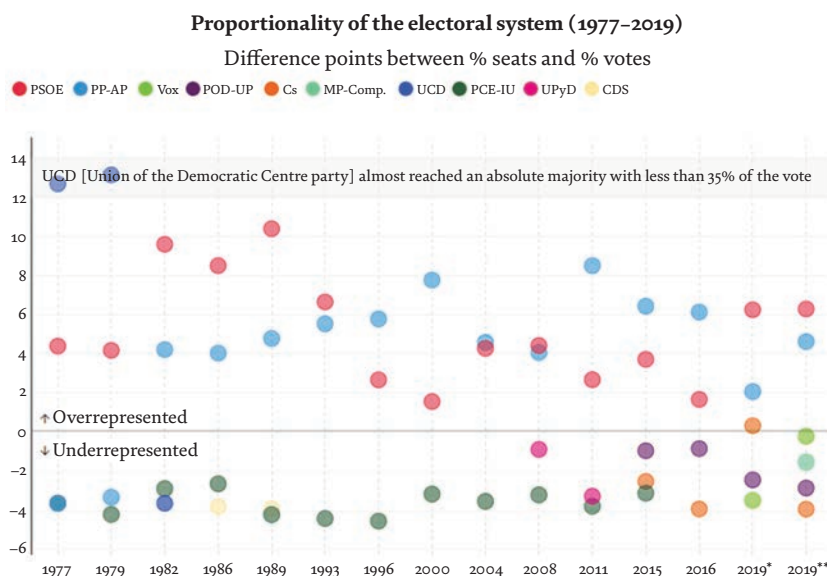


Figure 1.
Disproportionality between votes and seats in all legislatures. Source: Ministry of Interior and Demócrata. Información Parlamentaria.

3.1 Governability and proportionality: Two sides of the same coin

One of the virtues of the current electoral system has been governability, yielding four absolute majorities (1982, 1986, 2000, and 2011), and in the remaining elections until 2015, as a consequence of the fragmentation that led to the shortest legislature in the democratic era – lasting only 4 months and triggering a repeat election. In this sense, in four decades of democracy, there have been 5 years of UCD government (1977–1982), 14 years of PSOE (1982–1996), 8 years of PP (1996–2004), almost 8 years of PSOE (2004–2011), six and a half years of PP (2011–2018), and again, the PSOE. This stability has had three cornerstones: PP, PSOE, and nationalists, to which three new forces, Podemos, Citizens, and Vox, have recently been added.

On the negative side, there is a disconnect between votes and seats, as in every legislature, some parties have received more votes than others but have ended up with fewer seats due to the differing “cost” of seats across constituencies. This discrepancy pushes the current electoral system further from proportionality. Specifically, gaining representation in less populated provinces like Soria and Segovia is five times more challenging than in more populated provinces like Madrid and Barcelona.

In fact, the Council of State, in its report [17], pointed out that the most populated provinces were underrepresented compared to the least populated ones (which were overrepresented), and therefore proposes increasing the number of seats in Congress as a solution. Consequently, some doctrinal currents advocate for one deputy per province plus 398 based on population, with each province having at least two seats.

The parties most affected by the reduction in votes would be nationalist formations, which would try to form coalitions, just as they do in European elections, in order to face a single reduction in votes and not one for each party. The authors point out that if this were to occur, there could be two coalitions, in the style of the European ones, aimed at grouping nationalists and regionalists of the same ideological leaning.

The two major parties concentrated 80% of the seats in Congress until 2015, while small national parties concentrated 41 seats in 1977 (from the PCE, AP, and People's Socialist Party, PSP), 31 in 1989 (from IU and CDS) and only 18 in 1996 (all of them from IU). Therefore, small formations are often forced to merge or form coalitions with larger ones, as is the case with the PP and its regionalist partners Navarrese People's Union (UPN), Asturias Forum (FAC), and Aragonese Party (PAR), or in the past (specifically, in 1982 and 1986), with AP, which allied with smaller formations such as the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the Liberal Party (PL).

According to various authors, the current configuration of the electoral system has a stifling effect on small and medium-sized parties due to its majoritarian bias. This not only harms small parties but also those that start as small parties and then increase their representation to become medium-sized, something that does not happen with formations that enter directly as medium-sized, as is the recent case of Podemos, Citizens, and Vox. This has coincided with a significant loss of votes for the PP and PSOE.

It should be noted that an electoral law that hinders fragmentation, conversely, favors governability, especially when the constituencies are very large. If there were a single constituency and a very high number of seats, the allocation would be made to the parties according to the total votes they obtained, as is the case in Germany or the Nordic countries.

In various countries around the world, premiums have been introduced for the party with the most votes to help them secure the majority needed to govern alone.

For example, in Greece, the leading party receives a premium of 50 out of 300 seats, and in Italy, the party or coalition with the most votes gets 340 out of 630 seats. Proponents of this type of majoritarian system argue that a purely proportional system without any barriers or premiums would diminish the incentive for ideologically similar groups to form united lists, potentially leading to more fragmentation, as they would achieve the same level of representation whether running together or separately.

The lack of proportionality in the Spanish electoral system is especially visible with certain examples, such as the 2008 general election, when the most voted senator from Vizcaya was elected with 34% of the votes and the most voted from Murcia with almost 60%, the three senators who received the most votes in the elections were elected with very different percentages of the vote.

One of the biggest problems facing this issue is the lack of consensus, as it extends to everything that refers to electoral law, considering there is no consensus among the parties on the aspects that can be modified or on alternative substitutes. In fact, even in its beginnings, AP defended a majority system based on single-member constituencies, and the nationalist parties were in favor of the constituency being the autonomous community, advocating raising the number of deputies for this purpose. Added to this problem is the lack of a culture of coalitions between the two major parties, as is the case in Germany between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD), and in recent times, a culture of pacts with non-nationalist parties has been forced by circumstances; certainly, Citizens has agreed indiscriminately with PP and PSOE, Podemos only with PSOE, and VOX with PP.

In line with the above, AP was the only force that advocated a British-style majority system, while the rest, from the UCD to the PCE, opted for a proportional system. The Aliancists model was based on a single-member district system with as many districts as deputies to be elected, that is, with one deputy to be elected per district.

The only parliamentary group that has consistently criticized the electoral system over four decades of democracy has been the PCE/IU. Other parties, such as UPyD and Citizens, have raised similar criticisms only after gaining seats in the lower house. On the other hand, as some authors note, criticisms from parts of the population have not been as serious or sustained.

Catalonia has been one of the regions with the greatest disproportion between the percentage of votes and seats, with two clearly differentiated blocs of pro-independence supporters: Together for Catalonia (JxCat), Republican Left of Catalonia (ERC), the Popular Unity Candidacy (CUP) and Catalan Alliance (AC), which represent 43% of the votes, while the bloc of non-independence supporters, the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC), PP, VOX and Comuns Unite, represent 53% of the votes: Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC), PP, VOX and the Comuns represents 53% of the votes, but the pro-independence parties reap in all autonomous elections an absolute majority of seats despite not always surpassing the 50% barrier of the votes, in fact, in 2015, Together per Yes (Junts per Sí, JxSí) and the CUP reaped an absolute majority of 72 seats despite representing 48% of the votes.

It is pointed out that the frequent disproportion that occurs in Catalonia is not so much the responsibility of the D'Hondt Law or of the barriers to representation as of the distortion derived from the number of seats per province, something that has been regulated by the Decree [18] issued by Josep Tarradellas for the first autonomous elections of 1980, since out of 135 seats in the Catalan Parliament, 85 deputies correspond to Barcelona, 18 to Tarragona, 17 to Tarragona, 17 to Tarragona, 17 to Tarragona, 17 to Tarragona, 17 to Tarragona, and the rest to Barcelona.

According to the report, the frequent disproportion that occurs in Catalonia is not so much the responsibility of the D'Hondt Law or of the barriers to representation as of the distortion derived from the number of seats per province, something that has been regulated by the Decree issued by Josep Tarradellas for the first autonomous elections in 1980 [19], since out of 135 seats in the Catalan Parliament, 85 deputies correspond to Barcelona, 18 to Tarragona, 17 to Gerona and 15 to Lérida, so that a deputy in Barcelona costs 65.000 votes and in Lérida, 29.000 votes, which creates artificial majorities in the regional Chamber of Deputies. This system was once encouraged by the UCD to avoid left-wing majorities, which favored CIU. In this sense, Barcelona is the most underrepresented province, since, in proportion to its population, it has 10% fewer seats than it would be entitled to, while the other three have 3% more seats than the population they represent.

4. Conclusion: An eternal debate and possible solutions

Representative democracy is based on the principle of one person, one vote, and this principle is enshrined in the different Constitutions, whether one takes as a reference the Constitution of the Fifth French Republic (Article 3) or the Dutch Constitution (Article 4), although they are governed by different electoral systems: in the first case, with single-member constituencies, and in the second, with a single district through the D'Hondt Law. In Spain's case, due to the majority electoral system, small constituencies, and a limited Parliament, it is one of the countries with the worst alignment between the percentage of votes and the number of seats. Particularly, the LOREG did not prioritize proportionality as one of its goals, and the legislator did not explicitly aim for it. One of the conclusions that can be drawn from the research carried out for this project is that the parties' positions on the electoral system are influenced by the electoral interests of the small and large parties and where they concentrate their electorates [20].

The Constitutional Court differentiates between equality and proportionality, in fact, in its judgment 45/1992 of April 2 [21, 22], the Constitutional Court considers that proportionality must be limited in order to safeguard other legal interests, for example, in order to avoid excessive fragmentation of the party system, thus favoring the major parties to the detriment of the others, which is why the nationalist parties have been influential since 1993 as the only ones with the capacity to support a minority government.

As some doctrinal sectors point out, it is not just the electoral law that influences the configuration of the results but also the small constituencies, with the least populated ones being overrepresented.

With a view to improving proportionality, replacing the province as a constituency with the autonomous community could lead to the Congress overlapping with the Senate with an autonomous map in which seven of the regions are uniprovincial and five of them have two or three provinces. Another consideration to be considered, as some authors point out, is that greater proportionality will benefit the third or fourth political force.

Any electoral law must be a balance between governability and representativeness because if representativeness were to take precedence in excess, the result would be greater plurality but would lead to greater political fragmentation, slowing down the legislative process, an experience that has occurred with formulas of direct democracy. This was seen in the 2005 rejection of the draft European Constitution in France,

when many voted against it because they demanded greater budgetary autonomy, while the National Front (FN) opposed it on the grounds of nationalism.

Another of the issues, in my opinion, pending in a hypothetical electoral reform is the achievement of greater proportionality. It should be noted that the main asset of our electoral system has been political stability, an asset that Italy has lacked and which allows a government, whether of one party or another, to carry out the necessary political and economic reforms, especially the latter in the face of an economic crisis.

In Spain, there is a significant disparity between the votes received and the seats obtained, as the current system favors concentration and penalizes dispersion, much like in Italy, where electoral coalitions are common. Historical examples of such coalitions include the Olive Tree on the center-left and the House of Freedoms on the center-right. In this regard, the narrative that has been conveyed to the public is that the two-party system has provided four decades of stability. However, Spain has never had a pure two-party system like that of the United States. Instead, it has had an imperfect two-party system, where the governability of the nation has been shaped by nationalist coalitions. This has influenced the dynamics of successive PP and PSOE governments.

Spanish has had only four legislatures with absolute majorities out of a total of 14, making such stability truly ignominious, while the emergence of new national parties in recent years has given rise to a new culture of consensus and pacts, a dynamic that was common in the Transition and needed to be restored in order to regenerate political life from the logic of the old parties. It should not be forgotten that in Germany, coalitions in government are very common, even between the two major parties, which means that national interests do not depend on the party in government.

For the reasons given above, and in line with what different parties maintain, the reform to increase proportionality must respond to cohesion criteria in order to ensure that the vote of Spaniards, regardless of their province, has the same value without giving rise to excessive fragmentation that makes it impossible to form majorities, so that the most suitable formula should be a mixed system with a national constituency and British-style districts.

It would not be unreasonable to replace the D'Hondt Law with another system such as Sainte-Laguë, which is more proportional, and this does not require a constitutional reform, since the D'Hondt Law is not constitutionalized, opening the door to another formula, given that it would only require a reform of the LOREG. Along the same lines, if the electoral system were more proportional, Castilla y León would have 14 fewer deputies and the Community of Madrid 12 fewer, leaving aside a system that favors depopulated and rural autonomous communities over urban and more populated ones.

Another important factor to consider is that nationalists have shaped Spanish politics due to the political advantages they were granted in the past. During the Transition, the autonomous model was not designed to integrate just two regions (the Basque Country and Catalonia) but rather groups that were not in the majority in those territories. Since 1978, the political system has been built on three pillars: the PP, PSOE, and nationalists. While these nationalists could be considered integrable into the system in 1993 and 1996, they no longer are. Today, they show their true intentions as declared enemies of the system, seeking the fragmentation of Spain.

Throughout democracy, they have played at being Bismarck in Madrid and Bolívar in Barcelona, so it is not unreasonable to entrust the governability of the nation to those whose explicit aim is to destroy it.

If the Congress is national, there is no sense in tailor-made constituencies, and throughout democracy, there have been unfair arithmetical situations, an example of which would be that in the 2008 general elections, UPyD, with 300.000 votes, that is, the same as the PNV, obtained only one deputy, compared to the six of the Basque nationalists. This is one of the clearest effects of the current electoral law, which is based on the province, favoring those parties that, such as the nationalists, concentrate their electorate in the provinces of the same region, as opposed to the options that have their votes spread throughout the national territory.

Certain political and doctrinal sectors argue that it no longer makes sense for the constituency to be the province (a concept that became important in the nineteenth century under Javier de Burgos) and that it should instead be the autonomous regions, which serve as the core of the territorial system established in 1978. Nonetheless, it is also true that the Congress of Deputies is a national chamber representing all Spaniards, while the Senate was intended as a chamber of territorial representation. In practice, this objective is undermined by using provincial constituencies rather than autonomous ones, leading to the reproduction of similar patterns seen in Congress. In the same way that a regional constituency would make sense in the Senate, a national constituency would make sense in the Congress, at least partially, if a total implementation would make it possible for the Senate to have a regional constituency, and the Senate would have a national constituency, at least partially, if a total implementation would make it possible to have a national constituency.

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Chapter 9

Reactions of the Romanian People to the Recent Election Campaign Regarding the Russia-Ukraine War

Irina-Ana Drobot

Abstract

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the positions the Global North and Global South take with respect to the Russia-Ukraine War in the recent election campaigns. The Global North supports Ukraine, seeing this action as symbolic for supporting democracy, while the Global South is showing a neutral position, not wishing to interfere with the problems of the Western world. However, the economic issues which are the consequence of the Russia-Ukraine war are affecting the entire world. The position of Romania will be especially under analysis based on online social media and press discussions. Romania, while located in Southeastern Europe, is part of the Global North due to alignment with its values.

Keywords: online social media, political psychology, political analysis, democracy, values

1. Introduction

The war between Russia and Ukraine seems to have triggered reactions from people and countries from all over the world. It has drawn our attention to the fact that based on international relations, various alliances, and geopolitical structures, we are more interrelated and interconnected than we have thought. One action of one country can be enough to trigger the actions of huge numbers of countries and to divide the world into opposite sides, function of their interests. In this sense, in order to better understand the reactions to the war between Russia and Ukraine, as well as the position of various countries and, especially, groups of countries, we can consider the division of the world into the Global North and Global South [1, 2]. In this way, we can set up the context in which Romania in particular fits in with respect to its position regarding the war between Russia and Ukraine. The assumption is that, just like the fact that Romania is a member of the European Union, which not only sets up its political position, based on the position of the EU due to the nature of international relations with non-EU member countries, as well as that the EU proves a frame for a certain mindset, sets of values, principles, and beliefs about other countries and its people, so does the division between the Global North and the Global South [3–6].

The world is divided, from a social, economic, and political perspective, into the Global North and the Global South. As a general classification, the Global North includes those countries that are more economically developed [7] and, thus, wealthier and more industrialized. Usually, but not necessarily, these countries can be found, as a geographical location, to be situated in the Northern Hemisphere. We have in view countries such as the USA, Canada, the countries in Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand. These countries from the Global North have the following general features: they have an advanced infrastructure, their citizens have higher income levels, they have stronger institutions (and here we can mention examples such as health care and education), and they also have a greater global political, as well as economic, influence. These countries are, therefore, among the highly influential actors in the geopolitical order. The countries in the Global South are those generally located in the Southern Hemisphere and represent the less economically developed countries. In this category, we can include the largest parts of Africa, Latin America, South Asia, as well as parts of Southeast Asia. Among the features of this category of countries we can mention that they are those countries with developing or emerging economies [7], those countries with lower income levels, those countries that rely more on primary industries such as agriculture and mining, as well as those countries which frequently face challenges such as poverty, inequality, together with political instability. There are countries which are not geographically part of the Global North or Global South areas, but instead can be included in one category based on other criteria. For instance, Australia is located in the South, yet it is considered part of the Global North economically. India is located in the North, geographically, yet it is considered part of the Global South, since it is part of the former British colonies, and is still dealing with economic consequences, which makes it a country with developing economy. As a result, the Global South refers to historically rooted inequality, development status, and power relations.

The division between Global North and Global South is, thus, a geopolitical [8] and economic [9], as well as social [10], classification. It reflects global inequalities and historical power imbalances, more than just geography. This division relies on and helps us analyse the global wealth distribution, the development gaps, the political influence, as well as the historical legacies, such as colonialism and imperialism.

In this case, when we try to identify the location of Romania in either the Global North or the Global South, we need to consider, first of all, the general features of Romania in order to see where it can be included. Economically speaking, after joining the EU, poverty rates and economic disparities have been reduced [11]. Geographically, Romania is situated in Southeastern Europe. Ukraine is its neighbour to the North and East, Moldova is located in its East, Bulgaria is its neighbour in the South, Serbia in the Southwest, and Hungary in the West. We can, thus, see that Ukraine is one of its immediate neighbours and that the war is quite close to its borders, making the closeness between Romania and Ukraine even geographically not just at the level of international relations and of the EU policies. If we look at Romania's political and geopolitical position, we can start from its being pro-European Union and pro-NATO, which means that it supports European integration and transatlantic cooperation. In addition, it hosts US and NATO military bases, which makes this country a key player on NATO's Eastern flank. It is also an important country strategically speaking in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine due to its having shared borders with Ukraine and Moldova. Romania is also involved in the regional energy security, as well as in the infrastructure projects which are meant to reduce dependency on Russia.

In most of the Global North countries, the war in Ukraine has become the central point in political debates. Increased defence budgets to support Ukraine are the main point in the response of the politicians to the war between Russia and Ukraine. In countries such as Germany, the USA, as well as the UK, supporting Ukraine has become the equivalent of supporting and defending democracy [12–14]. Romania itself aligns to these positions, believing that supporting Ukraine is both their moral duty and that is ensured the continuation of a democratic world with democratic values. There are, however, certain changes in position or at least inner conflicts, in the USA [15], where some Republicans claim that the funds directed to support Ukraine are too costly, while Democrats and centrist Republicans believe that supporting Ukraine and sending help for it can ensure to keep authoritarianism, associated with Russia, in control. One of the issues related to the Russia–Ukraine war and the division of the world to support the war or not is related to the problem of the energy, as Russia is cutting gas supplies to Europe as a result of European countries supporting Ukraine. Energy independence and green energy have become the most discussed campaign issues. The politicians believe that the war can be an occasion to bring to attention a faster transition to renewable energy or revival of domestic fossil fuel industries. The cost of living is another issue, since the war has led to a rise in prices of global energy and food.

While the Global North is deeply involved in the Russia-Ukraine war [16] and takes clear positions to support Ukraine and democracy with it, we can meanwhile witness in the Global South a different attitude [17]. The Global South takes an attitude of neutrality. They do not align with the positions of the West, and, as a matter of fact, with any position, meaning that they do not offer support to any of the parties directly involved in the Russia–Ukraine war. Countries such as India, South Africa, and Brazil, through their governments, have taken neutral positions, seeking, in fact, to balance their relations with the West and with Russia. Since, historically, these countries share anti-colonial foreign policy traditions, they hesitate and also resist being drawn in into what we can call the Western wars. With respect to food and fuel prices, an issue affecting all world countries, as a consequence of the Russia-Ukraine war, we can see that many countries included in the Global South faced a higher degree of inflation. This is because Ukraine and Russia are major exporters of, especially, grains and fertilizers, whose prices went up. There are campaigns which criticize the West for focusing too much on Ukraine while, in the meantime, neglecting conflicts and crises that can be found in areas belonging to the Global South, such as Sudan and Gaza.

How does the historical past of Romania create a tendency for an attitude towards the Russia-Ukraine war, next to the attitude dictated by the European Union and by its belonging to the Global North? Can we claim that for Romania, there is a psychological tendency for having an attitude towards this war and in taking sides, rooted in history, as well as shaped by the mindset of the EU and of the Global North? This psychological tendency is expected to be there next to the ideological position, as well as to the position dictated by international relations.

2. The recent Romanian election campaign and the Russia-Ukraine war

Once we take into account the past of Romania, in relation to the Soviet Union, we can understand the resistance of the majority of the citizens to the position of Russia in the current Russia–Ukraine war. The support given by Romania to Ukraine moves

further beyond the obligations related to its being a member of the European Union. Since the 1940 annexation of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina by the Soviet Union, followed by the Soviet Occupation of Romania from 1944 to 1947, by the Stalinist period (1947–1953), then by the gradual autonomy, seeking independence from Moscow after the death of Stalin in 1953 during the 1950s–1960s, and culminating with Ceausescu's National Communism (1965–1989), Romania can only have negative associations with Russia and its politics.

If we look at the general mentality and reactions to the political personalities involved in the recent election campaigns, we can identify the recurring patterns of political personalities aligning with the EU and political personalities aligning with Russia and, consequently, with the break from the EU, with everything it may trigger back from the past.

As an example, the cultural and political memory of the past Soviet domination remains strong in Romania, which means that it triggers strong emotional reactions even nowadays. We can identify a deep skepticism towards Russian influence, even if so much time has, by now, passed, and, as a reaction, strong support of the Romanian citizens for the Western alliances. The past Soviet domination period is remembered among citizens nowadays for its repression, for its loss of sovereignty, and for its resulting hardship, but also for the nationalist turn that set Romania apart from other Warsaw Pact states. We can, therefore, also take into consideration the relatively recent emerging nationalist mindset and tendency of Romania, which may have been seen in reaction to its inclusion in the European Union. As a consequence to the inclusion in the EU, each country also feels the need to reinforce its nationalist dimension.

Romania aligns with the Global North and its anti-Russian stance [18]. It is a country that focuses, as a result, on the democracy vs. autocracy dimension. It works to reinforce bonds with NATO and to provide help, which can be, for some Global North countries, related to military aid to Ukraine. Romania also wishes to align with the Global North countries push towards renewables or energy independence [19, 20].

All of these tendencies can be seen in the attitude of the Romanian citizens in reaction to the election campaigns and rounds which occurred recently. The psychology of the citizens includes references to the past of Romania as a country and to its relationships with other countries and political powers such as Russia, which is understood in association with the former Soviet Regime.

The conflictual state of the recent elections campaign in Romania is visible since some results were canceled, especially as one of the candidates, Calin Georgescu, in the first round, on 24 November 2024, was considered to have received external help in his election campaign from external forces, namely from Russia. This caused a negative image for this candidate, especially since Russia has negative connotations based on former historical episodes. It triggers the associations with the Communist regime, which was definitely not well-received by the Romanian citizens and which was associated and still is with severe restrictions on individual freedom. The Romanian people were historically psychologically marked by the Communist regime, with its negative aspects, and all further associations with Russia and with a moving away from the EU trigger negative memories of a repressive regime. These associations and memories can explain why there is, in Romania, a severe resistance towards candidates moving away from the directions and values imposed at the level of the European Union. The European Union becomes, for the Romanian people, a source of freedom and a source of psychological comfort for the future. This is why they are not, in general, comfortable with candidates deviating from the positions and values of the European Union. Yet, even in Romania, the division between EU positions and

anti-EU positions is becoming clearly visible. Society becomes polarized in Romania, just as it has become in other European Union countries.

What insights can we find in the recent election campaigns in Romania, with respect to this social polarization, of EU vs. non-EU positions, which also reflects a polarization pro- and anti-Russian [21], and which is, therefore, also a polarization related to being pro- or anti-supporting Ukraine? We can notice that, on online social media, the discussions have become very emotionally intense and that the users have started supporting their candidates based, mostly, on their positions taken with respect to the EU. Recommendations were seen regarding not to side with one candidate or party, but with his/her or their position with respect to the EU. The EU remains a symbol and an indicator of alignment with Western world values and occasions, while attitudes against the EU can bring us into a closed reality where the respective country can only be the victim of an authoritarian regime, cutting off the connections of the respective country with the civilized, free, Western world, as it is perceived by former Communist countries.

2.1 The election campaign for candidates Calin Georgescu and Elena Lasconi

Elena Lasconi was a political candidate strongly associated with EU values, while the other candidate, Calin Georgescu, was strongly associated not only with nationalist values, but also with anti-EU values and, especially, with fears associated with pro-Russian values [22, 23].

Elena Lasconi, as a political personality, is the former mayor of Câmpulung and president of the Save Romania Union (USR). She has led a pro-European, anti-corruption campaign in the 2024 Romanian presidential election. We can notice that her platform underlined strengthening Romania's connections with the European Union and NATO, thus promoting LGBTQ+ rights, and also combating corruption through judicial reforms, as well as through increased transparency. The most significant moment for her political career is the first round of voting on 24 November 2024. This is the moment when Lasconi gained 19.18% of the votes, thus being situated before the far-right candidate Călin Georgescu. Even so, the election results were annulled because of the allegations of campaign finance violations and the so-believed Russian interference in the case of candidate Georgescu. In the May 2025 rerun, Lasconi managed to receive only 2.68% of the votes and thus resigned from her position as USR president.

While Lasconi identifies with the European Union perspective, Calin Georgescu identifies with its direct opposite. Still, we can notice, based on online social media analysis, that the majority of Romanians prefer a pro-EU candidate to support. Most of the Romanian voters wish to continue with the pro-EU position, since they believe that this can bring them the freedom they have dreamt of.

Many Romanians on online social media express their support for a pro-EU candidate, while the opposite position is also represented. Their support is due to a combination of historical experience, economic aspirations, migration patterns, and geopolitical concerns. We can take into account the following factors, of which the first one is the historical context, and, namely the reaction against the communist past. In this sense, Romania's traumatic experience under Soviet influence and communism has left a long-lasting distrust of Russia and authoritarianism when we consider these as regimes. The EU represents democracy, the rule of law, and modernization, in contrast to past oppression. From this point of view, the EU can represent freedom as a general keyword for us all. Still, we can consider, furthermore, that the

economic benefits and aspirations should also be mentioned. In this sense, the EU membership has brought major funding for infrastructure, agriculture, and development. Thus, many Romanians see the EU as a key element to economic stability and rising living standards. In addition, pro-EU candidates are seen as more likely to attract investment and maintain access to EU markets and funds. What is more, when it comes to migration and the Romanian diaspora, over 3 million Romanians live and work in other EU countries. This means that many of them have first-hand experience of better governance and opportunities in the West. In this sense, their influence—through remittances, online platforms, and voting—helps fuel pro-EU sentiment. What is more, we can mention social media demographics. In this sense, online users, especially on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter), tend to be younger, urban, and more educated. This makes such groups to be more likely to: travel or study abroad, value liberal democratic norms, see the EU as part of their identity and future, as well as they are also more exposed to Western media narratives and often distrust nationalist or anti-EU rhetoric. With respect to security and foreign policy concerns, we can mention that in Eastern Europe we could witness fears about Russia due to its starting the war in Ukraine, fears which were related to its conquest not only of Ukraine but of other countries as well.

Being pro-EU is associated with being pro-NATO; which, in turn, is associated with a guarantee of the national security of a country. Safety and global legitimacy are associated with EU alignment by many Romanians. The EU is considered as a check on domestic corruption. The Cooperation and Verification Mechanism is considered by Romanians to be a pressure tool that can hold political personalities accountable. In addition, pro-EU political candidates often promise transparency and reform, which are issues that resonate with Romanians in a strong way.

If we look at online social media discussions, we often find that Romanians prefer a pro-EU political candidate. This is because the EU is associated with their hopes to have an open and therefore secure and prosperous future.

2.2 The election campaign for candidates George Simion and Nicusor Dan

Once political candidate Calin Georgescu was accused of paying users to support him on TikTok [24] and even of receiving the support of external countries such as Russia following his online social media political campaign, and once he was left out as a candidate due to this, as he was considered to resort to dishonest means, another candidate of a similar political orientation replaced him, and elections were postponed, which was considered a failure of democracy and a threat to it [25]. Yet, the value of democracy was considered central in these two rounds, since the pro-EU or democratic position was eventually chosen after being strongly under debate in the Romanian public space [26]. We can also see the interference of various conflicts on social media regarding fake news and bots, or spreading various rumours in this election campaign [27]. In this way, there was another round of elections established [28].

The next candidates were George Simion, from the part of Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) party, which is an anti-system party, and from the pro-EU position, candidate Nicusor Dan was proposed. Both candidates ran for the position of president of Romania. There were also other candidates, yet they were minor compared to these two major political figures.

George Simion entered the election race on March 14, right after candidate Calin Georgescu was excluded. Simion collected a number of 600,000 signatures that would legitimize his candidacy. Before this, Romania witnessed the annulment

decision which sparked outrage. Simion used the slogan respect, which favored women, students, pensioners, as well as urban voters. In addition, the reactions of outrage to the 2024 elections annulment meant to bring back democracy. The Simion Plan in 2024 consisted of 1 million state-built apartments near the cities, which would sell with zero-interest financing. In addition, these would be finances with zero-tax regimes and would be tied to elections by personal accountability. The potion supported by Simion means a sovereignist EU membership, which would include alliances with the party of Meloni in Italy and with PIS in Poland, together with a trend involving criticism of EU structures and a rejection of a Russia-aligned posture. From the point of view of the security stance, an opposition towards further military aid for Ukraine was had in view and a call for a ceasefire in the style of Donald Trump. However, Simion would describe himself as having an anti-Russia position and a pro-NATO one.

During the March protests in Bucharest, Simion was considered to be a voice of the anti-establishment. He presented himself to be a heir of Georgescu's platform, which meant that he had, as an aim, to continue his position and to even pledge Georgescu as future premier.

During the same campaign, Nicusor Dan was remarked as an independent candidate, who also had a pro-EU position. He was a mayor of Bucharest since 2020. He was backed by parties such as USR, PMP, FD, REPER, and DREPT. Among the main campaign themes for Nicusor Dan, we can identify the pro-EU and NATO focus. He positioned himself as a guardian of the Euro-Atlantic alignment of Romania. During the rally from May 10, he underlined the role of the EU is the growth of his country, Romania, and he frames his runoff as being a pro-western and not an isolationist. With respect to the anti-corruption and reform position, he underlined the judicial overhaul, as well as the transparency. He warned that the other candidate, Simion, was the supporter of the Russians, who would lead to opposing to the democratic progress. Nicusor Dan argued to flexible foreign policy, meaning a continuation of security cooperation, support for Ukraine, and, therefore, a stronger defence alignment with EU supporters. A pro-EU position is related to the government promising stability [29].

George Simion, the AUR candidate, was preferred by nationalists, protest-voters, by the members of rural areas, as well as of the trump-aligned members of diaspora [30]. In contrast, the independent candidate Nicusor Dan was preferred in general by urban, educated, pro-EU citizens, as well as by the anti-establishment-oriented youth. Based on the economic plan, candidate Simion focused on affordable housing, tax cuts, and on a so-called Contract with Romanians, while candidate Nicusor Dan focused on fiscal discipline, deficit control, and especially on the alignment with EU norms. From the perspective of geopolitics, candidate George Simion proved to be EU skeptical, yet supportive of NATO, arguing for no military aid provided by Romania to Ukraine. Nicusor Dan, from a geopolitics perspective, was strongly supportive of the EU and NATO, as well as of Ukraine, and of the Western alliances. In relation to the campaign style, George Simion relied on mass rallies, populist messaging, and protest mobilization. Nicusor Dan, in his turn, relied on policy-driven, debate-focused, coalition messaging. Candidate Simion is perceived of risking to isolate Romania in the EU and to bring populist instability, while Nicusor Dan is perceived as able to continue Western integration and modernization.

During the first round of elections, on May 4, Simion led with 41%, while Dan was situated at 20.99%. During the runoff from May 18, Dan won with 53.6%, while Simion was situated at 46.4%.

We can see that candidates George Simion and Nicușor Dan reflected the world tendencies regarding anti-EU and pro-EU positions. Thus, George Simion relied on a bold populist, as well as nationalist election campaign, including some ambitious economic promises and anti-EU rhetoric, which resonated with an anti-elite sentiment and protests. As for Nicușor Dan, he focused on preserving Romania's Euro-Atlantic position, dealing with corruption, and showing off a policy-rich, alliance which relied on securing diaspora support.

Just like Elena Lasconi and Calin Georgescu, Nicușor Dan and George Simion reflect positions which are supportive of the EU vs. positions which are against the EU and for a pronounced nationalism [31, 32], respectively. These conflicts and the debates between these two positions can be identified at world level. In this sense, Romania is no exception.

2.3 Pro-European Union vs anti-European Union positions at world level: Romania's position with the context

The world is divided between these two positions [33] function of politics, economics, but also of culture and history. Within Europe, and within EU member countries, the pro-European Union position can be identified in countries such as Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Ireland, and Nordic countries [34]. These are countries that are strongly pro-EU, and they are located especially in Western and Northern Europe. Among the issues at stake, we can include the following which stand for a pro-EU position: economic integration, which means that trade and business can benefit from shared currency and the single market; political stability, which means that EU favours peace and cooperation in the period after World War II; global influence, which means that the EU can act as a major diplomatic and regulatory power. The Western allies, such as the USA, Canada, and Japan, support the EU as a liberal democratic ally. Based on their position of NATO and security, the EU members are NATO allies. In addition, the EU is one of the largest rendering economic blocs. Furthermore, a united Europe strengthens the Western geopolitical strategy, and therefore, it represents a counterbalance to China and to Russia. With respect to the developing nations, where we can include Ukraine and the Western Balkans, we notice that they aspire to join the EU and relate to the following dimensions: economic development, which means access to funds and markets; the Rule of Law and Governance, which means that the EU encourages reformed and anti-corruption attitudes; visa-free travel and employment, which means that the EU is attractive to youth and to professionals.

When it comes to the anti-European Union positions, we can consider global criticism and skepticism. As an example, from inside Europe, we can consider the position of Euroscepticism, which includes countries such as Hungary and Poland, and whose governments accuse the EU that it has interfered with national sovereignty. In addition, we can identify here disputes over the rule of law, migration, as well as LGBT rights. With respect to the anti-European Union position and thus of the global criticism and skepticism, we can find such a position inside Europe, as well as outside. Inside Europe, we can find Euroscepticism with respect to the following countries: Hungary and Poland, which accuse the EU of its interference in the national sovereignty, of the disputed related to rule of law, migration, and LGBT rights. The UK, after Brexit [35], has voted to leave the EU due to concerns related to the following aspects: loss of national control, immigration policies, as well as bureaucracy and democratic deficit. In addition, populist or right-wing movements, which can be found in Italy,

France, and Germany, are concerned with the following: the fact that the EU imposes top-down policies, and that there is a critique of the euro and fiscal rules. Outside EU countries, such as Russia, can be considered to view the EU as a threat, especially due to its East expansion. Russia sees the EU as a threat due to its expansion towards the East, into Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. China has a mixed position towards the EU [36]. China wishes to weaken the unity of the EU to negotiate bilateral trade deals, and it is also suspicious of the human rights criticism and technological regulations of the EU. The EU is also criticized by some African and Asian representatives [37], based on the following: its protectionist trade policies, its fortress-like migration policies, and its green regulations which are considered harmful by the Global South exporters.

The pro-EU countries, Germany, France and the Nordic countries, look forward to economic and political benefits. Ukraine and the Balkans, as pro-EU countries, consider advantages such as economic growth, rule of law, and security. The USA, Canada, and Japan are pro-EU due to reasons related to strategic alliance, trade, and liberal values. The UK, after Brexit, is anti-EU, due to concerns related to sovereignty, immigration, and bureaucracy. Russia is also anti-EU, considering it a security threat due to its sphere of influence. Hungary and Poland are Eurosceptic, due to sovereignty and conservative values, while China is cautiously critical, due to competition, and due to its wanting a fragmented Europe. African and Asian countries are mixed, due to trade imbalance, migration, and considering the EU a regulatory burden.

Romania remains pro-EU, due to considering the EU as a guarantee for their openness to the Western world. They consider the EU as a symbol for liberalist value and for freedom and independence of thought and action. To many Romanians, the EU is a means of guaranteeing a free mindset. The association is, largely, psychological, as Romanians think beyond the economic aspects. Their association between the EU and freedom comes from their connections between the EU and their identity, their aspirations, as well as their historical context. From the point of view of identity, Romanians felt their Western cultural identity being validated by belonging to the EU, together with their wish to break away from the authoritarian past regimes associated with Romania. The EU represented their post-communist aspirations. Romania became an EU member in 2007. Regarding the historical context, Romania had been considered to be located at the periphery of Europe, being highly influenced by powers such as the Ottoman Empire, Tsarist Russia, and the Soviet Union. The hope for stability and modernity is also associated with the EU. Furthermore, within this context, the EU is also associated with rule of law, functioning institutions, reduction of corruption, governance standards, modern infrastructure, such as health care and education. Order, progress, and fairness are, in this sense, associated by Romania with the EU. Freedom and opportunity include free movement of people, especially since many Romanians have studied, worked or lived in Western Europe due to EU membership. This has made Romanians feel that they have personal agency, as well as control over their future. Freedom, travel, together with merit-based success, is associated by the youth with the EU, in opposition with the rigid and state-controlled system of the communist period. The Romanians feel a sense of pride in association with being European and belonging to the EU. At the same time, they also fight with a feeling of being second-class citizens of the EU, with discrimination against Romanian workers in Western Europe, as well as with stereotypes present in the media about crime and poverty connected to them. The Romanians also feel that there is a conflict between national pride and compliance to the EU, which can become at some points too interventionist, regarding judicial reforms, minority rights, and economic policies. We can identify a sense of ambivalence related to belonging to the EU. First of

all, we associate the EU with breaking free from post-Soviet identity. We associate the EU with hope, progress, stability, modern governance, freedom, with opportunities, mobility, and personal empowerment. All of these are aspects we should be grateful for. On the other hand, we perceive belonging to the EU as implying that we have with our country second-tier status or that we are victims of marginalization. We also witness with Romanians as well, just as with other nations, a pride in nationhood, and an external pressure to conform with respect to the EU. This conflict is translated into the different political positions which are represented by the two sets of candidates, in both first and second round for presidential elections.

Indeed, this conflict between two political positions translated as a conflict between two sets of values, which has divided Romanian society, just as it has divided other societies in countries that are EU members. In online social media discussions, which, after all, mirror face-to-face discussions, or personal beliefs, we witnessed the general opinion that we should choose the position represented by the candidate instead of being concerned over the candidate, personally. The focus was, therefore, on what the candidate symbolized, based on his or her position with respect to the EU.

2.4 Online social media discussions and positions regarding pro-EU and anti-EU attitudes

Individual users from Romania or from the diaspora on Facebook posted on their accounts speeches related to what became every citizen's moral duty regarding choosing a pro-EU candidate as president. They believed that this would ensure for our country an alignment with Western-world values. In turn, this would mean for Romania an openness towards the Western world which is associated with freedom, and an assurance that Romanian would not remain isolated from the rest of the world. In some cases, it was believed that by being part of the EU, Romania would not likely become the victim of a Russian, highly authoritarian rule, similar to the one some Romanians had personally known from Communism or from the others' stories. Mainly, therefore, the candidates that were pro-EU were considered as a high guarantee to everything that would bring freedom and prosperity for their country. The online social media posts had in view considered by the author of the present paper were the ones from the SNSPA community, which is the National University of Political Sciences and Public Administration from Bucharest. The professors at this university hold a strong pro-EU position. Their posts included passionate appeals to support pro-EU candidates, first of all Elena Lasconi, and second Nicusor Dan. Their choice as voters would ensure a direct support of democracy, strongly associated psychologically with the EU and pro-EU position. Members of the SNSPA community such as Claudiu Craciun and Roxana Dumitrache. Oana Baluta, Liliana Popescu, have posted on their personal Facebook accounts their personal convictions, while also urging the others to come to vote, that their vote counted, and that the pro-EU candidate would guarantee their values of democracy, freedom, various opportunities, and everything positive for Romania. Other Facebook users also shared the same opinions and appeal to the others, making it our shared moral duty and the right thing to do when we should vote for a pro-EU candidate. Random posts further on appeared, since Facebook brings about through its algorithms similar context with the one previously looked up for by the user. Individual users from the diaspora joined in the common effort to urge everyone to vote for the pro-EU candidate.

The other candidates, Calin Georgescu and Nicusor Dan, were associated with risks and dangers, as well as with limited future possibilities for Romania. It is

interesting that the Romanians focused on creating a black and white picture of pro-EU, anti-EU positions, while, in fact, matters could be seen in a more nuanced way. Romania would, after all, remain in the EU, being still an EU member in the event of the election of Georgescu or Dan as presidents. What would have changed would have been the approach to EU proposed measures, which would be filtered and negotiated, and some of them would be rejected if considered necessary. The Romanian society was, after all, divided based on these two positions, since there were certain dissatisfactions with the possibilities of living and starting a professional life and family here in Romania, judging by difficulties to find a job, find the money for paying to own a house, and having to work abroad in order to support a family. Many Romanian families who had just started encountered financial difficulties and resorted to move abroad or work abroad for some time. This shows that the benefits of the EU are not clearly-cut and not a guarantee for having the life everyone wants. What was best for Romania was, therefore, disputed among the two main conflicting sides: pro-EU and anti-EU, or nationalist position. Both sets of candidates, in fact, reflected the emotions of segments of Romania's population, and, in doing so, focused especially on the emotional component.

We can consider online social media posts as relying, similarly to a spoken message delivered during a political speech, on the dimension of pathos, mostly, which is its emotional component. Pathos [38], in any public speech, signified the appeal to emotion, which provides a means for persuading the audience. The speakers prompt an emotional response. A public speech also relies on logos [39], or the appeal to reason and logic. A strong argument relies on logos. However, the appeal to reason is more reliant on personal experience with the realities of the country of Romania and personal perceptions about it, rather than on facts. A public speech also relies on ethos [40], which refers to the credibility and authority of the speaker, based on their own professional credentials which makes them qualified to comment on the topic. Even online social media written messages can have the impact of a public speech. In addition, we may also find short videos with short speeches. What we notice is the replacement, in some cases, of a political personality with the common citizen or Facebook user.

In many cases, there is a distorted version of reality presented in Facebook posts. Romania can be depicted as not being enough taken into account based on its national values by the anti-EU supporters, and it can be depicted as facing the dangers of being the victim of Putin and the highly authoritarian, even communist regime once Romania is no longer protected by the EU, a version of reality promoted by pro-EU users. Such versions of reality become dystopic and highly exaggerated, yet for the persons with whom they resonate these are hypothetical scenarios for the future of Romania.

The candidates themselves made use of online social media during the presidential campaigns to promote their views and public image. Especially candidate Calin Georgescu made high use of online social media, relying on TikTok to present his views, portraying himself as a mystic messenger. His views resonated with those of a large number of young people, especially. Discussion in online social media mentioned that young people adopted an anti-system position due to their fears of the continuing war between Russia and Ukraine, and the possibility to have them enrolled to fight for Ukraine. After all, a pro-EU position meant the continuation of the Russia-Ukraine war. This war had become problematic due to the resulting economic and financial issues [41] of the countries supporting Ukraine and also of the other non-EU countries which were affected economically by the war, based on exports of various products and rising prices of living. However, during the

arguments and discussions regarding a pro-EU position, what is negative is clearly set aside and not mentioned. A pro-EU position is, for its supporters, a utopic version of life, while the opposing position, that of nationalism, becomes a dystopic version of life based on the EU supporters' opinions.

We can see these extreme positions present when Calin Georgescu was accused of relying for his online social media campaign on external support, likely, rumours went on, from Russia and Russia-supported bots, which raised his position in the polls, thus spreading even more fear related to the future of Romania in the rows of the pro-EU citizens. Even so, Georgescu mentioned that he did not intend to make Romania leave the EU and NATO, and simply wishing to focus on national interest at the expense of the Western influence. In turn, Elena Lasconi was portrayed on social feeds as warning of a political confrontation between candidates based on the positions of democracy vs. Russian influence [42]. Those users supporting Georgescu focused on the issues of defending sovereignty and fighting against the existing moral decay, as the EU and NATO were considered responsible for undermining Romanian identity,

George Simion, a candidate strongly associated with AUR party, was directly, in his speeches and messages on X, formerly Twitter and Telegram nationalist, but also Eurosceptic, and anti-Ukraine. He considered the EU policy to be invasive. He also believed he was fighting for freedom together with those who were patriots and adopted a sovereignist position. We notice how each candidate argues in a very emotionally-based way for the good of Romania, presenting an honest, emotionally-driven perspective on their intentions as candidates and their promises for the future of Romania.

As Nicusor Dan won the elections, his winning was celebrated widely on online social media, considered to be a "victory for democracy and EU unity", and celebrated through memes and social media posts [43]. Opposite reactions came from anti-EU influencers on online social media, considering him part of the corrupt elite supporting the EU. Supporters of George Simion sent many comments in online social media comments sections, and on Telegram, accusing Nicusor Dan of what was worst, including dishonest voting, and even frauds during the voting process [44]. The conflict between the two positions is thus echoes at the level of political candidates, who are portrayed as resorting to violent verbal attacks, especially from Simion and his supporters, mirroring the verbal conflicts usually noticed among citizens supporting one side or another.

The society becomes polarized, yet the supporters are not clearly-cut based on age or location. Everything depends on personal, subjective convictions, regarding the way in which we perceive everyday life realities and the position of Romania in the world.

We notice the reliance of individual users' environment, that of online social media, of the political candidates representing the polarization of society between pro-EU and anti-EU, positions which, however, cannot be black and white, yet they are emotionally experienced in this way. The populist position of political candidates is reflected in their addressing the citizen, the individual, the people, directly in their own medium, and, after all, speaking their language. Each of the candidates portrays him or herself as one of their own, as any citizen, siding with the respective position or perspective.

We notice here a strong psychological component. We can find that candidates show empathy with their voters, directly engaging in dialog with them, in addition to expressing their views. Next to political analysis of the situation of Romania in

the international context, we can also consider the polarization of society based on political psychology [45].

We can consider the social identity theory [46], as voters stick with the candidates which reflect the values of their group and also with the way in which they define the other, such as the elites, or other opponent. In the case of Lasconi vs. Georgescu, Lasconi largely appealed to an urban middle class valuing cosmopolitan, pro-EU identity, gender equality, and modernization. Georgescu appeals to a traditionalist audience, valuing nationalist identity and presenting the EU and NATO as threats to the spiritual and cultural identity of Romania. In the case of Simion vs. Dan, Simion relies on the authentic Romanian identity, also including anti-globalist values. Dan relies of a legalistic, technocratic identity, based on institutional integrity and rational governance.

We also notice the affective polarization [47], meaning that voters not only dislike, but also fear the opposed candidate and side he or she represents. Voters of Lasconi felt hope for a EU-related future and fear of the Russian influence. Voters of Simion and Georgescu felt emotions such as anger, betrayal, and resentment directed at the elites, bureaucracy, and at the status quo.

Cognitive biases [48] can also be identified, as there is a high reliance on conspiracy thinking and disinformation. Conspirational narratives such as those relying of the EU and NATO as puppet masters, election fraud, and a deep state which works against national interest are part of the discourses of Simion and Georgescu. The confirmation bias [49] was noticeable with disillusioned and low-trusting people, who had their ideas and fears confirmed. Simple and emotionally charged explanations are likely to be believed in hard times, especially having in view our tendency to project on the outside something that bothers us, especially a powerful outgroup.

We can mostly see how the way in which we resonate emotionally with certain opinions beats the reliance on facts during political campaigns and speeches. Furthermore, the two conflicting positions of pro-EU and anti-EU reflect an emotional conflict between a traumatic perception of the Communist past and a feeling of nostalgia [50]. For Romanians, the EU itself can be seen from two conflicting perspectives, represented by the two sets of candidates. On the one hand, the EU poses constraints on Romania, while, on the other hand, it provides for Romania the liberalist mindset of individualist societies of the Western world.

3. Conclusion

The reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war for Romanians during the recent, 2024–2025 and 2025 presidential election campaigns, and especially re-elections and various discussions translate as a polarization of society in pro-EU and anti-EU positions. The reactions to the Russia–Ukraine war cannot be considered and understood outside the larger context, based on a Global North vs. Global South perspective. Romania is clearly not a neutral country, which is explainable first of all by being a member of the EU. Even so, attitudes of EU members vary, and some states have considered regaining their sovereignist, nationalist position, and control over the decisions taken at EU-level. Romania has chosen a pro-EU candidate, and thus, the majority of the Romanians considered that the EU was not, after all, an opposing force, in spite of the economic and financial issues triggered by the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine and the pro-EU associated support of Ukraine. The emotional response takes up the main position in the conflict between pro-EU

and anti-EU positions. People are guided by the candidates' positions and opinions regarding the state of affairs and choose the predominant benefits. Candidates oversimplify their views of the EU, which is accepted by the people since they recognize in these views their own opinions and feelings. The Russia-Ukraine war leads to other positions regarding the way in which the world is split based on geopolitics and opinions and is strongly associated with them. This war cannot be treated in isolation from other factors, such as EU-related values, and attitudes towards the EU. The reactions to the war images themselves were emotional, yet it depended, ideologically, on the position taken at the level of each country regarding, in the case of EU members, support for Ukraine and making people sympathize with the Ukrainians. It is an expected fact, however, that both sides experienced similar losses, on both sides soldiers would fight for the country, and their loved ones would lose them. In addition, civilians could be affected on both sides. We can see how political psychology can mostly account for the reactions towards the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and how political candidates rely on the people's emotional reactions to political events.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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