

Political Communication and Governance in Nigeria's Off-Cycle Elections: A Comparative Study of Osun 2022 and 2026

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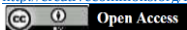
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ABSTRACT

Nigeria's off-cycle governorship elections are routinely described as test cases for electoral administration, yet little work compares successive contests in the same state or asks how the communication surrounding them shapes their legitimacy. This study compares the Osun governorship elections of 16 July 2022 and 15 August 2026 through a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. The quantitative strand combines the officially declared results of both elections with process indicators reported by independent observers (Yiaga Africa, the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room and the Centre for Democracy and Development). The qualitative strand is a thematic and frequency-based content analysis of a purposive corpus of 20 public documents (9 for 2022; 11 for 2026) comprising observer statements, civil-society reports, candidate and party communication, and press analysis, coded against seven themes. The two strands were merged through a joint display. Turnout (accredited voters as a share of registered voters) moved only from 42.4 per cent to 43.2 per cent, the winning margin widened from 3.5 to 6.7 percentage points of valid votes, and the rejected-ballot share fell from 2.27 to 2.06 per cent. Independent verification found the declared results consistent with parallel vote tabulation in both elections. Yet discourse about vote inducement appeared in about two-thirds of the documents in both years, and documents on technology and on institutional communication were proportionally more common in 2026, when observers also recorded a lower share of polling units with fully functional accreditation devices (80 per cent against 92 per cent). The study concludes that procedural integrity and the integrity of voter choice are communicated and contested as separate questions, and that governance legitimacy in Osun rests more on accurate counting and personal incumbency narratives than on issue-based competition. Findings are exploratory because the evidence base is documentary and unequal in size across the two elections.

1. Introduction

Elections confer legitimacy on governments only when citizens and political actors accept both the way they were run and the way they were explained. In Nigeria, where governorship elections in several states fall outside the general-election calendar, the burden of that explanation is carried largely by communication: statements by the electoral commission, observer groups, parties and candidates, and the press and social media that relay them. The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD, 2023) has identified incumbency, identity, insecurity, institutions, inducement, information disorder and impunity as recurring features of Nigeria's 2023 off-cycle elections, and the Situation Room (Adebayo, 2023) notes that such elections tend to attract lower turnout, strain logistics and expose local contests to political pressure.

Osun State offers a rare opportunity for within-case comparison. Its governorship election on 16 July 2022 was won by Ademola Adeleke of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) with 403,371 votes (50.14 per cent of valid votes) against 375,027 (46.62 per cent) for the incumbent, Gboyega Oyetola of the All Progressives Congress (APC) (Kolawole, 2022; Abdurashied, 2026). On 15 August 2026, Adeleke, now contesting on the platform of the Accord Party after the PDP did not field a candidate,

was declared winner with 511,067 votes against 444,815 for the APC's Bola Oyebamiji (Ogundapo & Suleiman, 2026; Bello, 2026). The 2026 contest was described by CDD (2026) as the last governorship election the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) would conduct before the 2027 general elections, and therefore a test of preparedness, neutrality and public trust.

The existing literature on Nigerian elections has examined electoral technology (Acheampong, 2023; Okolie, 2024), vote buying and turnout (Adeleke, Lawal & Akinyemi, 2024; Braimah & Fajimbola, 2025), electoral violence in off-cycle contests (Omotola & Oyewole, 2025) and disinformation (Hassan, 2023; Ibrahim & Ekdale, 2026). What remains thin is a design that places two elections in the same state side by side, measures what can be measured about their conduct and outcomes, and reads the surrounding political communication systematically. This article addresses that gap with the following research questions:

RQ1. How did participation, competitiveness and the integrity of declared results differ between the Osun 2022 and 2026 governorship elections?

RQ2. What themes characterise the political communication surrounding each election, and how did their prominence change?

RQ3. To what extent do the quantitative indicators and the communication themes converge, complement or contradict one another as evidence of governance legitimacy?

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and sets out the conceptual framework. Section 3 describes the mixed-methods design. Section 4 presents quantitative, qualitative and integrated results. Section 5 discusses them, and Section 6 concludes with recommendations.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

2.1 Elections, institutions and democratic consolidation

The concept of democratic consolidation provides the longest-standing lens on Nigerian elections. Linz and Stepan (1996) argue that a democracy is consolidated when democratic procedures are accepted by political actors and citizens as “the only game in town”, a condition that requires repeated contests whose outcomes are accepted by losers as well as winners. Norris (2014) extends the analytical focus from outcomes to the quality of the whole electoral cycle, conceptualising electoral integrity as the extent to which elections meet international standards at every stage and showing why perceptions of integrity matter for citizens' confidence and behaviour. Together these works imply that the legitimacy of an election depends on stages beyond the count, including campaign conduct and the information environment.

Applied to Nigeria, institutional explanations dominate. Omotola (2010) examines how election administration shaped democratisation under the Fourth Republic and finds that the elections from 1999 to 2007 were poorly administered at every stage, producing widely discredited outcomes. He attributes this mainly to weak electoral institutions, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and political parties, noting that the presidency shaped INEC's composition and funding. He also observes that the growing practice of challenging electoral fraud in court suggested a strengthening of the rule of law. This institutional emphasis resonates with Posner and Young (2007), who argue that formal institutional rules have gained importance in African politics over the preceding fifteen years and are unlikely to lose it. Cheeseman and Klaas (2018), writing from a comparative perspective, show that elections can be undermined through several strategies rather than only through manipulation on polling day. The reforms since 2010, including biometric accreditation and electronic result transmission, can be read as attempts to harden the institutional rules at the point of voting; the question this study pursues is what happens to legitimacy at the stages those reforms do not reach.

More recent assessments keep the focus on INEC's independence. Moshood and Sesa (2024), using qualitative analysis and primary documents, argue that INEC has not been politically independent in managing elections during the Fourth Republic, that incumbent parties may collude with it to retain power, and that opposition parties have repeatedly challenged its announced results. Adie (2025), working from a Marxist theory of the state, finds that INEC's administrative capacity significantly affects election credibility and that, although officially independent, it lacks the operational autonomy

needed for truly free, fair and credible elections. Abubakar (2025), writing on the Fourth Republic from 1999 to 2007, links the irregularities of that period to INEC's lack of autonomy and resources and argues that strengthening its financial and institutional capacity was a priority for restoring public confidence.

A further point arises from Linz and Stepan's emphasis on acceptance of results. Afrobarometer (2023) reports that 71 per cent of Nigerians regard elections as the best way to choose leaders and that 78 per cent say the losing side should accept defeat and cooperate with the government rather than monitor and criticise it, which indicates broad normative support for electoral competition. The same survey, however, finds that only 23 per cent trust INEC "somewhat" or "a lot", a fall of 12 percentage points since 2017, with 78 per cent trusting it just a little or not at all. Normative acceptance of elections thus coexists with low confidence in the institution that runs them, which is the setting in which communication about electoral administration carries particular weight.

2.2 Off-cycle elections: assumptions and evidence

Off-cycle elections are held outside the general-election calendar, usually for reasons rooted in constitutional or legal timelines (Adebayo, 2023). Two opposing expectations have been attached to them. The optimistic view is that their smaller scale lets the electoral body and security agencies concentrate resources, so that they should be better governed and more peaceful than general elections. The sceptical view, reflected in the Situation Room's assessment, is that off-cycle elections tend to draw lower turnout, strain logistics and expose local contests to political pressure (Adebayo, 2023). Omotola and Oyewole (2025) observe that the optimistic assumption has received little academic scrutiny and test it by comparing violence in the 2019–2020 governorship elections in Edo, Kogi and Ondo with Nigeria's 2019 general elections, using Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) data within a mixed-methods approach. CDD's (2023) review of the 2023 off-cycle elections in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi organises the recurring features of these contests under seven headings: incumbency, identity, insecurity, institutions, inducement, information disorder and impunity, and compares turnout with earlier elections.

A companion analysis by a CDD researcher draws four lessons from the same 2023 elections: incumbency carried the day, with the APC sweeping all 27 local government areas in Imo, the PDP's Duoye Diri re-elected in Bayelsa with 60 per cent of the vote, and the successor to the term-limited governor winning in Kogi; vote trading was widespread and concentrated in local government areas with the most registered voters and collected permanent voter cards; late arrival of INEC officials delayed voting at 65 per cent of observed polling units in Bayelsa, 80 per cent in Imo and 40 per cent in Kogi despite an 8:30 a.m. start; and violence, although present in 17 recorded incidents, was less common than vote trading, which was the main form of malpractice observed (Chinye, 2023). These findings are observer-based rather than peer-reviewed, but they were produced with a consistent lens across several off-cycle contests.

Osun has been studied less than its prominence suggests. Ogunmodede and Shittu (2024), using 20 semi-structured interviews with lawyers, electoral officials, party figures and academics and content analysis of secondary sources, conclude that the 2018 Osun rerun "lacks all the elements of a credible election", attributing this to parties' determination to win at any cost, the zero-sum nature of party competition and voter attitudes. Their study is valuable for its qualitative depth but concerns a single election. Dataphyte's turnout series, from 54.42 per cent in 2003 and 54.17 per cent in 2014 to 45.74 per cent in 2018 and 42.09 per cent in 2022 (Ishola, 2026a), documents the participation context in which both elections studied here took place. The literature therefore offers detailed accounts of individual Osun contests and general claims about off-cycle elections, but no comparison of successive contests within the state.

Participation tells a similar story elsewhere. In Ekiti, another off-cycle state, turnout was 36.47 per cent in 2022, the lowest for any regular election in the state's recent history, and the same data-journalism source reports that turnout has never reached 50 per cent in any Ekiti election, listing apathy, doubts about credibility, declining trust, vote trading and fear of violence among the explanations offered (Ishola, 2026c).

2.3 Participation, violence and public trust

Declining turnout is a recurring concern in the Nigerian literature. Adebisi and Abubakar (2020) report that turnout in presidential elections has fallen since 1999, with the steepest decline in 2015, and identify four causes: voter apathy linked to violence and inadequate security, electoral malpractice and fraud, lengthy registration and voting procedures, and unfulfilled electoral promises. Hamid, Ikara and Sandamu (2025), reviewing the Fourth Republic to 2023, argue that voter apathy “is not a sign of citizen indifference” but a rational response to systemic failures, and name four mutually reinforcing factors: malpractice and a weak electoral umpire, political violence and insecurity, governance failures and poor socio-economic conditions, and a political culture marked by weak party ideology and elite disconnection from voters. On the role of violence, Bratton (2008) finds from survey evidence that violence reduces turnout, while Collier and Vicente (2014) show in a randomised field experiment around the 2007 elections that anti-violence campaigns reduced perceptions of violence and increased turnout, and they suggest that such campaigns work mainly as a form of voter education that coordinates collective action.

These findings matter for the present study in two ways. They suggest that participation responds to the information and security environment as well as to administrative quality, and they imply that communication interventions can alter participation. They also give grounds for treating the low and stable turnout observed in Osun as a question about communication and trust, rather than only about logistics.

2.4 Vote buying, clientelism and voter inducement

Research on inducement has moved from asking whether vote buying occurs to asking how it works under a secret ballot. Stokes (2005) models political machines as exchanging particularistic benefits for votes and argues that machines use their embeddedness in voters’ social networks to infer individual votes, a mechanism she calls perverse accountability. Nichter (2008) questions why parties would pay for votes when voters can accept rewards and vote as they wish, and proposes that much of what is called vote buying is better understood as turnout buying, in which parties reward unmobilised supporters for voting. The distinction has implications for how inducement should be communicated about: if inducement targets turnout rather than choice, then accurate counts and compromised participation can coexist.

Evidence from Nigeria qualifies the picture of machine control. Bratton (2008) reports from survey estimates that fewer than one in five Nigerians personally experienced vote buying and fewer than one in ten experienced threats of electoral violence, that these practices were concentrated among the rural poor, and that because most citizens consider campaign manipulation wrong, “defection from threats and agreements is more common than compliance”. More recent work stresses structure. Braimah and Fajimbola (2025), through critical discourse analysis of online news on the 2024 Edo and Ondo governorship elections and drawing on clientelism and rational-choice theory, find that extreme poverty, weak institutions, limited voter education and political patronage increase vote buying, and that voters tend to favour immediate material benefits over long-term gains. Adeleke, Lawal and Akinyemi (2024) examine the dimensions of vote buying and voter turnout in the 2023 elections. Taken together, the literature treats inducement as both a socio-economic and a communicative problem, since civic appeals, party messaging and media coverage all shape whether it is seen as normal or as wrong.

A complementary line of work treats inducement, intimidation and fraud as alternative strategies. Collier and Vicente (2012) analyse the political economy of elections in Sub-Saharan Africa and argue that the choice among violence, bribery and ballot fraud depends on the relative strength of candidates and on the constraints they face. This framing is useful for off-cycle governorship contests because it directs attention to which manipulation strategy dominates in a given setting, and it fits the observer finding that vote trading rather than violence was the main malpractice in the 2023 off-cycle elections (Chinye, 2023).

2.5 Political communication and information disorder

Political communication is understood in this study as the set of public messages through which institutions, parties, candidates, observers and the media explain, contest and evaluate an election. Dahlgren (2005) describes how the internet both extends and pluralises the public sphere and contributes to the destabilisation of established political communication systems, a framing that helps explain why election narratives now travel through several channels at once. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) distinguish three forms of information disorder: misinformation, information that is false but not created to cause harm; disinformation, information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, group, organisation or country; and malinformation, information based on reality that is used to inflict harm.

For Nigeria, Hassan (2023) draws on 60 interviews and 18 focus-group discussions across the geopolitical zones and finds that social media has become a major channel for fake news and disinformation used to sway public opinion and discredit opponents, that social media content shapes traditional media, and that it deepens existing ethnic and religious divides. Ibrahim and Ekdale (2026) analyse the press statements of the three leading candidates in the 2023 presidential campaign through critical discourse analysis and identify four campaign responses to false and misleading information: prebunking, debunking, fake-news tagging and counter-disinformation. They show that campaigns both introduced misleading claims and responded to damaging ones, which frames information disorder as an exchange between those who spread falsehoods and those who are targeted by them. CDD (2023) lists information disorder among the seven features of the 2023 off-cycle elections. These studies concern national campaigns or general phenomena; they do not examine how communication about administration, inducement and outcomes differs between two elections in one state.

2.6 Electoral technology, incumbency and party-switching

Electoral technology is central to INEC's claim of reform. Acheampong (2023) argues that the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) helped curb inflated registers and multiple voting, but that failures on election day, including slow authentication and failed result uploads, undermined the credibility the tools were meant to secure, and that the mock trials were too limited to reveal these problems. Okolie (2024), in a qualitative content analysis, likewise finds that INEC adopted BVAS and the INEC Result Viewing portal (IReV) to strengthen integrity, but that the rollout was imperfect and both tools had documented failures. A broader comparative argument comes from Cheeseman, Lynch and Willis (2018), who contend that enthusiasm for election technology has often outpaced evidence of its effectiveness, that digital tools can create new opportunities for corruption and carry opportunity costs, and that failures in digital checks can leave an election more open to manipulation than before. CDD's review of the 2023 off-cycle elections similarly concluded that INEC had not convincingly answered questions about BVAS reliability (Chinye, 2023). The implication for communication is direct: where technology fails visibly, the explanation offered by the electoral body becomes part of the legitimacy outcome.

Incumbency and party-switching shape the other half of the contest. Nwosu, Mbah and Iwuamadi (2021), using documentary analysis within a distributive-state framework, argue that politicians switch parties mainly to gain access to public resources and patronage, and that defectors tend to move towards the ruling party. The Osun case departs from that pattern: in 2026 the incumbent governor left the party on whose platform he had won in 2022 and ran under the Accord Party (Bello, 2026), so the personal vote and incumbency, rather than allegiance to a ruling party, were at stake. On governance performance, Ikwuoma and Akinlabi (2026) argue in their analysis of the 2026 election, drawing on electoral data, observer reports and post-election commentary, that the contest showed a more sophisticated voter, limited returns from party machinery where governance is weak, and incremental consolidation, while CDD (2026) provides a pre-election background paper that frames the contest as continuity versus change and flags declining issue-based campaigning, political violence, vote trading and technology.

2.7 Summary of reviewed studies

Table 2.1: Selected studies informing the analysis

Study	Context and method	Relevance to this study
Omotola (2010)	Election administration and democratisation, Nigeria 1999–2007	Institutional weakness of INEC and parties as the core problem
Omotola & Oyewole (2025)	Violence in 2019–2020 off-cycle governorship elections versus 2019 general elections; mixed methods with ACLED data	Tests the assumption that off-cycle elections are better governed
CDD (2023)	Review of 2023 off-cycle elections in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi	Seven recurring features, including inducement and information disorder
CDD (2023); Chinye (2023)	2023 off-cycle elections in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi	Observer-based incumbency, vote trading, INEC delays and BVAS reliability
Ishola (2026a, 2026c)	Turnout in Osun and Ekiti; data journalism	Long-run decline in participation in off-cycle states
Moshood & Sesa (2024); Adie (2025); Abubakar (2025)	INEC independence and capacity; qualitative analyses	Institutional credibility of the electoral umpire
Collier & Vicente (2012)	Violence, bribery and fraud in African elections	Choice among manipulation strategies
Cheeseman et al. (2018)	Election technology in limited-capacity states	Risks and unintended consequences of digital checks
Ogunmodede & Shittu (2024)	2018 Osun rerun; 20 interviews and content analysis	Earlier Osun case; single election
Adebiyi & Abubakar (2020); Hamid et al. (2025)	Turnout decline in the Fourth Republic; literature-based	Causes of apathy: malpractice, violence, governance failure, weak parties
Bratton (2008); Collier & Vicente (2014)	Survey estimates; randomised field experiment, 2007 elections	Violence, vote buying and the effect of communication on turnout
Stokes (2005); Nichter (2008)	Formal models and Argentine survey data	Mechanisms of vote buying and turnout buying
Braimah & Fajimbola (2025)	Critical discourse analysis of news on 2024 Edo and Ondo elections	Drivers of inducement in off-cycle elections
Hassan (2023); Ibrahim & Ekdale (2026)	60 interviews and 18 focus groups; critical discourse analysis of 2023 campaign statements	Disinformation channels and campaign responses
Acheampong (2023); Okolie (2024)	BVAS and IReV in the 2023 elections; analytical and content-analytic	Technology's design strengths and implementation failures
Nwosu et al. (2021)	Party-switching and the distributive state; documentary analysis	Incumbency, patronage and defection
Ikwuoma & Akinlabi (2026); CDD (2026)	Osun 2026 election analysis; pre-election background paper	Closest existing work on the 2026 election

Source: authors' synthesis of the reviewed literature.

2.8 Conceptual framework

The study combines the two perspectives in Section 2.1 with a communicative mechanism. Electoral integrity (Norris, 2014) and democratic consolidation (Linz & Stepan, 1996) supply the outcome concepts: whether an election is accepted as legitimate, and whether repeated elections strengthen that acceptance. The communicative mechanism links institutional performance to those outcomes: administrative performance becomes legitimacy only through what observers, parties, candidates and media say about it, and the information environment can either reinforce or erode it (Hassan, 2023; Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Three exploratory propositions follow, each testable with the data collected here.

P1. Administrative improvements do not by themselves raise participation, so turnout will change little between the two elections.

P2. As electoral technology matures, communication shifts from logistics and security towards technology performance and institutional accountability.

P3. Accuracy of the count and integrity of voter choice are communicated and contested as separate matters, so verified results can coexist with persistent inducement discourse.

2.9 Research gap

The review reveals four gaps. First, the literature on off-cycle elections tests general assumptions (Omotola & Oyewole, 2025) or describes single contests (Ogunmodede & Shittu, 2024; Ikwuoma & Akinlabi, 2026), but does not compare successive elections in one state. Second, studies of vote buying and turnout rely mainly on surveys, models or news discourse and rarely set communication themes beside measured process indicators. Third, studies of technology and of disinformation concern national elections and do not track how these concerns change between two off-cycle contests. Fourth, the existing work on Osun 2026 is either a pre-election background paper (CDD, 2026) or an early analysis (Ikwuoma & Akinlabi, 2026) that does not integrate the 2022 comparison with a design that triangulates quantitative and qualitative evidence. The present study addresses these gaps.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

The study adopts a comparative case design with a convergent parallel mixed-methods strategy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The two elections are treated as the cases: they occur in the same state under the same off-cycle arrangement, which holds constant many institutional and demographic factors. A quantitative strand and a qualitative strand were conducted independently and merged at the interpretation stage. The mixing follows the purposes of triangulation and complementarity described by Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989), and integration is achieved by a joint display, an integration technique described by Fetters, Curry and Creswell (2013).

3.2 Quantitative strand and instrument

The quantitative instrument is a structured indicator schedule with two blocks. Block A records outcome indicators for each election: registered voters, accredited voters, total votes cast, valid and rejected votes, the votes and shares of the leading candidates, the winning margin, and the share of valid votes won by the two leading candidates combined. These were taken from the results as declared by INEC and reported by Premium Times (Ogundapo & Suleiman, 2026; Abdurashied, 2026) and, for the 2022 turnout series, Dataphyte (Amata, 2022; Ishola, 2026a, 2026b). The primary INEC result sheets were not accessed, so all outcome indicators are cited as reported by the named media outlets. Block B records process indicators reported by independent observers using their own sampling designs: Yiaga Africa's parallel vote tabulation (PVT) and observation findings, and Situation Room and CDD observation statements. Indicators were computed as follows: turnout is accredited voters divided by registered voters, and, for comparison with published figures, votes cast divided by registered voters; the rejected-ballot share is rejected votes divided by votes cast; the margin is the winner's votes minus the runner-up's votes, expressed as a share of valid votes. Quantitative analysis is descriptive (absolute and percentage-point change). Because the outcome indicators are complete counts of the electorate rather than samples, no inferential significance test is applied to them.

3.3 Qualitative strand and instrument

The qualitative instrument is a document-analysis protocol with a coding frame. The corpus was assembled purposively from publicly available documents that met four criteria: (a) published in the election window (for 2022, 10 July 2022 to 3 January 2023; for 2026, 15 December 2025 to 26 August 2026); (b) authored by an observer or civil-society group, a candidate or party spokesperson, or a professional news outlet; (c) substantively concerned with the conduct, contestation or communication of the election; and (d) retrievable in full from the publisher's page at the time of analysis. Twenty documents satisfied these criteria: nine for 2022 and eleven for 2026 (Appendix A). Pure results-reporting pages were treated as quantitative sources and excluded from the corpus.

The coding frame combined deductive and inductive elements. Seven themes were defined in advance from the literature in Section 2 and refined during a first reading (Appendix B): T1 personalised and polarised campaign framing; T2 inducement and vote-trading discourse; T3 technology and trust (BVAS, IReV); T4 institutional communication and the credibility of election administration; T5 governance performance, incumbency and state-resource narratives; T6 peace, security, acceptance and dispute-management discourse; and T7 information disorder and issue-based campaigning. Each document was read in full and a theme was recorded as present when the document contained at least one explicit statement on it. The analysis proceeded through the phases of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006), familiarisation, coding, theme development, review and definition, and was complemented by counts of the number of documents carrying each theme, a basic form of quantitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2018).

3.4 Integration, validity and ethics

Integration took place in a joint display that sets each quantitative finding beside the relevant qualitative themes and classifies the relationship as convergence, complementarity or divergence. Validity was supported by three practices: every figure and quotation was traced to a named, retrievable source; figures that differed between sources were reconciled or flagged (Section 4.1); and quantitative indicators from different observers were not combined into a single index. The study uses only published documents and involves no human participants, so no ethical clearance for fieldwork was required.

3.5 Limitations of the design

Four limitations should be kept in view. First, the corpus is not a random sample, and it is smaller for 2022 (nine documents) than for 2026 (eleven), with a higher share of observer-group material in 2026, so differences in theme prevalence are descriptive and partly reflect corpus composition.

Second, the qualitative coding was performed in a single pass and no inter-coder reliability statistic is reported; replication by an independent coder is recommended. Third, observer indicators for the two elections come from different samples of polling units and, in some cases, different wording, so they indicate direction rather than precise change.

Lastly, the design cannot establish causation between communication and electoral outcomes. The study does not include a survey or interviews, so it says nothing about individual voters' perceptions.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative strand: outcomes and process indicators

Table 1: Outcome indicators, Osun governorship elections 2022 and 2026

Indicator	2022	2026	Change
Registered voters	1,952,387	2,339,544	+19.8%
Accredited voters	827,218	1,010,684	+22.2%
Turnout, accredited ÷ registered	42.37%	43.20%	+0.83 pts
Total votes cast	823,124	1,005,800	+22.2%
Turnout, votes cast ÷ registered	42.16%	42.99%	+0.83 pts
Valid votes	804,450	985,079	+22.5%
Rejected votes	18,674	20,721	+11.0%
Rejected share of votes cast	2.27%	2.06%	−0.21 pts
Winner's votes	403,371 (PDP)	511,067 (Accord)	+107,696
Winner's share of valid votes	50.14%	51.88%	+1.74 pts
Runner-up's votes	375,027 (APC)	444,815 (APC)	+69,788
Runner-up's share of valid votes	46.62%	45.16%	−1.46 pts
Margin (votes)	28,344	66,252	+133.7%
Margin (% of valid votes)	3.52%	6.73%	+3.21 pts
Top-two combined share of valid votes	96.76%	97.04%	+0.28 pts
Local government areas won by winner (of 30)	17	19	+2

Sources: Registered, accredited, cast, valid and rejected figures and candidate votes from Abdulrasheed (2026) and Ogundapo and Suleiman (2026); percentages computed by the authors from those figures; LGAs won from Bello (2026) for 2022 and Yiaga Africa (2026) for 2026. Note: accredited voters exceeded votes cast by 4,094 (0.49%) in 2022 and 4,884 (0.48%) in 2026; neither source explains the gap. The Situation Room (2026b) reports 2,339,233 registered voters for 2026, 311 fewer than the figure declared by INEC (2,339,544), and the 2022 turnout has been reported as 42.09 per cent (Kolawole, 2022; Ishola, 2026a) and 42.16 per cent (Amata, 2022) depending on the numerator and denominator used.

Participation. Turnout rose by only 0.83 percentage points whichever numerator is used, from about 42 per cent to about 43 per cent, even though the register grew by almost 20 per cent. In absolute terms more people voted, but the proportion did not move materially, and the 2026 level remains well below the 54 per cent recorded in 2003 and 2014 (Table 2). Yiaga Africa's own estimates bracketed both official turnout figures (40–43 per cent for 2022; 42.5–44.8 per cent for 2026; Kolawole, 2022; Yiaga Africa, 2026). Proposition P1 is therefore supported.

Table 2: Turnout in Osun governorship elections, selected years

Year	Registered voters	Votes cast	Turnout
2003	1.3 million	744,000	54.42%
2014	1.4 million	765,000	54.17%
2018	not reported	not reported	45.74%
2022	1,952,387	823,124	42.09–42.37%*
2026	2,339,544	1,005,800	42.99–43.20%*

Sources: 2003, 2014 and 2018 from Ishola (2026a); 2022 and 2026 from Table 1. *Range reflects votes cast and accredited voters as alternative numerators; the 2022 lower bound is the 42.09 per cent reported by Ishola (2026a).

Competitiveness. The winning margin widened from 3.52 to 6.73 percentage points of valid votes, and the winner's share rose by 1.74 points while the runner-up's fell by 1.46. Both contests were

essentially two-candidate races: the two leading candidates together took 96.8 per cent of valid votes in 2022 and 97.0 per cent in 2026. In 2026 the winner was the incumbent, who changed party label between elections, so the widening margin is consistent with an incumbent premium that outweighed party identity. The data cannot show whether governance performance or personal appeal produced it.

Integrity of declared results. In both elections the independent PVT conducted by Yiaga Africa found INEC's declared shares within its estimated ranges. In 2022 the PVT projected the PDP at 47.8–51.8 per cent and the APC at 45–49 per cent, with rejected ballots estimated at 1.7–2.3 per cent against INEC's 2.2 per cent (Kolawole, 2022). In 2026 it estimated Accord at 50.3–54 per cent against 51.9 per cent declared, the APC at 43–46.8 per cent against 45.2 per cent, and the ADC at 1.4–2.1 per cent against 1.7 per cent, on 289 of 300 sampled polling units (Yiaga Africa, 2026). The rejected-ballot share declined from 2.27 to 2.06 per cent.

Table 3: Observer-reported process indicators

Indicator	2022	2026	Source
Observed polling units where BVAS worked properly	92%	80%	Yiaga
BVAS malfunction in observed units	7% fixed; 1% replaced	20%; later fixed	Yiaga
Verified-PVC voters denied accreditation after biometric failure	not reported	11% of units	Yiaga
Results transmission to IReV by presiding officers	71% attempted	85% transmitted	Yiaga
Polling units open and accrediting by 9:30 a.m.	96% opened	97% began accreditation and voting	Yiaga
Party agents attempting to influence voters or officials	19% of units	not reported as a percentage	Yiaga
Ballot secrecy compromised	7% of units	not reported	Yiaga
Polling units where voting began at 8:30 a.m.	not reported	87%	Situation Room
IReV results uploaded by 16 August	not reported	98.43%	Situation Room

Sources: Yiaga 2022 indicators from Kolawole (2022) and Agboluaje (2026) for the 2026 opening indicator; other Yiaga 2026 indicators from Yiaga Africa (2026); Situation Room 2026 indicators from Situation Room (2026b). Observers used different samples and some different wording (“attempted” versus “transmitted”), so entries indicate direction rather than exact change.

Technology. Observers reported that accreditation devices worked properly in a smaller share of observed polling units in 2026 (80 per cent) than in 2022 (92 per cent), and that in 2026 biometric or facial authentication failures led to the denial of accreditation to voters with verified permanent voter cards in 11 per cent of units, with elderly voters particularly affected (Yiaga Africa, 2026; Situation Room, 2026b). By contrast, the reported share of polling units in which presiding officers transmitted results to IReV was higher (85 per cent transmitted in 2026 against 71 per cent attempting transmission in 2022), although Yiaga recorded that uploads of 3,292 polling-unit results stalled for over an hour on the night of the election. The 2026 evidence is therefore mixed: result transmission appears to have improved, while front-end accreditation reliability appears to have deteriorated.

4.2 Qualitative strand: themes in political communication

Table 4 shows the number and share of documents in which each theme appears. Because the 2022 and 2026 corpora differ in size and composition, shares should be read as indicative only.

Table 4: Prevalence of communication themes in the document corpus

Theme	2022 (n=9)	%	2026 (n=11)	%
T1 Personalised and polarised campaign framing	2	22.2	3	27.3
T2 Inducement and vote-trading discourse	6	66.7	8	72.7
T3 Technology and trust (BVAS, IReV)	3	33.3	6	54.5
T4 Institutional communication and administrative credibility	4	44.4	9	81.8
T5 Governance performance, incumbency and state resources	1	11.1	4	36.4
T6 Peace, security, acceptance and dispute management	6	66.7	8	72.7
T7 Information disorder and issue-based campaigning	1	11.1	4	36.4
Total theme occurrences (mean per document)	23 (2.6)		42 (3.8)	

Source: authors' coding of the corpus in Appendix A; coding matrix in Appendix B.

Personalised and polarised campaign framing (T1). Communication in both elections centred on individuals. In 2022 the celebrity musician Davido, a relative of the PDP candidate, used social media to claim that the APC was “jittery and desperate” and to tell voters to “protect your vote” (Shittu, 2022), while after the result the winning camp cast the outcome in providential terms, with Adeleke’s spokesperson insisting that “God is of justice, equity and honesty, not of electoral banditry and deceit” (Ripples Nigeria, 2023). In 2026 CDD (2026) reported that the contest was framed as “continuity” under the Accord incumbent against “change” under the APC, a framing the paper said did not reflect major policy differences, and that APC messaging leaned on demeaning labels such as “dancing governor” and “placeholder”, which it warned could generate sympathy for the incumbent. The incumbent’s own campaign language was equally binary: “Osun will not go back to the dark days”, and a vote for the APC was “a return to the failures of the past” (Kolawole, 2025). A post-election analysis characterised the outcome as “very personality-driven” and read Adeleke’s switch to the little-known Accord Party as a gamble that paid off through incumbency and personal appeal (Bello, 2026).

Inducement and vote-trading discourse (T2). This was the most persistent theme, present in six of nine documents in 2022 and eight of eleven in 2026. In 2022, civic and elite actors urged voters to “reject any money in return for our votes” (Agbor, 2022), a civic-tech campaign ran the slogan “DO NOT SELL YOUR VOTE” on road shows and radio and reported residents who doubted their votes mattered or had already sold them (Musa, 2022), and CDD’s fact-checkers documented “claims and counter-claims by political actors” on vote buying (News Agency of Nigeria, 2022). Yiaga recorded reports of inducement by agents of both leading parties at ₦2,000 to ₦5,000 (Kolawole, 2022). Communication was not uniform even within one camp: Davido’s message combined a call to resist inducement with the instruction to “chop their money, vote your PDP vote” (Shittu, 2022), which implicitly normalises acceptance of cash. In 2026 observers described inducement as more discreet than before, including the recording and tagging of voters after they voted (Situation Room, 2026b), and Yiaga Africa (2026) reported widespread inducement while distinguishing the accuracy of the count from the freedom of voters’ choice.

Technology and trust (T3). Technology discourse in 2022 was largely monitoring-oriented and positive: CDD recorded BVAS present and functioning in 99 per cent of units visited early on election day (News Agency of Nigeria, 2022), and Yiaga reported that devices worked in 92 per cent of observed units (Kolawole, 2022). In 2026 the tone was more cautionary. CDD (2026) named a “technology versus trust paradox” that INEC must address, observers described congestion where only one device served large polling units and the failure of fingerprint and facial recognition for some elderly voters, and the

Situation Room (2026b) concluded that “technology alone cannot guarantee credible elections”, a line repeated in its post-election call to build on the lessons of the election (Kolawole, 2026).

Institutional communication and administrative credibility (T4). Documents in both years credited INEC’s logistics, but in 2026 they were more likely to ask for communication from INEC itself. A pre-election commentary stressed that timely communication from INEC is essential to sustaining voter confidence and that media must counter misinformation (Brown, 2026); Yiaga Africa (2026) recommended that INEC communicate promptly about IReV failures and publish the causes of biometric failures; and the Situation Room (2026b) urged a comprehensive post-election audit and, in its civil-society statement, an inclusive review involving parties, observers and the media rather than an internal one (Kolawole, 2026). A late court judgment on 22 July 2026 that added the Social Democratic Party’s candidate forced the reproduction of ballot papers and result sheets and delayed materials distribution (Situation Room, 2026b), which observers described as a systemic risk.

Governance performance, incumbency and state resources (T5). Governance narratives were almost absent in 2022 documents, appearing only in the Situation Room’s call for a level playing field and fair access to state facilities (Situation Room, 2022). In 2026 they were more prominent. The incumbent claimed that his administration was reversing damage left by its predecessor and cited a primary health care leadership award (Kolawole, 2025), and on declaration he said that “the primary essence of a government is the welfare and well-being of the people” (Channels Television, 2026). CDD (2026) credited the administration with road construction in Ile-Ife and full and prompt payment of civil servants, but noted poor education and health indicators, including about 297,000 out-of-school children, and criticised both campaigns for largely ignoring such issues. It also quoted a media practitioner who said misuse of state resources was seen as normal and that opposition parties were unlikely to complain because they had done the same.

Peace, security, acceptance and dispute management (T6). This theme was common in both elections. In 2022, Oyetola’s statement urged calm and said the APC would respond “after studying the results” (Akewushola, 2022), CDD urged contestants to be to be “graceful in defeat” and to show magnanimity in victory (Olatunji, 2022), and the Situation Room (2022) noted that fear of violence had been spread because of the previous governorship election, which went to a rerun. In 2026 observers commended a generally peaceful poll while recording isolated harassment and thuggery and the intimidation of an observer (Agboluaje, 2026; Situation Room, 2026a), and asked the winner, parties and candidates to accept the outcome peacefully and use legal channels for complaints (Kolawole, 2026).

Information disorder and issue-based campaigning (T7). Information disorder was explicitly handled in only one 2022 document, in which CDD fact-checkers debunked a false claim circulating on election morning that a court had sacked Adeleke and found that the image used for a viral vote-buying claim did not support it (News Agency of Nigeria, 2022). In 2026 four documents addressed the theme: CDD (2026) described the pre-poll information environment as poor and likely to worsen, noted a broad decline in issue-based campaigning and warned that slogans such as “no vacancy in Osun” and “rescue Osun” could inflame passions; Dataphyte listed misinformation and disinformation among the reasons for declining participation (Ishola, 2026a); and observers called for issue-based campaigns (Situation Room, 2026b). None of the 2026 observer statements reported systematic monitoring of misinformation on election day, so the theme is better evidenced as concern than as measured incidence.

4.3 Integration of the two strands

Table 5: Joint display of quantitative findings and communication themes

Domain	Quantitative finding	Qualitative theme	Relationship
Participation	Turnout 42.4% to 43.2% despite 19.8% larger register; far below 54% in 2003 and 2014	T6 and T4: peace and administration are the main legitimacy claims; turnout was called “commendable” by civil society; declining trust and misinformation cited as causes of low participation	Convergence on low, stable participation; communication emphasises process over engagement
Competitiveness	Margin 3.5 to 6.7 pts; top two take about 97% in both years	T1 and T5: personality-driven contests, binary framing, incumbency and party switch	Convergence: incumbent premium; two-candidate polarisation
Integrity of results versus choice	PVT confirms declared results in both years; rejected share 2.27% to 2.06%	T2 present in 67% and 73% of documents; inducement described as more discreet in 2026	Divergence: accurate counting coexists with contested voter choice
Technology	BVAS worked in 92% (2022) and 80% (2026) of observed units; IReV transmission 71% to 85%	T3 rises from 33% to 55% of documents; “technology versus trust paradox”	Complementarity: numbers show mixed performance; discourse explains why it matters for trust
Institutional communication	Late court-ordered ballot change in 2026; uploads stalled for 3,292 results	T4 rises from 44% to 82% of documents; calls for prompt INEC communication and post-election audit	Convergence: operational incidents generate demand for institutional communication
Information environment	No systematic quantitative measure in either year	T7 rises from 11% to 36%; fact-checking in 2022; concern in 2026	Gap: evidence is discursive only

Source: authors’ integration of Tables 1–4.

5. Discussion

The first finding is that stability in participation sits beside real improvements in administration. Turnout rose by less than one percentage point while the register grew by about a fifth, which supports P1 and is consistent with the long decline Dataphyte documents for Osun (Ishola, 2026a). It also qualifies the assumption, discussed by Omotola and Oyewole (2025), that off-cycle elections are better governed, and parallels Ekiti’s similarly low turnout (Ishola, 2026c); the elections were administratively credible by the standards of independent observers, but credible administration did not translate into notably higher participation. The documents themselves explain low participation through distrust, fear of violence, weak civic education and misinformation rather than through logistics (Ishola, 2026a), which suggests that the problem is at least partly communicative. This reading accords with accounts that tie apathy to distrust, violence and governance failure (Adebiyi & Abubakar, 2020; Hamid et al., 2025) and with Afrobarometer’s (2023) finding of low public trust in INEC.

The second finding concerns what independent verification can and cannot certify. In both elections the parallel vote tabulation matched the declared results, yet inducement discourse appeared in about two-thirds of documents in each year. This pattern supports P3 and matches Yiaga Africa’s explicit separation of the accuracy of the count from the integrity of voter choice. In terms of Norris’s (2014) framework it suggests that integrity is not a single dimension: a credible count addresses one stage of the electoral cycle, while campaign finance and inducement belong to another. The finding is also consistent with Braimah and Fajimbola (2025), who link vote buying to poverty and patronage rather than to polling-day administration, and with CDD’s observation that vote trading, not violence, was the most common malpractice in the 2023 off-cycle elections (Chinye, 2023). Bratton’s (2008) finding that voters often defect from inducement agreements is a reminder that observed inducement does not

establish that it changed the result, and the present data cannot settle that question. The mixed messages observed in 2022, in which civic appeals to refuse payment coexisted with partisan advice to take the money and vote freely, show how communication from several sources can leave the norm unclear. Nichter's (2008) distinction between vote buying and turnout buying is a further reminder that inducement can operate on participation as well as on choice; the documents analysed here do not allow the two to be separated.

Third, the technology evidence complements the existing literature. Acheampong (2023) and Okolie (2024) both found that BVAS and IReV were sound in design but uneven in deployment in 2023, and the 2026 Osun evidence repeats that pattern in a smaller, more controlled setting: accreditation devices failed more often in observed units than in 2022, while results transmission appeared to improve. P2 is partly supported. Technology and institutional communication appeared in a larger proportion of 2026 documents, but the change is confounded by the larger share of observer material in the 2026 corpus. The central lesson shared by observers and CDD, that technology cannot by itself produce trust, echoes Cheeseman et al.'s (2018) warning that failed digital checks can leave elections more vulnerable than before, but it remains better supported as an interpretation than as a measured effect.

Fourth, governance legitimacy in Osun appears to rest on personal incumbency narratives more than on programmatic competition. The margin widened and the incumbent won a larger share under a new party label, which fits Bello's (2026) reading of a personality-driven electorate and Ikwuoma and Akinlabi's (2026) argument, as stated in their abstract, that party machinery yielded limited returns when governance was weak. The incumbent's move away from the PDP towards a minor party, rather than towards the party in power at the federal level, runs against the centripetal pull towards the ruling party described by Nwosu et al. (2021), which supports the personal-vote reading but cannot be generalised from one case. Yet the communication corpus shows little engagement with social indicators: CDD (2026) criticised both campaigns for ignoring education and health even as it recorded the incumbent's infrastructure and salary gains. The widening margin is thus compatible with a performance explanation, a personal-popularity explanation or both, and this study cannot adjudicate between them.

Finally, the study speaks to democratic consolidation in the sense of Linz and Stepan (1996). Acceptance of outcomes by losers is a core marker. In 2022 the APC candidate's statement was conditional, promising a response after studying the results, and the dispute continued after the election in the form of post-election communication by both camps (Akewushola, 2022; Ripples Nigeria, 2023). In 2026 the documents analysed record a peaceful process but do not report the APC's reaction to the declaration. A fuller test of consolidation would need systematic coding of losing candidates' communication, which is a clear avenue for further work.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study compared the Osun governorship elections of 2022 and 2026 through a convergent mixed-methods design. The quantitative strand showed stable and low turnout, a wider incumbent margin, a slightly smaller share of rejected ballots and independent confirmation of the declared results in both years. The qualitative strand showed that political communication in both elections was personalised and that inducement and peace-and-acceptance narratives were persistent, while discourse on technology, institutional communication, governance and information disorder grew more prominent in 2026. Integrating the strands indicates that Osun's elections are credible in their counting and contested in their communication: verified results coexist with doubts about the freedom of voter choice and with falling confidence in the technology meant to protect it.

Four recommendations follow from the evidence.

First, INEC should adopt a standing protocol for real-time public communication on technology failures, including the publication of causes and remedies, and should carry out and publish the post-election technical audit of accreditation and transmission that observers requested (Situation Room, 2026b; Yiaga Africa, 2026).

Second, anti-inducement enforcement and messaging should be coordinated: security agencies and anti-corruption bodies should extend enforcement to the vicinity of polling units, and parties and prominent public figures should avoid messages that normalise accepting payment for votes.

Third, parties and candidates should compete on measurable governance issues, including the education and health indicators identified by CDD (2026), rather than on personalised labels.

Lastly, media, civil society and fact-checkers should be resourced to monitor and debunk election-day misinformation on a systematic basis, building on the fact-checking recorded in 2022 (News Agency of Nigeria, 2022).

Future research should add primary data, namely a representative voter survey and interviews with election officials, party agents and journalists, to test the propositions advanced here at the level of individual perception, and should extend the comparison to other off-cycle states.

Data availability

All data analysed are drawn from the public documents listed in Appendix A and the References. The indicator schedule and coding matrix are reproduced in Tables 1–5 and Appendix B.

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