Elections and Political Authority – Is Choice Enough?

Ndubuisi Anthony Ugwu[1] Chibuzor Chigozie Nweke[2] James Osita Igweike[3] Ogonna Chukwuma[4] Jude Chukwuemeka Okafor[5]
[1,2,3,4,5]Department of Political Science,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

Corresponding Author:
Ndubuisi Anthony Ugwu
Phone: +2348063473928
Email: na.ugwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract
This study aimed to critically assess whether electoral choices alone were sufficient to establish legitimate political authority across various political environments. It explored the relationship between electoral processes and political legitimacy, focusing on contexts of electoral authoritarianism and systemic inequalities. A qualitative research design using document analysis was adopted as the primary data collection method. This approach involved systematically reviewing government reports, scholarly articles, civil society publications, media sources, and reports from international organizations. The documents were selected based on their relevance to the research questions and their ability to provide insights into electoral choices and legitimacy. Data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, with patterns and themes identified through a thematic approach. Electoral Authoritarianism Theory, which describes regimes that combine formal democratic practices like elections with authoritarian control, provided the theoretical foundation for the paper. This framework helped to analyze how modern authoritarian regimes manipulated electoral processes to maintain power. The central argument of the paper was that elections, by themselves, did not guarantee legitimate political authority or effective democratic governance. The findings revealed that electoral authoritarianism, socioeconomic barriers, and weak civil society participation undermined legitimacy. Conversely, civil society engagement and independent electoral institutions enhanced electoral outcomes. The study recommended that electoral reforms are necessary to strengthen independent electoral institutions, reduce elite manipulation, and safeguard electoral integrity, which were crucial for building public trust and ensuring the legitimacy of political authority.

Key Words: Political Legitimacy, Electoral Authoritarianism, Electoral Integrity, Civil Society, Disenfranchisement

Introduction

Elections are widely regarded as the cornerstone of democratic governance, because it provides citizens with crucial mechanism to express their preferences and engage in the political process. Traditionally, elections serve as the formal means of conferring political legitimacy and authority on elected officials, based on the expectation that they reflect the collective will of the electorate (Dahl, 1989). This belief forms the foundation of many democratic societies, where elections are not just seen as a right but also as a civic duty and as an essential component of the functioning of democracy.

Thus, the concept of free and fair elections is central to this framework, with the assumption that transparent and equitable elections promote accountability and encourage political leaders to respond to the needs of their constituents. Such an electoral environment thrives on principles like informed voting, competitive political parties, and impartial electoral administration, all of which contribute to a dynamic process of democratic governance. The legitimacy that stems from this process is expected to foster public trust in governance and ensure that power rests with the people, creating a system where citizens can meaningfully influence policy and decision-making.

However, despite these democratic ideals, the assumption that elections inherently confer legitimacy is often oversimplified. Scholars have increasingly highlighted the phenomenon of "electoral authoritarianism," where elections may meet formal democratic standards but are held in environments where political freedoms, civil liberties, and genuine competition are severely restricted or absent (Pappas, 2019). This raises the question of whether holding elections alone is enough to establish legitimate political authority, particularly in contexts where manipulation, coercion, or limited choices undermine the electorate's ability to express true preferences. In such cases, elections may become tools of state control rather than reflections of popular will, leading to a disconnect between formal democratic processes and substantive democratic ideals.

Moreover, political science literature increasingly explores the impact of systemic inequalities on electoral participation. Barriers such as socioeconomic status, educational disparities, and social marginalization can inhibit true engagement,

skewing representation and undermining the legitimacy of elected bodies. Consequently, the ability of elections to convert voter preferences into political authority may be compromised, challenging the assumption that electoral choice alone can sustain a legitimate democracy.

Despite the theoretical foundation that supports elections as key instruments of representation, significant gaps often exist between these ideals and the realities of electoral outcomes. In many cases, the optimistic narrative of electoral choice fails to translate into effective democratic governance or legitimate political authority. Issues like voter disenfranchisement, whether through systemic barriers, marginalization, or restrictive laws, threaten the integrity of the electoral process. Additionally, widespread corruption frequently distorts democratic practices, enabling powerful interests to manipulate election results and consolidate authority in the hands of a select few. These challenges are particularly prevalent in hybrid regimes, where democratic façades mask autocratic control, allowing political elites to exploit elections for personal gain rather than genuinely representing the electorate (Levitsky & Way, 2010). This dynamic further fosters apathy and disillusionment among citizens, eroding public confidence in the electoral system and questioning its capacity to produce authentic political representation.

Given these complex realities, it becomes evident that elections alone may not be sufficient to guarantee political legitimacy. Therefore, people must reconsider the broader framework of political authority and participation to determine whether additional mechanisms such as civil society engagement, independent electoral institutions, protection of political rights, and accountability are needed to ensure that elections result in genuine representation and governance. To provide answers to some of the issues raised, this study seeks to critically examine whether the provision of electoral choices alone is adequate for establishing legitimate political authority. The guiding research questions are:

1. To what extent does the mere provision of electoral choice establish legitimate political authority, particularly in different political contexts?

2. What additional mechanisms are necessary to ensure that elections lead to meaningful political representation and effective governance?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design that employed document analysis as the primary method for data collection, aiming to explore the relationship between electoral choices and the establishment of political authority, particularly in the context of electoral authoritarianism and systemic inequalities. The types of documents that were analyzed included government reports, scholarly articles, civil society publications, media articles, and reports from international organizations. The document selection process was based on the relevance of the documents to the research questions and their ability to provide insights into the concepts of electoral choice and political legitimacy. The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, focusing on identifying patterns, themes, and relationships that emerged from the documents, with the analysis process involving thematic analysis that grouped coded data into broader themes to identify how the documents addressed the research questions.

Theoretical Framework

Electoral Authoritarianism Theory, propounded by Andreas Schedler in 2002, describes political regimes that blend formal democratic features, such as elections, with authoritarian practices designed to undermine genuine democratic competition. These regimes maintain the outward appearance of democracy but strategically use elections to reinforce authoritarian control establishing a foundational framework for understanding how modern authoritarian regimes manipulate democratic processes to retain power while projecting legitimacy (Schedler, 2002). The theory argues that although these regimes hold elections, they lack essential democratic components like free competition, civil liberties, and media freedom, and instead use elections as tools of manipulation, with opposition parties' restricted and political freedoms curtailed. Elections in such regimes serve to legitimize authoritarian rulers both domestically and internationally, but they do not genuinely reflect the will of the people (Schedler, 2002). The paradox highlighted by the theory is that while the outward form of democracy elections is retained, the underlying principles of free and fair competition are systematically undermined.

Schedler also differentiates between competitive authoritarianism, where some level of competition exists but is heavily skewed in favor of the ruling elites, and full electoral authoritarianism, where competition is virtually nonexistent due to the complete dominance of the ruling party or

leader (Schedler, 2002). Several scholars, including Levitsky and Way (2010), have expanded on this concept, exploring hybrid regimes in which elections coexist with autocratic practices. In their book *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*, they examine how authoritarian rulers use elections to maintain power without fully democratizing. Brownlee (2007), in his work *Authoritarianism in an Age of Democratization*, delves into how elections are manipulated to sustain authoritarian control, particularly in regions like the Middle East and Asia.

The theory's relevance to the study *Elections and Political Authority – Is Choice Enough?* is profound, as it addresses the core question of whether elections alone can establish legitimate political authority. The study explores how elections held in restrictive environments characterized by voter manipulation, suppression of opposition, and limited political freedoms fail to meet democratic standards. In line with the theory, the study argues that the mere presence of elections does not guarantee democratic legitimacy, particularly when civil liberties are compromised, and political competition is constrained (Schedler, 2002; Levitsky & Way, 2010). Furthermore, Electoral Authoritarianism Theory explains how authoritarian leaders use elections to legitimize their rule while maintaining tight control over the political landscape, perfectly fitting the study's exploration of how hybrid regimes manipulate electoral processes to consolidate power rather than provide meaningful political representation. Thus, the theory provides a robust framework for understanding the limitations of elections in conferring legitimate political authority.

However, despite its wide acceptance, Electoral Authoritarianism Theory has faced criticism. Some scholars argue that it focuses too narrowly on institutional manipulation, neglecting other important factors influencing elections, such as social movements, international influences, and economic conditions (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009). Additionally, the theory may not fully account for the agency of voters, who may still view elections as opportunities to express dissent or influence political change, even in authoritarian settings. Another limitation is the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between electoral authoritarianism and competitive authoritarianism, as the line between the two can be blurred in practice. The theory also does not provide a clear pathway for how these regimes might transition toward full

democracy or how pressures from civil society and international organizations could promote democratization. Finally, the theory has been critiqued for its inability to explain variations within electoral authoritarian regimes, with some maintaining stability and legitimacy while others experience significant instability despite employing similar practices (Brownlee, 2007). These critiques point to the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how elections function in authoritarian contexts.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Political Legitimacy and Authority

Political legitimacy, as defined by Weber (1978), refers to the recognition of an authority's right to govern, a concept that encompasses various dimensions and helps differentiate democratic from non-democratic contexts, with authority in a democracy typically derived from the electorate, a relationship underscored by the electoral process. Dahl (1989) argues that elections are a crucial mechanism for transferring authority and legitimacy from citizens to their elected officials, with the normative foundation of electoral processes characterized by the principles of free, fair, competitive, and participatory elections, as outlined by Schumpeter (1943). Traditional democratic theory views elections as essential tools for ensuring accountability and representation, with the expectation that they translate the will of the people into governance, thereby safeguarding against authoritarianism. Dahl (1989) further emphasizes that elections are not merely procedural but constitute a civic duty critical for maintaining democratic governance. However, this classical view is challenged by the often-observed disconnect between electoral ideals and actual practices, particularly in developing or hybrid regimes, as Schedler (2002) notes, raising concerns about the legitimacy of representative governance when elections fail to meet established democratic standards.

Electoral Authoritarianism

The introduction of the concept of electoral authoritarianism by Schedler (2002), to describe regimes that hold elections while manipulating the processes to undermine genuine democratic competition, distinguishing between competitive electoral authoritarianism, where some level of competition exists, and full electoral

authoritarianism, marked by significant state control over electoral outcomes. In such authoritarian contexts, various mechanisms of manipulation, including voter intimidation, election fraud, suppression of opposition parties, and strict media control, were commonly employed to maintain power. Levitsky and Way (2010) discuss how elections in these regimes serve to project legitimacy both domestically and internationally, often masking the underlying authoritarian practices, with examples like Russia, Venezuela, and Zimbabwe, where elections are used to sustain autocratic rule. Despite its contribution to understanding hybrid regimes, electoral authoritarianism theory faces criticism for overemphasizing institutional manipulation while potentially overlooking the roles of civil society and international pressures and the challenges of distinguishing electoral authoritarianism from other hybrid regimes further complicate the theoretical framework (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009).

The Role of Electoral Integrity

The integrity of elections is crucial for establishing democratic legitimacy. Norris (2014) provides a framework for assessing electoral integrity, arguing that violations such as electoral fraud and voter suppression directly undermine political authority and the legitimacy of elected officials. Systemic barriers, including socioeconomic disparities, educational inequalities, and social marginalization, further hinder electoral participation, with Pappas (2019) identifying voter apathy and disenfranchisement as critical threats to electoral integrity, complicating the realization of democratic ideals, particularly in countries like Nigeria, Kenya, and India, where electoral challenges are widespread. In continuation, from Pappas (2019) assertions, corruption also plays a significant role in influencing electoral outcomes, manifesting through practices such as vote-buying and intimidation, as powerful interests manipulate electoral processes, which directly affects political representation and legitimacy, especially in hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Mechanisms for Political Legitimacy

Civil society plays a crucial role in counterbalancing electoral manipulation by promoting political rights, accountability, and transparency through civic activism, aligning with Putnam's (1993) emphasis on the importance of social capital, and case studies show how civil society movements have strengthened electoral processes in

places like Tunisia and South Korea. The establishment of impartial and autonomous electoral bodies is equally essential for ensuring free and fair elections, with successful examples such as independent electoral commissions in Ghana and South Africa demonstrating the impact of strong institutions in safeguarding electoral integrity. Protecting civil liberties, including independent media, freedom of speech, and political pluralism, is critical for fostering genuine electoral competition, as articulated by Diamond (1999). Post-election accountability mechanisms, guided by judicial systems and constitutional frameworks, are also vital in preventing the abuse of electoral outcomes by ensuring that political leaders remain answerable for their actions and that electoral processes maintain integrity over time. These mechanisms, reinforced by effective checks and balances within government structures, help uphold democratic principles, enforce electoral laws, challenge fraudulent practices, and hold officials accountable for misconduct, thereby reinforcing the legitimacy of the political system.

Classification of Key Concepts

Political Legitimacy: Political legitimacy refers to the acceptance and recognition of an authority or governing body as rightful and justified in exercising power. This concept is essential for the functioning of democratic systems, where governments derive their authority from the consent of the governed. Political legitimacy is foundational for maintaining public trust and compliance with governmental decision-making. According to Dahl (1989), legitimacy is achieved when the governed recognize the electoral process as a fair reflection of their will. Literature suggests that legitimacy is not just conferred through elections but must be supported by the quality of governance, respect for civil liberties, and the rule of law (Weber, 1978). In contexts like electoral authoritarianism, where elections persist despite the absence of genuine competitive environments, the legitimacy of political authority can be severely undermined (Pappas, 2019). Thus, legitimacy extends beyond procedural correctness to encompass substantive democratic values

Electoral Authoritarianism: Electoral authoritarianism describes regimes that hold elections but manipulate them to maintain authoritarian control. These regimes often mask repressive governance under the guise of democratic legitimacy. This concept has been extensively analyzed by scholars such as Andreas Schedler (2002). It highlights

how elections can be used strategically by authoritarian regimes to project a facade of legitimacy while restricting meaningful participation and competition. Scholars like Levitsky and Way (2010) illustrate how these regimes maintain power by leveraging electoral processes. They create environments where civil liberties are curtailed, and genuine opposition is suppressed. Understanding electoral authoritarianism is crucial for evaluating the relationship between electoral practices and political authority. These regimes exploit electoral choice without delivering substantive democratic outcomes.

Electoral Integrity: Electoral integrity refers to the adherence to accepted standards and principles in the electoral process. It ensures that elections are free, fair, and transparent. Pippa Norris (2014) provides a comprehensive framework for assessing electoral integrity, emphasizing the need for safeguards against fraud, intimidation, and discrimination. The presence of electoral integrity is essential for fostering public trust. It ensures that citizens can realistically influence political outcomes. When integrity is compromised, the legitimacy of elected officials is called into question. This can lead to voter apathy and disillusionment (Pappas, 2019). Studies show that high electoral integrity correlates with stronger democratic norms and citizen engagement. This reinforces the notion that choice in elections must be underpinned by robust protections and equitable access to the electoral process.

Voter Disenfranchisement: Voter disenfranchisement occurs when individuals are systematically denied the right to vote or face significant barriers in exercising that right. This situation undermines the electoral process. Disenfranchisement can stem from socioeconomic inequalities, restrictive laws, or practically implemented barriers that disproportionately affect marginalized groups (Pappas, 2019). Scholars highlight the complexities surrounding voter disenfranchisement, indicating that systemic factors such as educational disparities and social marginalization contribute to skewed representation in electoral outcomes. Literature suggests that when large segments of the population are disenfranchised, the legitimacy of the electoral process diminishes. This diminishment occurs because the resulting governance fails to reflect the collective will of the electorate (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

Civil Society Engagement: Civil society engagement refers to the active participation of non-governmental organizations,

community groups, and individuals in the political process. The aim is to promote accountability, influence policy, and enhance the democratic system. Civil society plays a pivotal role in strengthening democratic governance and electoral integrity. Through advocacy, public awareness campaigns, and grassroots mobilization, civil society organizations can counteract manipulation and promote political rights, as noted by Putnam (1993). Literature indicates that robust civil engagement leads to more informed electorates and encourages accountability from political leaders, as highlighted by Diamond (1999). Case studies demonstrate that when civil society is active, it can significantly enhance the legitimacy of electoral processes by ensuring that diverse voices are heard and represented.

Accountability Mechanisms: Accountability mechanisms are systems and processes established to ensure that elected officials and political leaders are held responsible for their actions and decisions. They foster transparency and responsiveness in governance. Effective accountability mechanisms include independent judicial systems, a free press, and transparent public institutions. These mechanisms are essential for safeguarding democratic practices. They ensure that electoral outcomes translate into genuine political authority. Additionally, they impose checks on the power of elected officials, as noted by Norris (2014). Literature emphasizes that without these mechanisms, elections may devolve into mere formalities devoid of real significance. This can lead to increases in corruption and undermine public trust, as highlighted by Levitsky and Way (2010). Furthermore, studies advocate for the development of comprehensive frameworks. These frameworks should integrate accountability at multiple governmental and societal levels to enhance governance legitimacy.

Discussion of Findings

The study found that electoral authoritarianism undermines legitimacy. In many hybrid regimes, formal electoral processes that comply with democratic norms can still fail to produce legitimate authority. This failure occurs due to manipulation and coercion. Studies have shown that while elections may be held, they often operate within a framework that limits genuine competition and suppresses civil liberties. As a result, this leads to a perception of illegitimacy among the electorate. Pappas (2019) highlights instances in which electoral results are predetermined and dissent is stifled. This demonstrates that the mere act of

voting does not equate to the expression of the people's will. Empirical literature support from research by Levitsky and Way (2010) in their examination of competitive authoritarian regimes indicates that even in contexts with regular elections, the lack of political freedom and media openness creates an environment where legitimacy is superficial. In countries like Russia and Venezuela, elections serve more as a tool for maintaining the status quo rather than reflecting popular sovereignty.

The study also found that socioeconomic barriers diminish electoral engagement. Systemic inequalities can exacerbate the disconnect between electoral choice and political authority legitimacy. Inequities related to socioeconomic status, education, and social marginalization can prevent significant segments of the populace from participating meaningfully in elections. The result is that elected representatives do not adequately reflect the diverse interests of the citizenry. This undermines the perceived legitimacy of political authority. Literature support from a report by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA, 2017) discusses how socioeconomic disparities contribute to lower voter turnout and engagement, specifically in developing democracies. This underscores the notion that without inclusive electoral participation, the mere provision of choices becomes meaningless. Unequal access to the electoral process distorts representation and undermines legitimate authority.

Furthermore, the study found that civil society engagement enhances electoral outcomes. The active participation of civil society organizations (CSOs) is critical for advancing democratic processes and ensuring electoral integrity. CSOs help to monitor elections, educate voters, and advocate for policy changes that promote equity and inclusion in the electoral process. Their involvement elevates public discourse, encourages political participation, and challenges manipulative practices that threaten electoral integrity. Report from a study by the National Democratic Institute (NDI, 2020) indicates that countries with robust civil society participation in electoral processes tend to have higher levels of electoral integrity and citizen trust in government. Examples from recent elections in Tunisia and South Korea illustrate how vibrant civil engagement can lead to significant democratic reforms and improved electoral practices.

Lastly, the study found that independent electoral institutions are essential for legitimacy. The establishment and maintenance of independent electoral bodies are vital for ensuring free, fair, and credible elections. Such institutions can help mitigate electoral fraud, manage transparent electoral processes, and maintain the impartiality required for democratic legitimacy. Without independent oversight, the potential for manipulation increases. This erosion of public confidence in electoral outcomes can have serious consequences. The study conducted by Norris (2014) emphasizes that countries with autonomous electoral commissions report higher levels of public trust and satisfaction in the electoral process. In nations like Ghana and South Africa, independent electoral institutions have been instrumental in conducting credible elections. This enhances political legitimacy and facilitates smooth transitions of power.

Conclusion

This study emphasizes that the mere provision of electoral choices is insufficient for establishing legitimate political authority. Although elections are often viewed as a cornerstone of democratic governance, the findings indicate that electoral authoritarianism can severely undermine legitimacy. In situations where political freedoms are restricted, the authenticity of electoral outcomes is compromised, leading to a disconnect between the formal democratic processes and the genuine expression of the electorate's will. Additionally, socioeconomic barriers and systemic inequalities further diminish electoral engagement, skewing representation and weakening the perceived legitimacy of political authority. Moreover, the active participation of civil society and the establishment of independent electoral institutions emerge as critical components for ensuring meaningful political representation. Civil society organizations play an essential role in monitoring elections and advocating for equitable practices, while independent electoral bodies contribute to credible electoral processes that foster public trust. Therefore, to enhance the legitimacy of political authority, it is imperative to address these systemic issues and implement additional mechanisms that support genuine democratic engagement.

Recommendations

- To enhance the legitimacy of political authority, it is essential to promote electoral reforms that ensure the integrity of the electoral process. This

includes establishing independent electoral institutions with the autonomy to oversee elections impartially, minimizing the influence of political elites, and safeguarding electoral integrity. Strengthening these institutions can help build public confidence in electoral outcomes, thereby reinforcing the perception of legitimacy

- To address socioeconomic barriers to electoral participation, targeted initiatives should be implemented to promote inclusive voter engagement. This can include educational programs aimed at marginalized communities, advocacy for equitable access to the electoral process, and policies that reduce systemic inequalities. By fostering an environment where all citizens can participate meaningfully in elections, the legitimacy of political authority can be significantly improved, ensuring that elected representatives truly reflect the diverse interests of the populace.

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