

Mapping Electoral Violence in Nigeria: Revisiting The 2019 General Elections

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Abstract

Electoral violence remains a persistent challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria despite repeated legal, institutional, and administrative reforms. This study revisits the 2019 general elections to examine the perceived impact of electoral violence on election conduct and to identify major factors associated with its persistence. The study adopted a survey design complemented by key informant interviews (KIIs). The study distributed 400 questionnaires across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones; 307 usable questionnaires were returned, for a 76.75% response rate. The study also interviewed seven politically knowledgeable key informants from the geopolitical zones. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse questionnaire responses, while interview evidence was used to interpret and contextualise the quantitative results. Frustration-aggression theory provided the principal analytical lens, while its limitations in explaining strategic and elite-organised violence were acknowledged. The findings indicate that 91.5% of questionnaire respondents perceived electoral violence as having a high or very high adverse impact on the 2019 elections. Respondents associated this impact with intimidation, disruption of voting and collation, loss of life and property, reduced participation, and weakened confidence in election administration. In addition, 84.7% agreed or strongly agreed that the high rewards attached to public office, combined with weak punishment of electoral offenders, contributed substantially to electoral violence. These findings are consistent with domestic and international observer reports documenting intimidation, violence, vote buying, security concerns, and serious irregularities during the 2019 electoral cycle. The study concludes that electoral violence undermines participation, electoral integrity, and public confidence, but cautions that the survey establishes respondents' perceptions and associations rather than definitive causal effects. It recommends stronger enforcement against electoral offences, risk-based election security, internal party reforms, sustained civic and political-tolerance education, and measures to reduce incentives to treat elective office as a winner-takes-all prize.

Keywords: electoral integrity, electoral violence, elections, frustration-aggression theory, Nigeria, political tolerance

Introduction

Competitive elections are central to representative democracy because they give citizens a regular mechanism to choose leaders, confer political legitimacy, and hold public officials accountable. In Nigeria, however, elections have repeatedly been accompanied by intimidation, coercion, destruction of electoral materials, clashes among political supporters, and, in some instances, fatalities. These persistent problems have made electoral violence a key question for democratic consolidation.

Nigeria's 2019 general elections were the sixth general-election cycle of the Fourth Republic. The presidential and National Assembly elections were held on 23 February 2019, while governorship and State House of Assembly elections followed on 9 March, with supplementary elections in some locations. Domestic and international observers reported intimidation, vote buying, election-related violence, disruption of voting and collation, and concerns about the conduct or perceived neutrality of some security personnel. The joint International Republican Institute/National Democratic Institute

observation mission concluded that the elections fell short of many Nigerians' expectations and identified violence and intimidation as serious irregularities that weakened confidence in the process.

Electoral violence matters not only because of its immediate human and material costs but also because fear and insecurity can discourage participation, constrain election officials and observers, distort political competition, and weaken the legitimacy of electoral outcomes. The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room's final assessment of the 2019 elections similarly identified major credibility and security concerns and called for stronger accountability for actors who subvert the electoral process.

Existing scholarship has examined electoral violence in Nigeria from the perspectives of political competition, weak institutions, impunity, security-sector conduct, socioeconomic pressures, and the high stakes of public office. However, an important empirical question remains: how did politically engaged citizens and election stakeholders perceive the impact and principal drivers of violence in the 2019 election cycle? This study addresses that question by combining questionnaire evidence from the six geopolitical zones with key informant interviews. Its contribution is therefore interpretive and empirical: it maps patterns of perceived impact and causation while locating those perceptions within documented events of the 2019 elections.

Conceptual and Empirical Literature Review

Electoral Violence

Electoral violence refers to coercive, intimidating, destructive, or physically harmful acts directed at electoral actors, institutions, materials, or processes before, during, or after an election. It may include threats, assaults, clashes, destruction or seizure of election materials, obstruction of voting, intimidation of voters or officials, and politically motivated killings. The concept is broader than election-day violence because mobilisation, candidate selection, campaigns, collation, announcement of results, and post-election disputes can all become sites of coercion.

Bamgbose (2011) treats electoral violence as aggressive conduct capable of inflicting injury, destroying property, and generating fear and disorder. Kalu and Gberville (2015) similarly link election violence to struggles over political power and the integrity of democratic competition. For the present study, electoral violence is understood as the use or threat of force, intimidation, or destructive action intended to influence, disrupt, punish, or otherwise affect an electoral process or its participants.

Elections, Participation, and Electoral Integrity

Elections are institutional mechanisms through which citizens select representatives and confer authority within a constitutional order. Their democratic value depends not merely on voting but on meaningful competition, participation, security, transparency, impartial administration, and credible dispute resolution. Violence weakens these conditions by raising the cost of participation and creating opportunities for coercive actors to shape electoral outcomes.

In the Nigerian context, this relationship matters because electoral participation is a major avenue for citizens to exercise political choice. When voters expect violence or intimidation, formal registration and possession of voter cards may not translate into actual turnout. Electoral violence can therefore affect both election administration and citizens' willingness to participate.

Electoral Violence and the 2019 General Elections

The 2019 elections displayed geographically uneven but significant patterns of violence and intimidation. Observer reports documented incidents during voting, counting, and collation, as well as concerns about vote buying, intimidation, security-force conduct, and impunity. The IRI/NDI mission reported violent acts and disruption in several states and noted that the conduct of some electoral actors, including concerns surrounding military involvement, undermined citizen confidence.

The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room deployed observers across the six geopolitical zones and concluded that the elections did not meet its credibility threshold. Its report called for stronger security planning around identified flashpoints and greater accountability for those who subvert electoral processes. Contemporary reporting associated with civil-society monitoring estimated 626 deaths across the wider 2019 electioneering period, from the start of campaigns through the general and supplementary elections. This figure should therefore be interpreted as an election-cycle estimate rather than as deaths occurring solely on polling days.

The literature and observer evidence point to several recurring explanations for electoral violence: intense competition for political office, weak enforcement of electoral rules, impunity, intra-party conflict, political thuggery, security-sector problems, and winner-takes-all incentives. This study focuses on two propositions emerging from its field instruments: the adverse impact of violence on election conduct and the perceived role of public-office rewards alongside weak punitive measures.

Theoretical Framework: Frustration-Aggression Theory

The study adopts frustration-aggression theory as its principal analytical lens. The classic formulation associated with Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears (1939) proposed a relationship between frustration—the blocking of goal-directed behaviour—and aggression. Later scholarship, especially Berkowitz (1962), refined the proposition by recognising that frustration does not mechanically produce aggression in every circumstance; rather, frustration may create a disposition toward aggression whose expression depends on cues, opportunities, norms, and context.

The theory is relevant to electoral competition because aspirants, parties, supporters, or patrons who perceive that access to a highly valued political goal is blocked may respond aggressively, particularly where institutions are weak. Coercion is perceived as low-cost. In a high-stakes political environment, costly campaigns, winner-takes-all expectations, disputed primaries, perceived manipulation, or anticipated defeat can intensify frustration and create incentives for violent mobilisation.

Applied to the 2019 elections, the framework suggests the following analytical sequence: highly valued political office and intense competition increase expectations; actual or anticipated blockage of political ambitions generates frustration; weak deterrence and available coercive networks lower the cost of aggressive action; and violence may then be deployed to intimidate opponents, disrupt voting or collation, or contest outcomes.

The theory nevertheless has limits. Electoral violence may be strategic, organised, and instrumental rather than a spontaneous psychological reaction to frustration. Elite sponsorship, institutional weakness, impunity, political financing, and security-sector behaviour may independently shape violence. The theory is therefore used here as a lens for interpreting perceived motivations, not as an exhaustive causal explanation.

Research Questions

1. How did electoral violence affect the conduct of the 2019 general elections in Nigeria?
2. What factors did respondents identify as major drivers of electoral violence in Nigeria's general elections?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective is to assess the perceived impact and major drivers of electoral violence in Nigeria, with particular reference to the 2019 general elections.

The specific objectives are to:

1. examine respondents' perceptions of the impact of electoral violence on the conduct of the 2019 general elections; and
2. assess respondents' perceptions of the role of the rewards attached to public office and weak punitive measures in sustaining electoral violence.

Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design supplemented by key informant interviews. The target population comprised adult Nigerians who participated in or had direct knowledge of the 2019 electoral process, with particular attention to politically engaged respondents and election stakeholders. The original study used the national number of votes cast as a contextual indicator of the scale of electoral participation; that figure should not be treated as a literal sampling frame. The study adopted a target sample of 400 questionnaire respondents as a practical large-population survey size at a 5% margin-of-error benchmark.

To achieve geographical spread, the fieldwork was clustered across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones, with approximately equal questionnaire allocation to each zone. The manuscript provides no evidence of a complete probability sampling frame or a documented random-selection procedure within each zone. Accordingly, the resulting estimates reflect the perceptions of the surveyed respondents and should not be presented as statistically representative of all Nigerian voters.

Four hundred questionnaires were administered. Three hundred and seven usable questionnaires were returned, producing a response rate of 76.75%. Seven key informants were interviewed to provide contextual and interpretive evidence. The interviewees represented political actors from the six geopolitical zones. For publication, interview evidence is reported using anonymised identifiers (KII 1–KII 7); personally identifying details are omitted unless documented informed consent for disclosure is available.

Questionnaire data were analysed descriptively using frequencies and percentages. The KII material was organised thematically around the two research objectives and used to triangulate the survey results. Because the design is descriptive and non-experimental, the analysis does not claim causal proof or statistical significance. Terms such as “impact,” “driver,” and “cause” are therefore used cautiously and, where appropriate, framed as respondent perceptions or associations.

The field survey was conducted in 2020 and asked respondents to reflect on the 2019 election cycle. Participation was treated as voluntary, and publication should preserve respondent confidentiality. A limitation of the design is the possibility of recall bias, selection bias, and overrepresentation of politically engaged respondents. These limitations are considered when interpreting the findings.

Electoral Violence in the 2019 Nigerian General Elections

Violence surrounding the 2019 elections took several forms, including intimidation, attacks on election officials and voters, disruption of polling and collation, seizure or destruction of electoral materials, clashes among party supporters, and allegations of improper security involvement. The intensity varied considerably across states and phases of the election cycle.

International observers identified violence and intimidation as important shortcomings of the elections. The IRI/NDI mission reported that the state-level elections were marred in some locations by irregularities, intimidation, vote buying, and violent acts. It also recorded concerns about militarisation and how insecurity affected citizens' willingness to participate. Human Rights Watch's review of events in 2019 likewise described the general elections as marred by political violence and reported allegations involving soldiers and election officials in Rivers State.

Domestic civil-society monitoring reached similar conclusions. The Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room reported serious deficiencies that undermined the elections' credibility and recommended risk-based deployment of security personnel to major flashpoints, legal reform, and stronger accountability for those who subvert electoral processes. Civil-society reporting associated with the election cycle estimated 626 deaths from the beginning of electioneering campaigns through the general and supplementary elections.

Table 1
Reported Election-Cycle Fatalities by Geopolitical Zone

Zone	Reported deaths
North West	172
North East	146
South South	120
North Central	111
South West	63
South East	14
Total	626

Note. Election-cycle estimate reported in civil-society monitoring of the 2019 elections; the period extends beyond polling days.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Of the 400 questionnaires administered, 307 were returned and usable. Seven KIIs were also conducted. Questionnaire respondents, rather than questionnaires plus interviewees combined, constitute the denominator for the survey percentages reported below.

Table 2
Questionnaire Response and KII Participation

Instrument	Target/Conducted	Usable/Completed
Questionnaire	400	307
Key informant interviews	7	7

Note. Questionnaire response rate = $307/400 \times 100 = 76.75\%$.

Table 3
Age Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18–25	78	25.4
26–40	108	35.2
41 and above	121	39.4
Total	307	100.0

Table 4
Sex Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	209	68.1
Female	98	31.9
Total	307	100.0

Table 5
Geopolitical-Zone Distribution of Questionnaire Respondents

Zone	Frequency	Percentage
North East	51	16.6
North West	52	16.9
North Central	51	16.6
South East	51	16.6
South West	51	16.6
South South	51	16.6
Total	307	99.9*

**Percentages are rounded; therefore, the displayed total may differ slightly from 100%.*

Table 6
Political-Party Membership of Questionnaire Respondents

Status	Frequency	Percentage
Party member	198	64.5
Non-party member	109	35.5
Total	307	100.0

The sample contains a high proportion of party members. This is useful for obtaining politically informed perceptions but also reinforces the need not to generalise the estimates mechanically to the entire voting population.

Objective 1: Perceived Impact of Electoral Violence

Table 7
Respondents' Assessment of the Impact of Electoral Violence

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Very high	203	66.1
High	78	25.4
Low	21	6.8
Very low	5	1.6
Total	307	99.9*

**Percentages are rounded.*

Combining the “very high” and “high” categories shows that 281 respondents, or 91.5%, perceived electoral violence as having a high or very high impact on the 2019 elections. By contrast, 8.4% rated the

impact as low or very low. The result indicates that respondents strongly perceived violence as materially affecting the electoral process.

The KII evidence reinforces this interpretation. Interviewees described electoral violence as recurrent and linked it to intense intra-party competition, the survival-of-the-fittest character of candidate selection, weak enforcement, and political actors' willingness to benefit from coercive practices. Several also stressed that many incidents were underreported. Read these accounts as informed stakeholder perceptions rather than independently verified estimates of incidence.

The reported effects included fear among voters, disruption of polling and collation, intimidation of election officials, destruction or seizure of materials, loss of life and property, and reduced willingness to participate. These mechanisms are consistent with observer reports from the 2019 elections, which documented intimidation, violent acts, disruptions, and declining public confidence.

Objective 2: Perceived Drivers of Electoral Violence

Table 8

Perceptions of Public-Office Rewards and Weak Punishment as Drivers

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	209	68.1
Agree	51	16.6
Disagree	27	8.8
Strongly disagree	20	6.5
Total	307	100.0

A total of 260 respondents (84.7%) agreed or strongly agreed that the high rewards associated with public office, combined with weak punitive measures against electoral offenders, contribute substantially to electoral violence. Forty-seven respondents (15.3%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. The finding demonstrates a strong perception of a relationship between high political stakes, weak deterrence, and violence; it does not, by itself, establish that these are the sole or objectively leading causes.

The KII material provides a plausible interpretation of this pattern. Interviewees repeatedly linked electoral desperation to the perceived economic and political benefits of office and argued that weak punishment lowers the cost of violent conduct. In theoretical terms, high-value political goals may intensify frustration when access is threatened, while weak enforcement creates an enabling environment for aggression or strategically organised coercion.

At the same time, the evidence suggests that electoral violence is multi-causal. Party conflict, political financing, institutional weakness, security practices, local grievances, and the availability of coercive networks can interact with the incentives respondents identified. The findings therefore support a layered explanation rather than a single-cause account.

Discussion of Findings

The first major finding is that respondents overwhelmingly perceived electoral violence as damaging to the conduct of the 2019 elections. Domestic and international observation evidence supports this perception by describing violence, intimidation, disruptions, and security concerns. Electoral violence can affect elections through at least three channels: direct disruption of electoral operations, deterrence of voters and officials, and erosion of confidence in the process's fairness and legitimacy.

The second major finding is the perceived importance of public-office rewards and weak punishment. This supports a political-economy interpretation of electoral violence in which access to office is treated as a high-value prize and electoral competition becomes unusually costly. Frustration-aggression theory helps explain how blocked ambitions or perceived exclusion may contribute to aggressive responses, but the empirical evidence also indicates the importance of deliberate strategy and institutional incentives.

The study therefore contributes to the literature by linking respondent perceptions to documented patterns from the 2019 election cycle. Its results should, however, be interpreted within the limits of the sampling design and retrospective data collection. The evidence is strongest as an account of how surveyed politically engaged respondents understood electoral violence, not as a nationally representative causal estimate.

Conclusion

The study concludes that respondents widely perceived electoral violence as a serious impediment to the conduct and credibility of Nigeria's 2019 general elections. Violence and intimidation can disrupt voting and collation, endanger citizens and officials, discourage participation, and weaken confidence in electoral institutions. These concerns are consistent with major observer assessments of the 2019 electoral cycle.

The study also finds strong respondent agreement that the high rewards associated with public office and weak punishment of electoral offenders contribute to electoral violence. These factors should not be treated as the only causes; rather, they operate alongside institutional weakness, party conflict, security challenges, and other contextual pressures. The central policy implication is that electoral violence is not merely a behavioural problem. It is also an institutional and incentive problem requiring credible deterrence, lower political stakes, stronger party governance, professional election security, and sustained civic norms.

Because the study relies on a geographically distributed but not fully documented probability sample and on retrospective perceptions collected in 2020, its findings should not be generalised mechanically to all Nigerian voters. Future research should employ transparent probability sampling, event-level datasets, state-level comparisons, and longitudinal designs to test causal mechanisms more rigorously.

Recommendations

- i. **Strengthen enforcement against electoral offences.** Investigate and prosecute electoral offences promptly and transparently under the applicable legal framework. Enforcement should target sponsors and organisers of violence, as well as direct perpetrators, while respecting due process.
- ii. **Reduce winner-takes-all incentives around public office.** Government and political institutions should strengthen transparency, accountability, and controls around the use of public resources and political patronage. The objective should be to reduce the perception of elective office as an extraordinary private economic prize.
- iii. **Improve risk-based election security.** INEC and relevant security institutions should use evidence-based risk assessments to identify flashpoints, protect voters and officials, and ensure professional, impartial, and proportionate security deployment.
- iv. **Strengthen internal party democracy.** Political parties should improve the transparency of primaries, candidate selection, dispute resolution, and disciplinary processes. Reducing intra-party exclusion and impunity can lower incentives for coercive mobilisation.
- v. **Institutionalise political tolerance and non-violence education.** INEC, civil-society organisations, political parties, educational institutions, and the media should sustain civic education on peaceful competition, acceptance of lawful outcomes, responsible political communication, and non-violent dispute resolution. Rather than creating a compulsory

certification barrier to candidacy, such programmes should be widely accessible and integrated into party and civic-development activities.

- vi. **Improve electoral-violence data and accountability.** Election stakeholders should maintain disaggregated, verifiable records of violent incidents, fatalities, injuries, arrests, prosecutions, and case outcomes. Better data would improve prevention, research, and public accountability.

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