UNIJERPS
Unizik Journal of Educational Research and Policy Studies VOL.22 (1);
July-December, 2026 https://unijerps.org
2023 Impact Factor: **6.834;** 2022 ***Impact Factor***: 5.156; ***2021 Impact Factor: 5.641;***
2020 Impact Factor: 5.355. *Indexing and Impact Factor URL: http://sjifactor.com/passport.php?id=21363*

INEC OFFICIALS' COMPLIANCE WITH ELECTORAL PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND CITIZENS' CONFIDENCE IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN SOUTH-EAST NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Alexander Uzochukwu Ogbunugwor[1]
Email: au.ogbunugwor@unizik.edu.ng **Phone:** +2348038762909
&
Ebunoluwa Helen Adebola[2]
Email: he.adebola@unizik.edu.ng **Phone:** +2347038176467

Prof. I.T. Ugwoegbu
it.ugwoegbu@unizik.edu.ng; +2347059955726

ABSTRACT

INEC is Nigeria's constitutionally established electoral management body responsible for organizing, conducting, and supervising specified elections in the country. The study investigated INEC officials' compliance with electoral professional ethics and citizens' confidence in the electoral process in south-east Nigeria: Implications for community development. Two research questions were answered and two null hypotheses were tested. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population comprised 26,326 electoral stakeholders, consisting of 1,200 community leaders, 21,631 party agents and 3,495 representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A sample of 2,633 respondents was selected using a multistage sampling procedure. Data were collected using a researcher-developed instrument titled INEC Officials' Compliance with Professional Ethics in the Conduct of Elections and its Implications for Community Development in South-East Nigeria Questionnaire (IOCPECESEQ). The instrument was validated by five experts and yielded an overall Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficient of 0.84. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test the null hypotheses at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that revealed that INEC officials complied with the principle of non-partisanship to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria. The study further showed a moderate positive relationship between INEC officials' compliance with the principle of non-partisanship and citizens' confidence in the electoral process. Based on the findings, it was recommended, among others, that INEC should strengthen the enforcement of non-partisanship among election officials by ensuring strict compliance with the oath of neutrality and sanctioning officials found to have favoured or discriminated against any political party or candidate during election processes.

Keywords: INEC officials, electoral professional ethics, non-partisanship, human rights, citizens' confidence, electoral process, community development

Introduction

Elections constitute an indispensable component of democratic governance because they provide citizens with an institutional mechanism for choosing representatives, expressing political preferences and determining who exercises governmental authority. The democratic significance of elections, however, extends beyond the periodic casting and counting of ballots to include the credibility, fairness and legitimacy of the processes through which political choices are translated into electoral outcomes. Norris and Grömping (2019) maintained that electoral integrity requires conformity with acceptable democratic standards throughout the electoral cycle, while Birch et al. (2020) demonstrated that citizens' perceptions of electoral integrity can influence their subsequent political behaviour. Within the Nigerian context, Madueke (2025) similarly observed that election management practices have significant implications for the integrity of elections. Thus, the credibility of an election is influenced not merely by its outcome but by the institutional procedures and professional conduct through which the outcome is produced. Central to the credibility of elections is the conduct of the electoral management body and the officials responsible for implementing electoral laws, regulations and procedures. Election officials interact directly with voters, political parties, candidates, observers and other stakeholders at critical stages of the electoral process and therefore represent the electoral institution in practical terms. Van Ham and Garnett (2019) maintained that the independence and performance of electoral management bodies are important to electoral integrity, while International IDEA (2022) emphasised professionalism, impartiality and consistency in electoral administration. In Nigeria, the Electoral Act (2022) and the Independent National Electoral Commission's Regulations and Guidelines for the Conduct of Elections provide the statutory and procedural frameworks within which electoral officials are expected to discharge their responsibilities. Madueke (2025) further demonstrated that the manner in which electoral procedures are implemented can substantially shape assessments of electoral integrity in Nigeria.

The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), as Nigeria's electoral management body, bears substantial responsibility for administering elections within the legal framework established for the country's democratic system. Its responsibilities are translated into practice through permanent and ad hoc officials who perform such duties as voter accreditation, management of electoral materials, supervision of voting, counting and recording of votes, management of polling units and participation in result collation. The professional conduct of these officials is consequently important because citizens frequently evaluate INEC through their encounters with its personnel and through their observations of election administration. Amao and Ambali (2024) linked electoral integrity with voters' confidence and good governance in Nigeria, while Madueke (2025) identified election management as an important element in understanding the integrity of Nigeria's 2023 general election.

Recent Nigerian research has therefore increasingly drawn attention to the relationship between electoral administration, institutional credibility and citizens' evaluations of the electoral system.

Despite repeated electoral reforms, Nigeria continues to experience challenges capable of undermining public confidence in elections. These include electoral violence, intimidation, administrative irregularities, vote buying, insecurity, inconsistent implementation of procedures and controversies surrounding result management. Oni (2025) observed that security challenges significantly affect election administration and electoral participation in Nigeria, while Madueke (2025) reported that expectations associated with reforms introduced for the 2023 general election were affected by controversies surrounding the implementation of electoral procedures. Nigerian studies have also continued to identify technological, institutional and operational weaknesses capable of affecting perceptions of electoral credibility (Olonite, Chidiebere, & Agbailu, 2023; Amao & Ambali, 2024; Young, 2025). These concerns indicate that electoral reform cannot be restricted to legislation and technology; attention must equally be directed to the professional ethics of the officials responsible for translating reforms into electoral practice. Professional ethics provides standards for determining how individuals entrusted with institutional responsibilities ought to behave in performing their duties. Within electoral administration, professional ethics encompasses principles intended to ensure that electoral officials exercise authority fairly, responsibly and consistently with democratic standards. Such ethical conduct requires more than technical competence in operating electoral equipment or completing electoral documentation. It requires officials to avoid partisan influence, respect the rights and dignity of electoral stakeholders, apply procedures fairly and refrain from using official positions to confer improper advantage on political interests. International IDEA (2022) emphasised impartial electoral administration as a foundation of credible elections, while the Electoral Act (2022) established legal obligations intended to regulate the conduct of electoral officials. Nigerian electoral scholarship similarly suggests that the credibility of election administration depends on how effectively formal rules and institutional reforms are implemented in practice (Madueke, 2025; Oni, 2025). In the present study, INEC officials' compliance with electoral professional ethics constitutes the independent variable, operationalised through two closely related dimensions: non-partisanship during election processes and respect for human rights. These dimensions are particularly relevant because electoral officials occupy positions that require neutrality in political competition while simultaneously exercising authority over citizens seeking to exercise their democratic rights. Non-partisanship focuses on the neutrality and impartiality of electoral officials in dealing with political parties, candidates and voters, whereas respect for human rights concerns the protection of citizens' dignity, equality, freedom of political choice, ballot secrecy and freedom from intimidation or

discriminatory treatment. These dimensions collectively provide a basis for assessing whether electoral authority is exercised ethically and, in a manner, capable of generating confidence among citizens (International IDEA, 2022; Electoral Act, 2022; Madueke, 2025). Non-partisanship during election processes constitutes an important component of professional ethics because electoral officials are expected to administer political competition without favouring or disadvantaging any political party or candidate. Non-partisanship requires officials to separate personal political preferences from their official responsibilities and apply electoral rules consistently to all contestants. This includes equal treatment of party agents, neutral handling of electoral materials, impartial implementation of accreditation and voting procedures and avoidance of actions or statements capable of creating reasonable perceptions of political bias. Van Ham and Garnett (2019) argued that institutional independence and impartial electoral management are closely connected with electoral integrity, while Norris and Grömping (2019) emphasised consistent adherence to electoral standards. Within Nigeria, Amao and Ambali (2024) associated electoral integrity with voters' confidence, suggesting that perceptions of fairness in election administration have implications for citizens' evaluations of the electoral process.

The significance of non-partisanship becomes particularly apparent when electoral officials are positioned between competing political interests. Where an official selectively applies electoral regulations, grants preferential access to one political party, obstructs legitimate party agents, manipulates electoral documentation or otherwise acts in a manner suggesting political allegiance, citizens may question the neutrality of the electoral institution represented by that official. Conversely, equal treatment of contestants can communicate institutional independence and procedural fairness. Madueke (2025) showed that election management and adherence to promised procedures were important to assessments of Nigeria's 2023 general election, while International IDEA (2024) identified unresolved electoral-reform issues following weaknesses exposed during that election. Non-partisanship should therefore be understood not simply as the absence of formal party membership among election officials but as observable neutrality in the exercise of electoral responsibilities. Non-partisanship is expected to relate directly to citizens' confidence in the electoral process, which constitutes the dependent variable of the study. When citizens observe that officials apply the same standards to political parties and candidates, permit legitimate stakeholder participation and administer procedures without visible political preference, they are more likely to regard the process as fair. Amao and Ambali (2024) connected electoral integrity with voters' confidence and governance in Nigeria, while research on electoral management generally indicates that the quality and impartiality of election administration shape public evaluations of elections. Consequently, perceived non-partisanship can strengthen confidence through perceived procedural

fairness: citizens infer from neutral behaviour that electoral outcomes have been produced through rules applicable equally to competing political interests.

The second dimension of electoral professional ethics examined in the study is respect for human rights during election processes. Elections represent not only administrative exercises but also mechanisms through which citizens exercise fundamental political rights. The right to participate in governance, freedom of political choice, equality of treatment, personal dignity and secrecy of the ballot are therefore integral to credible electoral administration. The Electoral Act (2022) established important protections and procedures governing participation in Nigerian elections, while International IDEA (2022) recognised inclusive and rights-respecting participation as central to democratic elections. Within the Nigerian environment, concerns surrounding insecurity, intimidation and violence remain particularly important because they can restrict citizens' ability to participate freely in electoral processes. Oni (2025) Arah (2025) identified security challenges as significant constraints on election administration and participation in Nigeria. Respect for human rights in electoral administration consequently requires INEC officials to treat voters and stakeholders with dignity, ensure equal access to legitimate electoral participation, protect the secrecy of voters' choices, avoid discriminatory treatment and refrain from actions that facilitate intimidation or coercion. It also entails sensitivity to the participation needs of vulnerable citizens, including older persons and persons with disabilities, within the limits prescribed by electoral law. Where citizens encounter electoral institutions as rights-respecting institutions, they are more likely to perceive electoral authority as legitimate. Conversely, experiences of intimidation, discriminatory treatment or arbitrary restriction can weaken perceptions of fairness. Nigerian research on election-related insecurity demonstrates that fear and violence can adversely affect electoral participation, particularly where voters perceive that participating in elections exposes them to unacceptable risks (Oni, 2025; Madueke, 2025). Respect for human rights and non-partisanship are conceptually distinct but mutually reinforcing. An official may refrain from openly supporting a political party but still undermine electoral ethics through discriminatory treatment, intimidation or disregard for voters' dignity. Similarly, an official may behave respectfully towards voters but apply electoral procedures selectively in favour of a political interest. Professional ethical compliance therefore requires both political neutrality and rights-respecting administration. International IDEA (2022) placed impartiality and inclusive participation among important features of credible electoral management, while Madueke (2025) emphasised the consequences of election-management practices for electoral integrity in Nigeria. Taken together, non-partisanship and respect for human rights provide complementary indicators of whether INEC officials exercise electoral authority in ways capable of sustaining public confidence.

Citizens' confidence in the electoral process refers to the extent to which citizens believe that elections are administered fairly, credibly and according to established procedures and that legitimate electoral outcomes represent the choices expressed through voting. Confidence involves perceptions of the fairness of electoral administration, trustworthiness of the electoral institution, integrity of voting and result-management procedures and willingness to regard electoral outcomes as procedurally legitimate. Amao and Ambali (2024) treated voters' confidence as an important component in understanding electoral integrity and good governance in Nigeria, while Madueke (2025) and Arah (2017) demonstrated that controversies in election management can undermine the integrity attributed to an electoral process. Evidence from citizen-focused assessments also suggests that erosion of trust in electoral institutions can coexist with declining electoral participation and broader political disengagement. Citizens' confidence is not synonymous with satisfaction with an election result. A voter whose preferred candidate loses may still have confidence in the electoral process when the voter believes that officials acted neutrally, rights were protected, votes were accurately counted and electoral procedures were consistently implemented. Conversely, electoral victory by a preferred candidate does not necessarily demonstrate confidence in the institutional process. This distinction is important because the present study conceptualises confidence as citizens' assessment of the credibility and fairness of the electoral process rather than partisan satisfaction with electoral outcomes. Birch et al. (2020) established that perceptions of electoral integrity have implications for subsequent political behaviour, while Nigerian evidence has linked electoral integrity, voters' confidence and governance outcomes (Amao & Ambali, 2024).

A direct conceptual relationship can therefore be established between INEC officials' professional ethics and citizens' confidence. Non-partisanship provides evidence of procedural fairness, while respect for human rights provides evidence of institutional legitimacy and inclusion. When both conditions are present, citizens have stronger reasons to believe that the electoral institution is administering political competition fairly and protecting their democratic participation. Where either condition is absent, confidence may deteriorate: partisan conduct generates suspicion that electoral rules are manipulated, whereas disregard for human rights generates perceptions that electoral participation is unsafe, discriminatory or ineffective. Thus, the immediate conceptual relationship proposed in the study is INEC officials' professional ethical compliance (non-partisanship and respect for human rights) → perceived fairness and legitimacy → citizens' confidence in the electoral process (Amao & Ambali, 2024; Madueke, 2025; International IDEA, 2022). This relationship is particularly relevant in South-East Nigeria, where election administration operates within a social environment affected by broader questions of security, political participation and institutional trust. Recent research examining insecurity and electoral participation in South-East and

South-West Nigeria reported that election-related violence and intimidation affected the environment surrounding the 2023 elections. Similarly, Oni (2025) demonstrated more broadly that security challenges affect election administration and participation in Nigeria. Where citizens simultaneously confront insecurity and doubts about institutional neutrality, the ethical conduct of electoral officials becomes especially important because officials' behaviour can either reassure citizens that institutional rules remain dependable or reinforce existing perceptions of political exclusion and distrust.

Citizens' confidence in the electoral process, in turn, has implications for community development. Community development depends partly on citizens' willingness to participate in collective affairs, cooperate with institutions, engage peacefully with competing interests and contribute to decisions affecting their communities. Phillips and Pittman (2016) conceptualised community development around participation, capacity building and collective action, while contemporary governance perspectives emphasise that legitimate institutions facilitate cooperation between citizens and public authorities. In the Nigerian democratic environment, Amao and Ambali (2024) connected electoral integrity and voters' confidence with good governance, suggesting that confidence generated through credible elections can have consequences extending beyond election periods. The relationship between citizens' electoral confidence and community development is, however, indirect rather than mechanically causal. INEC officials do not directly provide roads, schools, healthcare facilities or other community-development projects by behaving professionally. Rather, ethical electoral administration can strengthen citizens' confidence in democratic institutions; confidence can encourage political and civic participation; participation can promote peaceful engagement, institutional cooperation and social cohesion; and these conditions can support collective efforts towards community development. Conversely, persistent perceptions of partisan electoral administration and rights violations may produce distrust, political withdrawal, conflict and reduced willingness to cooperate with public institutions. Thus, community development represents a broader societal implication of electoral confidence rather than a direct product of election administration (Phillips & Pittman, 2016; Amao & Ambali, 2024; Madueke, 2025).

The variables in the present study are therefore linked through a coherent conceptual sequence. INEC officials' compliance with electoral professional ethics is the predictor variable, represented by non-partisanship during election processes and respect for human rights. These ethical behaviours are expected to influence citizens' confidence in the electoral process, which constitutes the criterion variable. Citizens' confidence subsequently has implications for institutional trust, civic participation, peaceful political engagement and social cohesion, which provide enabling conditions for community development. The proposed

pathway is therefore: Non-partisanship + Respect for Human Rights → Citizens' Confidence in the Electoral Process → Institutional Trust, Civic Participation and Social Cohesion → Community Development. This structure is consistent with Nigerian scholarship linking electoral integrity with voters' confidence (Amao & Ambali, 2024), election management with electoral integrity (Madueke, 2025), and security conditions with electoral participation (Oni, 2025). Despite the importance of these relationships, existing Nigerian electoral studies have tended to concentrate on electoral violence, vote buying, election technology, election security, electoral reforms and general assessments of electoral integrity. Madueke (2025), for instance, examined electoral integrity and election management in relation to the 2023 general election, while Oni (2025) investigated security challenges and election administration. Other recent studies have examined technological innovation and electoral credibility, reflecting continuing scholarly interest in the institutional and technological dimensions of election administration. Although these studies provide important insights, comparatively less empirical attention has been directed towards simultaneously examining citizens' perceptions of INEC officials' non-partisanship and respect for human rights as dimensions of electoral professional ethics and determining how these dimensions relate to citizens' confidence in the electoral process, particularly in South-East Nigeria. It is against this background that the present study investigates INEC Officials' Compliance with Electoral Professional Ethics and Citizens' Confidence in the Electoral Process in South-East Nigeria: Implications for Community Development.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent do INEC officials demonstrate non-partisanship during election processes in South-East Nigeria?
2. To what extent do INEC officials respect human rights during election processes in South-East Nigeria?

Hypotheses

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

H_{01}: There is no significant relationship between INEC officials' non-partisanship during election processes and citizens' confidence in the electoral process in South-East Nigeria.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between INEC officials' respect for human rights during election processes and citizens' confidence in the electoral process in South-East Nigeria.

Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. The population comprised 26,326 respondents, encompassing 1,200 community leaders, 21,631 party agents and 3,495 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) drawn from the five states of the South-East geopolitical zone of Nigeria. A sample of 2,633 respondents using the multi-stage

sampling procedure. Researcher's developed instrument titled "INEC Officials' Compliance with Professional Ethics in Conduct of Elections and its Implications for Community Development South-East Nigeria Questionnaire (IOCPECESEQ)" was used. Five experts validated the instrument, and reliability was determined through trial test and overall coefficient value of 0.81 obtained using Cronbach Alpha Method. Data was analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer research questions Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the rejection or non-rejection of the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

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

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGOs (n = 350)	
		Mean ($\overline{X}$)	SD	Mean ($\overline{X}$)	SD	Mean ($\overline{X}$)	SD
1	Treat all political parties and their agents equally and fairly at polling units and collation centers	3.34	0.71	3.08	0.83	3.27	0.75
2	Refrain from wearing any political party symbols, colors, or paraphernalia during election duties	3.43	0.68	3.19	0.79	3.36	0.73
3	Allow all party agents equal access to observe the voting, counting, and collation processes	3.18	0.77	2.94	0.88	3.11	0.81
4	Avoid making public comments that favour or oppose any political party or candidate	3.25	0.74	2.88	0.91	3.14	0.80
5	Handle complaints from all political parties promptly and without bias	3.07	0.82	2.31	0.97	2.96	0.85
6	Ensure that all valid votes cast for every party and candidate are counted and recorded accurately	3.29	0.73	3.01	0.86	3.22	0.76
7	Avoid accepting gifts, money, or favors from any political party, candidate, or their supporters	2.44	0.95	2.78	0.88	2.37	0.92
8	Maintain professional distance and neutrality when interacting with candidates, party leaders, or government officials during the election process	3.21	0.76	2.97	0.84	3.09	0.79
Cluster Mean		**3.15**		**2.90**		**3.07**	

The findings in Table 1 revealed that INEC officials complied with the principle of non-partisanship to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria, as indicated by the cluster mean scores of 3.15, 2.90 and 3.07 for community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives, respectively. High compliance was reported in treating political parties equally, refraining from displaying partisan symbols, allowing equal access to party agents, avoiding partisan public comments, counting and recording valid votes accurately, and maintaining professional neutrality when interacting with political actors. However, the respondent groups differed in their assessments of some practices. Party agents reported low compliance in the prompt and unbiased handling of complaints, with a mean score of 2.31, whereas community leaders and NGO representatives rated this practice highly. Similarly, community leaders and NGO representatives reported low compliance with avoiding gifts, money or favours from political actors, recording mean scores of 2.44 and 2.37, respectively, while party agents reported high compliance with a mean score of 2.78. The standard deviation scores ranged from 0.68 to 0.95 for community leaders, 0.79 to 0.97 for party agents and 0.73 to 0.92 for NGO representatives. These relatively low standard deviation values show that the respondents' ratings were generally close to their respective mean scores, indicating a reasonable degree of agreement within the three groups. Nevertheless, the comparatively higher standard deviations recorded for the unbiased handling of complaints and avoidance of gifts, money or favours indicate greater variation in respondents' experiences and perceptions of these practices. Overall, the findings indicate that INEC officials demonstrated a high but uneven level of non-partisanship, with weaknesses particularly evident in handling complaints without bias and resisting inducements from political actors.

Table 2: *Respondents' ratings on extent to which INEC officials uphold respect for human rights in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria*

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGO Representatives (n = 350)	
		Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD	Mean ($\bar{X}$)	SD
37	Allow every eligible citizen, regardless of gender, age, or disability, to vote without discrimination	3.35	0.69	3.06	0.83	3.27	0.74
38	Protect voters from physical harm at polling units and collation centers	3.18	0.76	2.93	0.87	3.11	0.79
39	Ensure that persons with disabilities (e.g., visual impairment, mobility challenges) are given special assistance to vote with dignity	3.07	0.81	2.84	0.89	3.02	0.82
40	Allow voters to cast their ballots in	3.29	0.71	3.01	0.84	3.21	0.76

S/N	To what extent do INEC officials:	Community Leaders (n = 120)		Party Agents (n = 2,163)		NGO Representatives (n = 350)	
	secret, without anyone monitoring or influencing their choice						
41	Respect the right of party agents and observers to carry out their duties without threats or physical assault	3.14	0.77	2.89	0.88	3.08	0.80
42	Refrain from using offensive language towards voters, agents, or observers	3.22	0.73	2.95	0.86	3.15	0.78
43	Ensure that elderly and pregnant women are given priority attention and not forced to stand in long queues for hours	3.09	0.79	2.81	0.91	3.04	0.81
44	Protect the right of voters to express their political choice freely without fear of being identified or victimized	3.17	0.76	2.92	0.87	3.12	0.79
45	Respect the right of the media to freely report on the election process without harassment or censorship	3.11	0.78	2.86	0.89	3.05	0.80
Cluster Mean		**3.18**		**2.92**		**3.12**	

The findings in Table 2 revealed that INEC officials upheld respect for human rights to a high extent in the conduct of elections in South-East Nigeria, as indicated by the cluster mean scores of 3.18, 2.92 and 3.12 for community leaders, party agents and NGO representatives, respectively. High compliance was reported in allowing eligible citizens to vote without discrimination, protecting voters from physical harm, assisting persons with disabilities, ensuring ballot secrecy, protecting freedom of political choice, treating electoral stakeholders respectfully and allowing the media to report freely. Nevertheless, relatively lower mean ratings were recorded, particularly by party agents, for providing special assistance to persons with disabilities, giving priority attention to elderly persons and pregnant women, protecting party agents and observers, and safeguarding media freedom. The standard deviation scores ranged from 0.69 to 0.81 for community leaders, 0.83 to 0.91 for party agents and 0.74 to 0.82 for NGO representatives. These relatively low standard deviation values indicate that the respondents' ratings were generally close to their respective mean scores, suggesting a considerable degree of agreement within the three groups. Community leaders recorded the lowest range of standard deviations, indicating greater consistency in their responses. Conversely, party agents recorded slightly higher standard deviations, with the highest value of 0.91 relating to

priority attention for elderly persons and pregnant women. This suggests that party agents' experiences and perceptions of the treatment of vulnerable voters were comparatively more varied. Therefore, the findings indicate that INEC officials upheld respect for human rights to a high extent, although assistance to vulnerable voters, protection of agents and observers, and respect for media freedom require further strengthening.

Table 3: *Pearson Correlation between INEC Officials' Non-Partisanship and Citizens' Confidence in the Electoral Process*

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	p-value	Decision
Non-partisanship	2,633	3.04	0.58			
Citizens' confidence	2,633	2.91	0.64	**.462**	**<.001**	Reject H_0

Table 3 shows a moderate positive relationship between INEC officials' compliance with the principle of non-partisanship and citizens' confidence in the electoral process, r = .462. The associated probability value was less than .001, which is below the 0.05 level of significance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates that there was a significant positive relationship between INEC officials' non-partisanship and citizens' confidence in the electoral process in South-East Nigeria. Thus, higher perceived compliance with non-partisanship was associated with higher citizens' confidence in the electoral process.

Table 4: *Pearson Correlation between INEC Officials' Respect for Human Rights and Citizens' Confidence in the Electoral Process*

Variables	N	Mean	SD	R	p-value	Decision
Respect for human rights	2,633	3.01	0.56			
Citizens' confidence	2,633	2.91	0.64	**.518**	**<.001**	Reject H_0

As shown in Table 4, there was a moderate positive relationship between INEC officials' respect for human rights and citizens' confidence in the electoral process, r = .518. The probability value was less than .001, which is below the 0.05 level of significance. Consequently, the null hypothesis was rejected. This means that INEC officials' respect for human rights was significantly and positively related to citizens' confidence in the electoral process in South-East Nigeria. The finding implies that greater perceived protection of voters' rights, dignity, ballot secrecy, non-discrimination and freedom from intimidation was associated with greater confidence in the electoral process.

Discussion of Findings

The finding of the study revealed that INEC officials demonstrated non-partisanship during election processes in South-East Nigeria to a considerable extent. This finding suggests that respondents generally perceived INEC officials as capable of carrying out their electoral responsibilities without openly favouring particular political parties or candidates. Non-partisanship is fundamental to electoral professional ethics because election officials occupy a sensitive position between competing political interests and are expected to apply electoral regulations uniformly irrespective of their personal political preferences. Amao and Ambali (2024) maintained that electoral integrity is closely associated with voters' confidence and good governance in Nigeria, implying that citizens' perceptions of the fairness of electoral administration are important for the legitimacy of elections. Similarly, Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) argued that the independence and institutional performance of INEC are critical to the integrity of Nigeria's electoral process. The finding may further indicate that citizens attach considerable importance to the observable neutrality of electoral officials. Non-partisanship is demonstrated not simply by an official's lack of formal affiliation with a political party but by equal treatment of political parties and candidates, consistent application of electoral procedures, impartial handling of electoral materials and avoidance of conduct that creates perceptions of political bias. This is important because Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) identified political interference and insufficient institutional independence among the factors constraining the capacity of INEC to deliver credible elections. Their observation reinforces the present finding by demonstrating that the credibility of election administration depends partly on the extent to which electoral officials and institutions are insulated from partisan influence. The finding also has implications for the credibility of elections in South-East Nigeria. Where citizens perceive electoral officials as neutral, they are more likely to believe that political parties and candidates compete under reasonably equitable conditions. Conversely, perceptions that officials selectively apply electoral rules, assist particular candidates or parties, or permit political influence to affect electoral decisions may generate suspicion regarding the legitimacy of the entire process. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) observed that weaknesses in adherence to electoral rules, institutional independence and organisational performance contributed to concerns surrounding Nigeria's 2023 general election. Similarly, Amao and Ambali (2024) found an important connection among electoral integrity, voters' confidence and good governance in Nigeria. Thus, non-partisanship constitutes an important ethical mechanism through which INEC officials can strengthen citizens' perceptions of electoral fairness.

The study further revealed that INEC officials respected human rights during election processes in South-East Nigeria to a considerable extent. This finding implies that respondents generally perceived electoral officials as recognising the rights and dignity of citizens while performing their electoral responsibilities. Respect for

human rights is central to professional electoral ethics because voting represents the exercise of a fundamental democratic right and must take place under conditions that enable citizens to participate freely, equally and without intimidation. Oni et al. (2025) emphasised that credible elections require an environment in which electoral officials and materials are protected and citizens are able to cast their votes without insecurity or systematic disenfranchisement. The Electoral Act (2022) equally provided the legal framework within which citizens' participation and electoral procedures are regulated. The finding is significant because respect for human rights during elections extends beyond permitting citizens to cast ballots. It encompasses respect for voters' dignity, freedom of political choice, secrecy of the ballot, equal treatment, freedom from intimidation and non-discriminatory access to electoral participation. It also requires appropriate consideration for vulnerable groups and citizens who may require assistance in exercising their voting rights. Nigerian scholarship has increasingly demonstrated that insecurity, intimidation and electoral violence can undermine these rights and consequently discourage political participation. Oni et al. (2025), for instance, reported that insecurity in Nigeria has contributed to voter apathy, systematic disenfranchisement, attacks on election observers and disruption of electoral administration. Respecting citizens' rights during elections is therefore both an ethical obligation and a practical requirement for inclusive electoral participation. The finding further suggests that rights-respecting conduct by INEC officials can enhance citizens' perceptions of institutional legitimacy. Citizens who are treated respectfully, allowed to exercise their electoral choices freely and protected against discriminatory electoral practices are more likely to regard the institution administering the election as legitimate. Conversely, intimidation, unequal treatment, arbitrary restrictions or interference with ballot secrecy can weaken citizens' confidence even where other technical aspects of election administration are properly implemented. This interpretation agrees with Oni et al. (2025), who demonstrated that insecurity and threats to citizens' participation can undermine election administration, and Madueke and Enyiazu (2025), who emphasised the broader consequences of deficiencies in electoral administration for electoral integrity in Nigeria.

Another finding of the study concerned citizens' confidence in the electoral process in South-East Nigeria. The observed level of confidence suggests that citizens' evaluations of elections are influenced by their perceptions of whether electoral procedures are fair, credible and professionally administered. Citizens' confidence represents more than satisfaction with electoral outcomes; rather, it reflects belief in the fairness of the procedures through which votes are cast, counted, recorded and translated into electoral outcomes. Amao and Ambali (2024) specifically examined the relationship among electoral integrity, voters' confidence and good governance in Nigeria and found a significant joint impact of electoral integrity and voters' confidence on good governance.

This demonstrates that public confidence is an important component of the legitimacy and broader governance consequences of elections. The finding can also be understood within the wider challenges confronting Nigerian election administration. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) observed that although Nigeria has maintained periodic elections since 1999, questions continue to surround their quality because of irregularities and institutional constraints. The authors identified corruption, insufficient adherence to rules and lack of independence among significant challenges affecting INEC. Such institutional weaknesses can influence citizens' confidence because voters evaluate electoral institutions partly on whether promised rules and procedures are consistently implemented. Consequently, confidence is likely to increase when citizens perceive correspondence between electoral regulations and the actual behaviour of officials responsible for implementing them.

The finding on the relationship between non-partisanship and citizens' confidence indicated that the perceived neutrality of INEC officials was associated with citizens' confidence in the electoral process. This relationship is theoretically plausible because non-partisanship provides citizens with observable evidence of procedural fairness. When election officials apply identical standards to competing parties, provide equal opportunities for legitimate participation and refrain from using their official positions to favour particular political interests, citizens have stronger grounds for believing that electoral outcomes have emerged from a fair process. Amao and Ambali (2024) demonstrated the importance of electoral integrity to voters' confidence in Nigeria, while Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) identified institutional independence and adherence to electoral rules as central challenges to credible election management. The relationship further implies that improving electoral technology alone may not be sufficient to restore or sustain citizens' confidence where electoral officials are perceived as politically biased. Technology operates through human and institutional actors, and citizens may continue to distrust technologically supported elections where they believe those administering the process are subject to partisan influence. Madueke and Enyiazu (2025) noted that institutional weaknesses and political interference continue to constrain INEC despite reforms intended to strengthen election administration. Therefore, professional neutrality should be considered alongside technological and legal reforms when seeking to improve public confidence in Nigeria's electoral process.

Conclusion

The study concluded that INEC officials' compliance with electoral professional ethics, particularly non-partisanship during election processes and respect for human rights, is essential for strengthening citizens' confidence in the electoral process in South-East Nigeria. When electoral officials demonstrate neutrality, treat political actors fairly, protect voters' rights and dignity, and conduct elections without intimidation or discrimination, citizens are more likely to

perceive the electoral process as credible and legitimate. The study further concluded that improved citizens' confidence can promote institutional trust, civic participation, peaceful political engagement and social cohesion, thereby creating favourable conditions for community development. Thus, the relationship can be summarized as electoral professional ethics → citizens' confidence → institutional trust and civic participation → community development. Consequently, strengthening the ethical conduct of INEC officials is important not only for credible elections but also for democratic stability and sustainable community development in South-East Nigeria.

Recommendations

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

1. INEC should strengthen the enforcement of non-partisanship among election officials by ensuring strict compliance with the oath of neutrality and sanctioning officials found to have favoured or discriminated against any political party or candidate during election processes.
2. INEC should organise regular ethics-based training and retraining for permanent and ad hoc election officials, with particular emphasis on political neutrality, impartial application of electoral procedures, professional conduct and avoidance of actions capable of creating perceptions of partisan bias.
3. INEC should strengthen mechanisms for protecting voters' human rights during elections by ensuring that election officials respect voters' dignity, ballot secrecy, freedom of political choice, equal treatment and freedom from intimidation or discrimination, with particular attention to elderly voters and persons with disabilities.
4. INEC should establish effective monitoring, complaint and disciplinary mechanisms through which citizens, party agents and election observers can report incidents of partisan conduct, intimidation, discrimination and other unethical practices by election officials.

REFERENCES

Amao, A. I., & Ambali, A. (2024). Electoral integrity, voters' confidence and good governance in Nigeria: A comparative analysis of 2015 and 2019 presidential elections. *Journal of Administrative Science, 19*(2), 39-65.

Arah, A. N. (2017) "Reality Television and the Change Imperative: A Critical Appraisal of Jeta Amata's Dawn in the Creeks". The Creative Artist: *A Journal of Theatre and Media Studies,13(2),* pp 80-90.

Arah, A. N. (2025) "Reverse-Acculturation and Identity: An Overview of Recent Tittle-taking Trend among Diaspora Onitsha Indigenes". *Journal of Humanities and Leadership Studies: Journal of Faculty of Arts, Dennis Osadebey University, Asaba, Delta State,* 1(2), 2025, 2971-5741.

Birch, S., Daxecker, U., & Höglund, K. (2020). Electoral violence: An introduction. *Journal of Peace Research, 57*(1), 3-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343319889657

Federal Republic of Nigeria. (2022). *Electoral Act, 2022*. Federal Government Printer.

Independent National Electoral Commission. (2022). *Regulations and guidelines for the conduct of elections, 2022*. Independent National Electoral Commission.

Independent National Electoral Commission. (2023). *Manual for election officials: 2023 general election*. Independent National Electoral Commission.

International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2020). *2019 post-election survey in Nigeria*. IFES.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. (2022). *The global state of democracy 2022: Forging social contracts in a time of discontent*. International IDEA.

Kerr, N. N. (2018). Election-day experiences and evaluation of electoral integrity in unconsolidated democracies: Evidence from Nigeria. *Political Studies, 66*(3), 667–686. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321717724932

Madueke, O., & Enyiazu, C. (2025). Electoral integrity and election management in Nigeria: The case of the 2023 general election. *World Affairs, 188*(1). https://doi.org/10.1002/waf2.12055

Norris, P., & Grömping, M. (2019). *Electoral integrity worldwide*. Electoral Integrity Project.

Oni, E. O., Faluyi, O. T., Asumu, L. O., & Olutola, A. A. (2025). Security challenges and election administration in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. *Frontiers in Political Science, 7*, 1458303. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1458303

Phillips, R., & Pittman, R. H. (Eds.). (2016). *An introduction to community development* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

United Nations Development Programme. (2022). *Human development report 2021/2022: Uncertain times, unsettled lives—Shaping our future in a transforming world*. UNDP.

Van Ham, C., & Garnett, H. A. (2019). Building impartial electoral management? Institutional design, independence and electoral integrity. *International Political Science Review*, *40*(3), 313-334. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512119834573

World Bank. (2017). *World development report 2017: Governance and the law*. World Bank.

Yiaga Africa. (2023). *Dashed hopes? Yiaga Africa report on Nigeria's 2023 general election*. Yiaga Africa.