

Artificial Intelligence and Electoral Democracy in Nigeria: Political Participation, Information Integrity and The Future of Democratic Governance

Hilary Ekpang Bisong, Ph.D¹, Abubakar Sodeeq Suleiman, Ph.D²

¹The Chief Whip, Cross River State House of Assembly.

²Senior Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation Research Officer, National Institute for Legislative and Democratic Studies, National Assembly.

ABSTRACT	ARTICLE DETAILS
Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming increasingly consequential to electoral information environments, although its democratic effects cannot be understood simply by treating every digital electoral technology as AI. This article examines how AI and AI-enabled information practices may shape electoral democracy and political participation in Nigeria, with particular attention to the 2023 general election and the institutional environment developing toward the 2027 electoral cycle. The study uses qualitative documentary research and thematic content analysis of peer-reviewed scholarship, Nigerian electoral and legal documents, institutional reports, and documented fact-checking evidence. The analysis distinguishes conventional digital electoral technologies, algorithmic systems, AI, generative AI, and synthetic media in order to avoid conceptual conflation. The evidence indicates that AI creates opportunities for voter information, civic verification, accessibility, administrative support and large-scale analysis, but also introduces risks associated with synthetic political content, impersonation, targeted disinformation, algorithmic amplification, uncertainty about content authenticity and gendered political abuse. Evidence from the 2023 election is particularly instructive because it includes both confirmed manipulated political audio and disputed or non-AI-generated material that was publicly described as a deepfake. This distinction reveals a deeper democratic problem: the erosion of citizens' ability to determine what political information can be trusted. The article develops an AI–Information Integrity–Participation–Democratic Legitimacy framework, arguing that the effects of AI are mediated by institutional capacity, regulation, platform governance, digital literacy, verification capacity and political trust. The article concludes that Nigeria's response to AI in elections should combine innovation with provenance, independent verification, institutional forensic capacity, platform accountability, media and AI literacy, and rights-preserving regulation. KEYWORDS: artificial deepfakes; elections; electoral democracy; generative AI; intelligence; information integrity; Nigeria; political participation	Published On: 16 September 2026 Available on: https://ijrsr.org/

INTRODUCTION

Since the return to constitutional civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria's democratic experience has been accompanied by successive transformations in the country's political information environment. The expansion of radio and television was followed by the growth of online news, mobile communication and social media. By the 2010s, digital platforms had become important spaces for political communication, mobilisation, campaign messaging and citizen expression. Nigerian studies have consequently associated social media use with new opportunities for political participation while also documenting the persistence of misinformation and unequal access to digital resources (Adams & Quadri, 2018; Mustapha & Omar, 2020; Ufuophu-Biri, 2020; Chirwa et al., 2023). The emergence of generative artificial intelligence introduces a qualitatively different layer to this information environment. Contemporary AI systems can generate or transform text, images, audio and video at low cost and at a scale that was previously difficult for individual political actors to achieve. AI also operates indirectly through content recommendation, ranking, moderation and other forms of algorithmic curation. Consequently, the democratic significance of AI is not limited to the

production of deepfakes. It extends to the conditions under which citizens encounter, interpret, share and contest political information.

Nigeria's 2023 general election provides an important early case for examining these dynamics. During the election period, political audio recordings circulated that were subsequently subjected to forensic or fact-checking scrutiny. One audio purporting to involve Atiku Abubakar, Aminu Tambuwal and Ifeanyi Okowa in a plan to manipulate the election was assessed by TheCable as doctored, with unrelated recordings edited together. By contrast, an audio involving Peter Obi and David Oyedepo was publicly described by some users as a deepfake but was assessed by the Foundation for Investigative Journalism and PRNigeria as not AI-generated. These contrasting cases are analytically important because they show that AI-related electoral risk is not simply the production of false content. It also includes uncertainty about authenticity and the possibility that genuine material may be dismissed as synthetic.

At the same time, digital technologies have created opportunities for electoral administration and civic oversight. Systems such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing portal (IREV) are important digital electoral technologies, but they should not automatically be classified as artificial intelligence. This distinction is essential. BVAS primarily concerns biometric voter accreditation, while IREV concerns electronic access to polling-unit result information. The article therefore treats them as part of the broader digital electoral ecosystem and examines AI as a distinct, emerging layer within that ecosystem.

The central problem addressed by this article is therefore not whether AI is inherently beneficial or harmful. Rather, the problem is how AI changes the informational conditions under which citizens participate in elections, and how Nigerian institutions can preserve electoral integrity while permitting legitimate technological innovation. Existing Nigerian literature has generated substantial knowledge about social media and political participation, but relatively less work connects AI-specific information practices to electoral information integrity, participation and institutional governance in an integrated Nigerian framework.

The article asks four questions: (1) How is AI reshaping Nigeria's electoral information environment and forms of political participation? (2) What opportunities does AI create for electoral administration, information verification and citizen engagement? (3) What forms of AI-enabled manipulation threaten electoral information integrity and political participation? and (4) What institutional and regulatory mechanisms are required to govern AI-related electoral risks while protecting democratic participation and freedom of expression?

The article makes three contributions. First, it develops a conceptual distinction between digital electoral technology, algorithmic systems, AI, generative AI and synthetic media. Second, it synthesises Nigerian documentary evidence around the concept of information integrity, showing why authenticity uncertainty can be democratically consequential even when the empirical effect of a particular piece of content on voting behaviour cannot be demonstrated. Third, it proposes an AI–Information Integrity–Participation–Democratic Legitimacy framework that links technological affordances to political outcomes through institutional and social mediating conditions.

Conceptualising AI, Electoral Democracy and Political Participation

Artificial intelligence and generative AI

Artificial intelligence refers broadly to computational systems capable of performing functions associated with human cognitive activity, including prediction, classification, pattern recognition, language processing and content generation. For the purposes of this article, the term is used more narrowly when the evidence concerns systems that perform such functions through machine-learning or related computational techniques. Generative AI refers to systems capable of producing new text, images, audio, video or other media from prompts or other inputs. Synthetic media refers to media that has been generated or substantially altered using computational techniques; deepfakes are a subset involving realistic synthetic or manipulated representations of people or events. These distinctions matter because digitalisation predates contemporary AI. A biometric accreditation device may be digital without being an AI system. A results portal may automate publication without generating content through AI. Conversely, a platform recommendation system may use machine-learning techniques even though users do not see it as an AI product. Conceptual precision therefore requires the article to identify what technology is actually being discussed before attributing a democratic effect to AI.

Electoral democracy

Electoral democracy is understood here as a political order in which citizens select political representatives through regular, competitive and credible elections supported by institutional rules that protect political rights, electoral integrity and meaningful public choice. An electoral system cannot be evaluated solely by whether voting occurs. Its democratic quality also depends on whether citizens can obtain sufficiently reliable information to form political preferences, participate without intimidation and have reasonable confidence in the integrity of electoral institutions.

Political participation

Political participation is treated as multidimensional. It includes informational participation, expressive participation, campaigning and mobilisation, voting, deliberation and public accountability. This broader definition is important because AI may influence participation without directly changing turnout. For example, AI-generated content may alter what citizens believe about a candidate, while AI-assisted translation may expand access to electoral information. The analytical question is therefore not only whether citizens vote, but whether AI changes the quality, accessibility and conditions of participation.

Information integrity

Information integrity refers to the extent to which citizens can access, evaluate and contest political information within an environment that preserves authenticity, context, provenance and meaningful opportunities for correction. The concept is broader than misinformation. It includes the production of synthetic content, algorithmic amplification, deceptive editing, uncertain provenance and the institutional capacity to verify contested information. International IDEA's analysis of AI and elections similarly emphasises creation, curation, moderation and political advertising as interconnected layers of electoral information integrity (Becker Castellaro et al., 2025).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital media and political participation in Nigeria

Research on Nigerian elections established an important baseline before the emergence of generative AI. Adams and Quadri (2018) found that social media created additional opportunities for political engagement and democratisation during the 2015 general elections. Mustapha and Omar (2020) similarly found that social media use was associated with political participation among Nigerian youths during the 2019 general elections. Ufuophu-Biri (2020) examined social media and political communication during the 2019 election and identified its role in expanding political communication. More recent studies have extended this literature to specific Nigerian regions and populations, including the Southeast and Lagos State.

The continental evidence is also important. Chirwa et al. (2023), using data from 36 African countries, found an association between digital access and political participation. The implication for Nigeria is that the benefits of AI-mediated participation are unlikely to be evenly distributed. Connectivity, device access, digital literacy and the ability to evaluate online content may determine who benefits from AI-enabled political information and who becomes more vulnerable to manipulation.

Disinformation and the electoral information environment

Disinformation research adds a second layer to the literature. Nigerian election studies have shown that false or misleading information can circulate through social networks and influence political narratives. Hassan (2023) highlights the role of disinformation within Nigeria's electoral information environment. Ekpang et al. (2023) provide more direct evidence on deepfakes, reporting survey evidence from five South-South states. The importance of this literature lies in showing that the Nigerian information environment was already vulnerable before generative AI became widely accessible.

Generative AI changes the economics and scalability of this problem. Synthetic media can reduce the cost of producing plausible political content, allow rapid adaptation to different audiences and increase the volume of material that must be verified. However, the available evidence should not be overstated. Circulation of synthetic or manipulated material does not by itself demonstrate that the material changed voting behaviour. A rigorous analysis must distinguish evidence of production, circulation, exposure, belief and behavioural effect.

AI, elections and information integrity

Recent international scholarship and policy research indicates that AI can affect elections through several pathways. International IDEA identifies content creation, content curation, content moderation and political advertising as distinct but interconnected layers of AI-related electoral risk. It also notes that early evidence from Latin American elections suggests AI's direct impact on electoral outcomes may remain limited, even though its potential to amplify existing information problems is substantial (Becker Castellaro et al., 2025). This distinction is important for Nigeria: the policy challenge is not to assume that AI has already determined election outcomes, but to identify the conditions under which AI could weaken information integrity and democratic confidence.

African scholarship is beginning to address AI-generated propaganda and electoral vulnerability, but much of this literature remains conceptual, comparative or policy-oriented. The Nigerian evidence base is therefore still fragmented. Existing research provides valuable pieces—social media participation, digital inequality, disinformation and deepfakes—but fewer studies integrate these strands into an institutional account of how AI may affect political participation and electoral governance.

Literature gap

The literature gap is therefore threefold. Empirically, there is limited Nigeria-specific evidence connecting documented AI-related electoral information events to citizens' political participation. Conceptually, studies often treat social media, electoral technology,

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misinformation and AI as separate issues rather than as components of a changing information ecosystem. Governance-wise, there remains insufficient analysis of how electoral commissions, courts, legislatures, platforms, civil society and citizens should share responsibility for protecting information integrity. This article addresses the gap by integrating these dimensions within a single framework while maintaining a clear distinction between documented evidence and prospective implications.

Table 1. Selected literature and the contribution to the present study

Study	Setting	Method	Focus	Key finding	Limitation	Relevance
Adams & Quadri (2018)	Nigeria	Survey	Social media; democratisation	Digital media broadened participation	Predates generative AI	Establishes pre-AI baseline
Mustapha & Omar (2020)	Nigeria	Survey	Social media; youth participation	Online participation was important in 2019	Youth-focused	Shows continuity of digital participation
Ufuophu-Biri (2020)	Nigeria	Survey/descriptive	Social media; political communication	Expanded electoral communication	Limited AI focus	Provides communication baseline
Chirwa et al. (2023)	36 African countries	Quantitative	Digital access; participation	Digital access associated with participation	Pre-generative-AI period	Supports digital-divide analysis
Ekpong et al. (2023)	Five South-South states	Survey; returned 1,123	Deepfakes; elections	Evidence of deepfake-related political propaganda	Regional focus	Direct Nigerian AI/deepfake evidence
Oni et al. (2024)	Lagos State	Quantitative	Social media; political participation	Digital media shaped political discourse	Conventional social media	Extends participation evidence
Suleiman & Peter (2025)	FCT	Mixed methods	Social media; participation; misinformation	Participation benefits coexist with misinformation	Limited generative-AI analysis	Bridges participation and information risk
Mutongoreni & Gwiza (2025)	Africa	Comparative/policy analysis	AI; propaganda; elections	AI can intensify electoral vulnerabilities	Limited Nigeria-specific evidence	Provides continental context
Becker Castellaro et al. (2025)	Latin America	Policy/case analysis	AI; information integrity; elections	AI affects creation, curation, moderation and political advertising	Not Nigeria-specific	Provides transferable information-integrity framework

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article adopts Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) as its principal explanatory framework and Deliberative Democratic Theory as its normative framework. Digital Divide Theory is used as a supporting perspective rather than a separate explanatory pillar. This consolidation avoids the theoretical eclecticism that characterised the original manuscript while retaining its useful insights.

Social Construction of Technology

SCOT emphasises that technologies acquire meaning and practical consequences through social processes. Technologies are designed, interpreted, adopted and regulated within particular institutional and cultural contexts. Applied to Nigerian electoral politics, this perspective suggests that AI does not produce a single inevitable democratic outcome. The same technical capability can be used for voter education, verification or accessibility, or for impersonation and deceptive political communication. The outcome depends partly on political incentives, institutional capacity, regulation, platform governance and public norms.

Deliberative Democratic Theory

Deliberative democratic theory provides the normative standard for evaluating the democratic consequences of AI-enabled information practices. Democratic participation requires more than the formal opportunity to speak. Citizens require a political communication environment in which claims can be challenged, evidence can be assessed and competing viewpoints can be considered. Synthetic political content can weaken these conditions when it creates uncertainty about what was said, who said it or whether an event occurred. AI therefore matters democratically because it can alter the informational conditions of public reasoning.

Digital Divide as a supporting perspective

Digital divide theory explains why the opportunities and risks of AI are unevenly distributed. Citizens differ in access to devices, connectivity, language resources and digital literacy. These differences may affect both exposure to AI-mediated information and the capacity to verify it. The digital divide perspective therefore informs the article's analysis of citizen resilience and its recommendation for multilingual and inclusive media and AI literacy.

Analytical integration

Together, the frameworks produce a simple analytical proposition: AI has technological affordances, but its democratic effects are socially constructed and normatively assessed through the quality of public communication. Institutional capacity, regulation, platform governance and citizen capability mediate the movement from technological affordance to participation and democratic legitimacy.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

The article employs qualitative documentary research and thematic content analysis. Documentary analysis is appropriate because the study addresses an emerging phenomenon for which systematic Nigerian citizen-level datasets remain limited. The design allows the article to triangulate scholarly findings, legal and institutional documents, and documented information incidents without claiming behavioural effects that the available evidence cannot establish.

Documentary corpus and source hierarchy

The documentary corpus is organised into four source tiers. Tier 1 consists of primary Nigerian legal and institutional documents, including electoral legislation and Independent National Electoral Commission materials. Tier 2 consists of international institutional and policy documents from organisations such as International IDEA, UNESCO and UNDP. Tier 3 consists of peer-reviewed scholarly literature. Tier 4 consists of professional fact-checking and credible media reports, used primarily to document the circulation and verification of specific incidents. The hierarchy is designed to prevent news reports from carrying theoretical claims that require scholarly support.

Inclusion and exclusion principles

Documents were considered relevant where they addressed at least one of the following: AI and elections; generative AI and political communication; deepfakes or synthetic media; Nigerian electoral information; digital political participation; electoral regulation; or institutional responses to AI-enabled information risks. Documents were excluded where they made general claims about AI without a clear relationship to democracy, elections, information integrity or political participation.

Analytical categories

Documents and incidents were examined through a thematic coding structure comprising: electoral administration; voter information; verification; content creation; content curation; content moderation; synthetic media; misinformation; disinformation; political mobilisation; political participation; public trust; electoral legitimacy; institutional response; regulatory response; and gendered harms. For electoral incidents, the analysis additionally distinguished confirmed or strongly supported AI-generated content, manipulated content not necessarily generated by AI, disputed claims of deepfakery, and authentic content falsely described as AI-generated.

Credibility and limitations

Credibility was strengthened through source triangulation. Where a political audio or video was contested, the analysis compared available fact-checking and forensic assessments rather than relying on a single political actor's claim. The study does not claim to estimate the prevalence of AI-generated electoral content nationally, nor does it infer changes in voting behaviour from the circulation of individual items. Its conclusions concern documented information practices, institutional responses and their plausible implications for democratic participation. This limitation is important because the empirical literature on AI-specific electoral behaviour in Nigeria remains emergent.

AI and the Nigerian Electoral Ecosystem

Table 2: A technology taxonomy

Technology category	Illustrative Nigerian example	Primary function	AI status
Digital electoral technology	IReV	Electronic access to polling-unit results	Not automatically AI
Biometric technology	BVAS	Voter accreditation/authentication	Not automatically AI
Algorithmic systems	Platform ranking/recommendation	Content distribution and curation	May use AI/ML
Artificial intelligence	AI-assisted analysis/verification	Pattern recognition, classification, assistance	AI
Generative AI	Synthetic text/audio/image/video	Content creation	AI
Deepfakes/synthetic media	Political audio/video impersonation	Deceptive or expressive media	Subset of AI/synthetic media

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This taxonomy is central to the article. It prevents the common analytical error of treating all technological innovation in elections as artificial intelligence. Nigeria's digital electoral infrastructure is broader than AI, and AI is best understood as an emerging layer within that infrastructure.

Opportunities for electoral administration and civic verification

Digital electoral technologies have already altered Nigeria's electoral administration. BVAS and IReV have sought to improve voter accreditation and access to polling-unit result information. These systems demonstrate how digital infrastructure can support transparency and administrative processes, but their existence should not be presented as proof that AI is already embedded in every electoral function.

AI creates additional opportunities where machine-assisted analysis can complement human oversight. Potential applications include anomaly detection, document classification, multilingual voter information, automated assistance for routine enquiries, and analysis of large datasets. These applications should remain subject to human review, auditability and clear responsibility because automation can reproduce errors at scale.

Civil society verification provides another opportunity. The emerging use of AI-assisted and human-verified tools for parallel analysis of election results demonstrates a model in which technology supports rather than replaces human judgement. The democratic value of such systems lies not in the claim that AI is infallible, but in the creation of an additional independent verification layer.

Citizen information and inclusion

AI may also improve political participation by lowering informational barriers. Automated translation, summarisation and conversational interfaces could help citizens navigate registration requirements, polling information, candidate programmes and electoral procedures. In a multilingual society, such tools may widen access to public information. However, accessibility benefits depend on language coverage, data quality, privacy safeguards and the ability of citizens to recognise machine-generated information.

AI-Enabled Manipulation and Electoral Information Integrity

The 2023 election as a documentary case

The 2023 election illustrates why AI-related electoral analysis requires careful verification. A viral audio presented as a conversation involving Atiku Abubakar, Aminu Tambuwal and Ifeanyi Okowa was examined by TheCable and PRNigeria and assessed as doctored or manipulated. TheCable reported that unrelated recordings had been edited together and that forensic analysis identified substantial manipulation. This constitutes useful evidence of deceptive political audio, although the precise technical pathway by which the manipulation was produced should not be inferred beyond the available verification.

A different case demonstrates the opposite problem. An audio involving Peter Obi and David Oyedepo was widely described on social media as an AI-generated deepfake. The Foundation for Investigative Journalism subjected the recording to deepfake analysis and reported that it was not AI-generated. PRNigeria likewise reported that its forensic and voice-recognition checks did not establish AI manipulation. The case is therefore analytically important not because it proves AI generation, but because it demonstrates the uncertainty surrounding authenticity claims in a high-stakes political environment.

Table 3: A taxonomy of electoral synthetic-media incidents

Category	Meaning	Analytical treatment
Confirmed/strongly supported synthetic content	Evidence supports AI generation or synthetic manipulation	Treat as AI-related incident
Manipulated content	Content edited or assembled deceptively without proof of generative AI	Treat as digital manipulation, not automatically AI
Contested deepfake claim	Actors disagree over whether content is synthetic	Treat uncertainty itself as evidence of information-integrity risk
Authentic content falsely labelled deepfake	Genuine material is dismissed as AI-generated	Analyse as authenticity denial/liar's-dividend risk
AI-assisted amplification	AI or algorithmic systems assist targeting, ranking or distribution	Analyse as ecosystem-level AI effect

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The liar's dividend

The most important implication of these cases is the possibility of a 'liar's dividend': once synthetic media becomes common, political actors may dismiss genuine evidence as AI-generated. The democratic harm therefore has two directions. First, citizens may believe fabricated evidence. Second, citizens may stop trusting authentic evidence. In both cases, the shared informational basis required for democratic deliberation is weakened.

Polarisation and targeted manipulation

AI-enabled content can also exploit pre-existing political, religious and regional divisions. The significance of such content lies less in the technical novelty of the manipulation than in its interaction with existing social cleavages. Generative systems can lower the cost of producing multiple versions of a message and can facilitate tailored communication to different audiences. The risk is therefore cumulative: AI may amplify pre-existing vulnerabilities rather than create them from nothing.

Gendered political harm

Women in public life can face particular risks from synthetic sexualised or humiliating content. International IDEA's recent work shows that AI-facilitated gender-based political violence is an emerging information-integrity concern. In Nigeria, this risk should be analysed as a participation issue rather than simply a content-moderation issue. Reputational attacks and sexualised synthetic media can generate harassment, intimidation and reputational costs that discourage women from political participation.

AI and Political Participation

AI affects political participation through multiple channels. Its effects should therefore be evaluated by participation dimension rather than through a single measure such as voter turnout.

Participation dimension	Potential opportunity	Potential risk
Informational	Faster voter education; translation; summarisation	Synthetic misinformation and false certainty
Expressive	Lower cost of producing political content	Automated propaganda and impersonation
Mobilisational	Rapid organisation and targeted communication	Microtargeting and manipulation
Electoral	Accessible polling and candidate information	Confusion about procedures or results
Deliberative	Broader participation in discussion	Polarisation and degraded shared factual basis
Accountability	AI-assisted monitoring and verification	False accusations and authenticity disputes

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The central analytical insight is that participation quantity and participation quality are not identical. AI can increase the amount of political communication while simultaneously reducing citizens' ability to distinguish reliable from unreliable claims. A democratic information environment therefore cannot be judged by the volume of participation alone.

INSTITUTIONAL AND REGULATORY GOVERNANCE

Electoral regulation

The legal context must be treated temporally. The Electoral Act 2022 governed the 2023 general election, whereas the National Assembly now lists the Electoral Act 2026 as the current Act regulating federal, state and area council elections. The 2026 Act should therefore be the principal legal reference for analysis of the institutional environment approaching 2027, while the 2022 Act should be discussed as the framework applicable to the 2023 election.

An AI-specific electoral governance framework should be narrow and rights-preserving. Regulation should focus on deceptive conduct that threatens electoral integrity rather than banning political expression simply because AI was used in producing it. Legitimate satire, parody, campaign creativity and political commentary require protection. The regulatory challenge is to identify material deception, disclosure obligations, provenance and remedies without creating a broad censorship mechanism.

INEC and institutional capacity

INEC's institutional response should be evaluated in terms of technical capacity, transparency and accountability. Any AI systems used by an electoral management body should be governed by clear procurement rules, human oversight, audit trails, data protection, independent testing and public reporting. An institutional AI capability is valuable only if citizens and stakeholders can understand how consequential automated systems are being used.

Platforms and provenance

Technology platforms occupy an important position because they shape the creation, curation and distribution of political content. Policy should therefore encourage provenance mechanisms, meaningful labelling of synthetic political content, rapid response to verified election-related deception, transparency about political advertising and appropriate access for accredited researchers and fact-checkers. International IDEA similarly recommends stronger platform transparency, provenance mechanisms and independent auditing of content curation systems (Becker Castellaro et al., 2025).

Judiciary and election dispute resolution

Electoral tribunals and courts may increasingly confront disputes involving synthetic media and digital evidence. This creates a need for access to qualified digital-forensic expertise and clear standards for establishing authenticity. Courts should not be expected to resolve technically complex authenticity questions solely through competing political assertions.

Civil society and fact-checking

Fact-checking organisations remain essential because electoral information disputes often emerge faster than formal legal processes can respond. Their role should be strengthened through technical training, secure access to forensic tools, transparent methodologies and partnerships with platforms and electoral institutions. Independence is critical: verification mechanisms should not become instruments of partisan information control.

Table 4. Institutional governance priorities

Actor	Primary responsibility	Principal AI-related risk	Priority response
INEC	Electoral administration	Manipulated information; automation error	AI governance, auditability, human oversight
National Assembly	Legislation	Regulatory gaps or overbroad restrictions	Narrow, rights-preserving rules
Judiciary/tribunals	Election dispute resolution	Authenticity disputes	Digital forensic expertise and evidence standards
Platforms	Content distribution	Amplification and opaque ranking	Provenance, transparency and rapid response
Civil society	Monitoring and verification	Scale and resource constraints	Technical capacity and independence
Fact-checkers	Verification	High volume of synthetic content	AI-assisted verification with transparent methods
Citizens	Information consumption and participation	Manipulation and false authenticity claims	Media and AI literacy

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DISCUSSION

The evidence supports a conditional rather than technologically deterministic interpretation of AI and democracy in Nigeria. AI provides capabilities that can be used to increase access to political information, support verification and improve administrative

analysis. The same capabilities can be used to manufacture deceptive political content or to make authenticity disputes more difficult to resolve. The democratic effect is therefore mediated by institutions, social conditions and governance arrangements. From a SCOT perspective, Nigeria's experience demonstrates that the meaning and consequences of AI are constructed within existing political and institutional structures. AI does not enter an empty political space. It enters a society characterised by intense electoral competition, strong social identities, unequal digital access and an already complex misinformation environment. These conditions shape the way the technology is adopted and interpreted.

From a deliberative-democratic perspective, the key issue is the integrity of the public sphere. Democratic participation requires citizens to encounter claims that can be challenged and assessed. The 2023 cases show why authenticity uncertainty matters. Where a manipulated recording is accepted as genuine, false information may influence political judgement. Where genuine material is dismissed as a deepfake, accountability may be weakened. The result in both directions is an erosion of the conditions for reasoned political judgement.

The digital-divide perspective adds an important distributional dimension. Citizens with limited connectivity or digital literacy may face greater difficulty accessing authoritative corrections or evaluating competing claims. AI therefore has the potential to widen existing inequalities unless its benefits are deliberately designed for multilingual, low-literacy and low-connectivity environments.

The findings also caution against overstating AI's present electoral impact. International evidence suggests that, in several recent elections, generative AI has been used in diverse ways but has not necessarily produced measurable changes in final electoral outcomes. The Nigerian case should therefore be understood as a governance warning and an information-integrity problem rather than as proof that AI determined the 2023 result. The prospective importance of 2027 lies in the increasing capability, affordability and accessibility of synthetic-media tools, not in a claim that future outcomes are predetermined.

The AI–Information Integrity–Participation–Democratic Legitimacy Framework

The article proposes a conceptual framework linking technological affordances to democratic outcomes through mediating conditions. The framework can be represented as follows:

AI affordances → Information opportunities and risks → Information integrity → Quality of political participation → Electoral integrity → Democratic legitimacy

The relationship is mediated by institutional capacity, regulatory quality, platform governance, verification capacity, digital and AI literacy, political trust and social inequality. The framework makes two propositions. First, the democratic effect of AI is conditional rather than automatic. Second, information integrity is the principal mechanism connecting AI to political participation and democratic legitimacy.

This framework also identifies a research agenda. Future studies should test whether exposure to synthetic political content affects trust, political efficacy, turnout intention, candidate evaluation or willingness to participate. Such questions require survey, experimental, panel or mixed-methods designs beyond the documentary approach used in this article.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Legal and electoral safeguards

Nigeria should develop narrow, clearly defined rules addressing materially deceptive synthetic political content during election periods. The objective should be to protect electoral integrity without criminalising legitimate political satire, parody, commentary or ordinary campaign creativity. Disclosure and provenance obligations should be considered alongside proportionate remedies.

Institutional forensic capacity

INEC, election tribunals and relevant justice institutions should have access to qualified digital-forensic expertise. Institutions should develop documented procedures for preserving, authenticating and evaluating digital evidence, including synthetic audio and video.

Platform accountability and provenance

Platforms should strengthen transparency around political advertising, synthetic media and content recommendation during election periods. Provenance systems, clear labelling and rapid response channels for verified election-related deception should be encouraged, while independent auditing and researcher access should be protected.

Media and AI literacy

Media and information literacy programmes should be expanded to include AI literacy. Citizens need practical skills for checking provenance, comparing independent sources, recognising manipulation and understanding that not every disputed item is necessarily a deepfake. Programmes should be multilingual and designed for both urban and rural populations.

Inclusive research and gender safeguards

Nigerian universities and research institutions should undertake citizen-level studies of AI and electoral behaviour. Research should examine differences by age, gender, geography, language, education and connectivity. Dedicated monitoring of gendered synthetic abuse should be integrated into election observation and political-party safeguarding systems.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has four principal limitations. First, the documentary design cannot establish causal effects of AI-generated content on voting behaviour. Second, the evidence base is developing rapidly, meaning that new incidents and institutional responses may emerge after the study's documentary cut-off. Third, public claims about whether a particular item is AI-generated are sometimes contested, making classification inherently uncertain. Fourth, Nigeria's diverse linguistic and media environment means that available online evidence may not capture all forms of offline or closed-network circulation, particularly on private messaging platforms.

Future research should therefore employ mixed methods. Survey research can measure exposure, trust and political efficacy; experiments can test the effects of synthetic versus authentic political content; digital-trace studies can examine amplification; and interviews can explore institutional responses. Longitudinal research across the 2027 electoral cycle would be especially valuable.

CONCLUSION

Artificial intelligence is becoming an increasingly important layer of Nigeria's electoral information environment, but its democratic significance should not be reduced to the presence of deepfakes. The more fundamental issue is the changing capacity to create, distribute and contest political information. AI can support voter information, accessibility, civic verification and administrative analysis, yet it can also lower the cost of political deception and intensify uncertainty about the authenticity of evidence.

The 2023 election demonstrates the importance of careful classification. A manipulated political audio can be falsely accepted as genuine, while authentic material can be publicly described as a deepfake. These opposite possibilities show that the democratic challenge is epistemic as well as technological: citizens must be able to determine what information can reasonably be trusted. The emerging 'liar's dividend' makes this challenge more serious because the existence of synthetic media provides a ready-made basis for dismissing authentic evidence.

Nigeria's institutional response should therefore move beyond a simple choice between technological enthusiasm and technological restriction. The appropriate strategy is governed innovation: permit useful applications while establishing safeguards for provenance, human oversight, forensic verification, platform accountability, citizen literacy and rights protection. The Electoral Act 2026 provides the current legal context for the approach to the 2027 electoral cycle, but additional governance arrangements may be required to address rapidly evolving synthetic-media practices.

Ultimately, AI will not determine the future of Nigerian democracy by itself. Its effects will depend on how political actors, electoral institutions, courts, platforms, civil society and citizens shape the social and institutional environment in which the technology operates. Protecting democratic legitimacy therefore requires not only technological capacity, but also a resilient information ecosystem in which citizens retain meaningful capacity to evaluate, contest and trust political claims.

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