

Redefining Electoral Literacy: An Appraisal of Content Adequacy, Audience Alignment, and Reform Prospects in INEC's Voter Education Programmes (VEP)

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Citation: Omoniyi, T.O. Redefining Electoral Literacy: An Appraisal of Content Adequacy, Audience Alignment, and Reform Prospects in INEC's Voter Education Programmes (VEP). *Asia Pacific Journal of Education and Society*, 13(2), 1. <https://doi.org/10.20897/apjes/17299>

Published: October 18, 2025

ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of democratic participation in Nigeria is inextricably tied to the robustness of voter education programmes, particularly those implemented by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). Extant literature has investigated how well the content of INEC's VEPs addresses critical democratic competencies, such as electoral procedures, rights awareness, civic responsibility, and resistance to electoral manipulation. This study critically evaluates the content adequacy, audience alignment, challenges, and reform prospects of INEC's voter education initiatives in Nigeria's evolving democracy. The study adopts a qualitative content analysis and expert interviews to assess the coherence between programme objectives and the information needs of voters. The finding revealed that the content of INEC VEP was not adequate, average aligns with the audience, INEC faces, including funding and logistic challenges. Also, the result suggests that while INEC's VEPs have improved in scope and technological adaptation, they often lack depth, contextual sensitivity, and long-term civic orientation. The study explained the urgency of reforming voter education to go beyond episodic election messaging and towards a more integrated, inclusive, and participatory civic learning framework. The paper concludes with policy recommendations for enhancing electoral literacy through curriculum redesign, strategic media partnerships, decentralised outreach, and youth-driven innovations, positioning voter education as a foundational pillar of democratic consolidation in Nigeria and across Sub-Saharan Africa.

Keywords: Electoral literacy, Voter education, Civic engagement, INEC Nigeria, Democratic participation

INTRODUCTION

In every democratic society, the quality of voter education determines the extent to which citizens can meaningfully engage in the political process. Electoral literacy is the capacity of citizens to understand electoral systems, processes, and practices to make informed political decisions and engage meaningfully in governance. It encompasses knowledge of voter registration procedures, voting methods, and the translation of votes into political power, as well as awareness of voter rights, responsibilities, and ethical standards (Osayi, 2024). An electorally literate citizen can critically assess political information, resist misinformation and vote-buying, and participate in both voting and broader democratic processes such as civic dialogues and election monitoring. In democratic societies such as Nigeria, electoral literacy is vital for ensuring free, fair, and credible elections. It empowers citizens

to make reasoned choices, hold leaders accountable, and contribute to peaceful political transitions. It also strengthens institutional trust, reduces political apathy, and bridges participation gaps among marginalized groups. However, despite its significance, efforts to build electoral literacy in Nigeria—particularly through the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC)’s voter education programmes—have faced persistent challenges.

While INEC has initiated numerous campaigns through media and community outreach, the content of these programmes has often been criticized as inadequate, generic, and misaligned with the diverse realities of the Nigerian electorate (Ochi et al., 2023). Several campaigns are urban-centered and poorly adapted for rural or marginalized populations. Moreover, they lack clarity on emerging electoral innovations such as electronic voting or digital voter verification systems. The Commission’s top-down communication style, limited interactivity, and insufficient integration of local languages and cultural contexts have further hampered effectiveness (Igiebor, 2022). As a result, despite increased visibility of voter education, widespread voter apathy, misinformation, and electoral malpractice remain prevalent (Boeke, 2012). Concerns about the effectiveness of INEC’s voter education programmes continue to attract attention from scholars, teachers, civil society actors, and policymakers. Specifically, questions have been raised about the adequacy of the content, its alignment with diverse audiences, and the challenges inhibiting implementation. The need for reform is underscored by Mohammed, Enganya, and Adi (2024), who argue that electoral literacy frameworks in Nigeria must urgently be rethought to ensure that content, delivery, and outreach strategies are inclusive, audience-sensitive, and responsive to technological change.

Content adequacy refers to the comprehensiveness and depth of information disseminated to voters, while content suitability pertains to how well information aligns with literacy levels, cultural contexts, and demographic characteristics (Mudau, 2022). Together, these dimensions serve as fundamental indicators of the relevance, accessibility, and impact of voter education initiatives. Yet, document analysis (Omoniyi, 2023) and other empirical studies point to a persistent disconnect between INEC’s materials and the realities of citizens—particularly in remote and educationally disadvantaged regions. Developing effective VEP content is not merely a procedural obligation but a democratic imperative (Nwali & Nwogbaga, 2019; Donneys et al., 2024). Electoral literacy extends beyond the ability to register or cast a ballot; it entails a deeper understanding of electoral laws, political rights, and the implications of participation. Inadequate or poorly designed content risks reinforcing misconceptions, political manipulation, and underutilisation of civic rights.

These inadequacies manifest in Nigeria as high rates of invalid votes, low voter turnout, election-related violence, and widespread distrust in electoral processes (Omoniyi, 2023). Audience alignment is another major concern. Many voter education materials are disseminated in English and other official languages, with limited effort to translate or adapt them into local dialects, visual formats, or informal learning structures. The accessibility and user-friendliness of INEC’s voter education programmes remain critical factors for fostering civic engagement in Nigeria’s evolving democratic landscape. Despite cycles of electoral reform and technological infusion, Nigeria’s electoral participation has stagnated or declined, exposing persistent gaps in electoral literacy and trust (Ijeh & Abimbola, 2023). For instance, the 2023 general elections recorded one of the lowest voter turnouts since 1999, with only 26–29% of registered voters casting ballots despite 93.5 million registrants and high PVC collection rates (Omoniyi, 2023). Analysts attribute this paradox to a trust deficit, operational challenges, and communication gaps, all of which highlight the inadequacy of voter education (Mohammed et al., 2024; Morales, 2020).

Recent scholarship explains three intertwined challenges confronting voter education in Nigeria: (a) low institutional trust and perceptions of integrity; (b) the changing information environment, including dis/disinformation; and (c) uneven inclusion across youth, women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Afrobarometer surveys conducted before the 2023 elections found that while Nigerians value competitive elections, fewer than one-fourth reported trust in INEC, which was strongly linked to low turnout. On the policy front, INEC’s Strategic Plan 2022–2026 envisions a broader scope of voter education that emphasizes inclusivity, digital literacy (e.g., BVAS, IReV), and counter-disinformation. The Electoral Act 2022 and INEC’s 2022 Guidelines formalized the use of accreditation technology and clarified procedures, providing benchmarks against which to appraise programme adequacy, audience alignment, and reform prospects (Musa-Usman, 2023). However, evaluations of sub-national contexts reveal that while INEC’s FAQs, manuals, and media engagement stimulate participation, they fail to inclusively reach diverse constituencies, particularly rural voters and first-time youth voters.

Taken together, Nigeria’s recent experience positions INEC’s voter education programme at the centre of democratic consolidation efforts. To be effective, it must (1) translate complex legal-procedural changes into accessible formats, (2) rebuild trust by addressing uncertainty and rumor, and (3) tailor strategies to underserved groups whose participation costs are highest. Yet systematic appraisals of content adequacy, audience alignment, and reform priorities remain sparse in the peer-reviewed literature, particularly for the 2020–2025 period (Ogunmokun et al., 2024). A user-friendly programme ensures that content is simplified without diluting meaning, delivered through resonant channels, and structured to encourage active participation. Language of instruction,

visual presentation, timing, and audience-specific adaptation all determine whether messages translate into informed electoral behaviour (Nwali & Nwogbaga, 2019). This is especially important as Nigeria grapples with voter apathy, misinformation, and declining trust in electoral institutions. However, logistical inefficiencies, limited outreach, and weak grassroots engagement continue to undermine implementation.

Nigeria's evolving political terrain demands more technologically integrated strategies. Youth, in particular, consume information digitally, yet INEC relies heavily on traditional media such as radio jingles, pamphlets, and town hall meetings. Without a complementary digital strategy and strong monitoring mechanisms, the impact of these programmes remains limited. Equally concerning is the issue of political neutrality. INEC's messages are often viewed with skepticism, particularly in volatile regions, reducing their legitimacy (Nweke et al., 2020; Fikejzová & Charvát, 2025). A voter education programme that lacks public trust cannot engender the transformative civic engagement Nigeria requires (Odionye et al., 2024). INEC's current voter education approach appears overly centralized and short-term, prioritizing pre-election awareness over continuous civic education. While partnerships exist with CSOs, media houses, and development partners, they often lack coherence and sustainability. For Nigeria to build durable democratic citizenship, there is a compelling need to appraise voter education content, ensure stronger audience alignment, and explore reform prospects for greater effectiveness.

Research Objectives

The study specifically assessed.

1. Adequacy of the content of INEC's voter education programmes (VEPs)
2. Audience alignment with VEPs in addressing the needs of the Nigerian electorate.
3. Key challenges inhibiting the effective implementation and reach of INEC's VEPs.
4. Major reforms prospects in rejigging INEC Voter Education Programmes for effective service delivery in Nigeria

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Context

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to appraise the adequacy of content and the alignment of audience needs in the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) voter education programmes (VEPs), as well as to explore reform prospects for enhancing their effectiveness. CDA was chosen because voter education texts, practices, and communications are not neutral; they are embedded in power relations, ideological positions, and institutional discourses that shape citizens' understanding and engagement. Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model which entails textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice, aligns directly with the research objectives by enabling the examination of (a) the linguistic and rhetorical construction of VEP materials, (b) the processes through which these materials are produced and interpreted by stakeholders, and (c) the broader socio-political and cultural structures that influence their effectiveness. The design is appropriate because it allows for a deep interrogation of institutional communications, stakeholders' interpretations, and citizens' lived experiences, thereby bridging theory and practice in electoral education.

Study Location

The study was conducted in Ondo City, Nigeria, specifically in Ondo West and Ondo East Local Government Areas (LGAs). These LGAs were purposively selected due to their urban-rural mix, religious and ethnic diversity, history of election-related violence in the past six general elections, and reputation for relatively high voter literacy. This setting provided a varied and context-rich backdrop for understanding how different socio-political and cultural factors shape the design, implementation, and reception of VEPs.

Population, Sampling, and Recruitment

The population comprised INEC officials, civil society organizations (CSOs) involved in civic education, community leaders, educators, religious leaders, media practitioners, political party representatives, National Orientation Agency (NOA) staff, election observer groups, and ordinary voters, including youth, women, rural dwellers, and persons with disabilities (PWDs). A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants who were either knowledgeable in electoral matters, directly involved in the voting process, or directly affected by INEC's voter education programmes. The unit of analysis consisted of both texts (official INEC voter education materials) and stakeholder interviews. A total of eighteen participants were purposively selected to represent the key stakeholder groups central to voter education in Nigeria. These included three INEC officials from the Voter

Education and Publicity Department, each with experience spanning at least the last two general elections; two representatives of civil society organizations actively engaged in civic education campaigns; two community leaders and traditional rulers; two religious leaders drawn from faith-based institutions; and two media practitioners with established experience in covering elections.

In addition, the sample comprised two political party representatives, two officials from the National Orientation Agency (NOA), two educators and school administrators, and one representative of local election observers. Recruitment was carried out through formal requests to INEC, CSOs, and community institutions. This process was complemented by snowball referrals to reach grassroots participants. The principle of data saturation guided the determination of the final sample size, which was reached once no new themes emerged from the interviews. Data for the study were collected from two primary sources. The first comprised institutional texts, specifically INEC's official voter education materials; including pamphlets, flyers, manuals, jingles, press releases, and online campaigns, produced for the 2019 and 2023 general elections. These documents were purposively selected because they reflect both the content and communication strategies employed by the Commission. The second source consisted of semi-structured interviews with the eighteen participants across the identified stakeholder groups. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, was audio-recorded with participants' consent, and conducted in either English or Yoruba depending on the respondent's preference. The interview guide focused on participants' perceptions of the adequacy, inclusivity, and relevance of voter education content, as well as their recommendations for reform.

Data Analysis

The study adopted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, which proceeded at three interrelated levels. At the textual level, attention was given to the coding of texts for vocabulary, grammar, and rhetorical devices. This enabled the identification of recurring terms, metaphors, and silences that revealed underlying ideological positioning within the voter education materials. At the discursive practice level, the analysis examined how these texts were produced, disseminated, and interpreted by INEC and other stakeholders, allowing for a comparison between institutional intentions and participants' perceptions. Finally, at the level of social practice, the findings were situated within broader socio-political contexts, linking emerging patterns to issues of power, marginalization, and prospects for electoral reform. To operationalize this, thematic analysis was applied to interview transcripts, generating categories such as inclusiveness, relevance, clarity, accessibility, and reform prospects. The analytical process involved several iterative steps: first, familiarization with the texts and transcripts through repeated reading; second, open coding to capture recurring patterns; third, grouping codes into themes aligned with the CDA dimensions; and fourth, interpretation through constant comparison across stakeholder categories and textual sources. These stages culminated in the integration of findings into wider discourses on electoral reform in Nigeria. A qualitative software used throughout the process to facilitate systematic coding, theme development, and retrieval of supporting evidence. This combination of textual, discursive, and social practice analysis ensured a holistic understanding of how voter education content both reflects and reproduces broader democratic challenges in Nigeria.

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study, several strategies were systematically employed. First, triangulation was carried out by drawing on multiple data sources, including INEC texts, diverse stakeholder groups, and interview perspectives. This allowed for cross-verification and a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with a subset of participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations and ensure that their voices were authentically represented. Third, peer debriefing was undertaken, whereby the coding framework and emerging themes were reviewed by two colleagues with expertise in discourse analysis and electoral studies, providing critical feedback that strengthened analytic validity. In addition, an audit trail was maintained, documenting coding decisions, analytic memos, and iterative changes to enhance transparency and allow for external scrutiny of the research process. Reflexivity was also prioritised; the researcher kept a reflexive journal to record positionality, underlying assumptions, and reflections on how these may have shaped the interpretations. Collectively, these measures enhanced the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study, thereby ensuring a rigorous and trustworthy account of the challenges and reform prospects in INEC's voter education programmes.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through the semi-structured In-depth Interviews. The In-depth Interview Guide (IIG) was designed to elicit information from stakeholders. Section A seeks to obtain demographic data, while Section B has five items revolving around core items. It was guided by a flexible protocol that covers key themes such as content adequacy, audience alignment, challenges, and reforms prospects of INEC VEP. For face and content validity of its instrument, it was shown to the experts in the areas of test and measurement, political science, and civic

engagement for corrections on the suitability of the content and language of presentation. Also, INEC Document Analysis was conducted on relevant documents such as INEC's voter education manuals, election guidelines, public outreach materials, press releases, and policy briefs to assess the stated content and principles guiding voter education

Data Analysis

The interview data were first transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis, which provided a systematic approach for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with repeated readings of the transcripts to achieve familiarity with the content, followed by initial coding that captured significant phrases, expressions, and viewpoints related to the research questions. These codes were then collated, compared, and refined into broader categories, which served as the foundation for generating themes. Thematic analysis was particularly suited for this study because of its flexibility in accommodating diverse perspectives while offering a structured means to interpret complex narratives around voter education. Through iterative coding and theme development, issues such as the content relevance of INEC's voter education programmes, their timeliness, and inclusiveness emerged as dominant themes. These themes were critically examined in relation to participants' perceptions and lived experiences, allowing for nuanced insights into the strengths and limitations of INEC's Voter Education Programmes (VEP). To enhance the credibility of the analysis, coding and theme refinement were reviewed by two colleagues with expertise in discourse analysis and electoral studies. This peer debriefing process ensured that the interpretations were not solely dependent on the researcher's perspective but reflected a broader scholarly validation.

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered strictly to ethical standards guiding qualitative research. Participants were informed of the purpose of the research and provided informed consent before participation. It is to be noted that conditions of anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were guaranteed throughout the research process. In the same vein, no participant was coerced or influenced unduly, and the data collected were used solely for academic purposes. Ethical approval was obtained from the researchers' institutional review board

RESULT

Research question 1: To what extent is the content of INEC's voter education programmes relevant and comprehensive in promoting electoral literacy?

Analysis of the interviews revealed a consistent perception among stakeholders that INEC's voter education content is inadequate in depth, scope, and inclusivity. While most acknowledged that INEC provides useful procedural information, there was consensus that the content does not sufficiently build robust electoral literacy. One INEC official admitted that voter education materials "provide general information about voting procedures, dates, and rules," but lamented that the content "lacks depth" and fails to cover critical issues such as vote buying, disinformation, or post-election responsibilities. This comment is significant because it explains how even insiders recognize that the programme prioritizes surface-level awareness rather than deeper civic education. The broader implication is that procedural voter education may equip citizens with the "how" of voting, but not the "why," leaving gaps in political empowerment and accountability. Civil society perspectives reinforced this limitation. A CSO representative described INEC's voter education as "repetitive and overly focused on procedural aspects." This illustrates a recurring theme: the overemphasis on mechanics of voting at the expense of fostering democratic consciousness. If citizens only learn how to register and cast ballots without understanding how to monitor elections or hold leaders accountable, voter education risks becoming transactional rather than transformational, thereby weakening democratic consolidation.

Youth stakeholders particularly emphasized relevance gaps. A youth leader described the content as "rudimentary" and disconnected from issues that matter to young people, such as digital participation, employment-linked political decisions, and policy outcomes. This observation illustrates a pattern of generational misalignment, where institutional voter education fails to resonate with the priorities of the largest voting demographic. The implication is that youth disengagement may deepen if voter education continues to neglect issues that connect politics to everyday realities in the 21st century. Women and persons with disabilities (PWDs) drew attention to inclusivity deficits. A rural woman explained that pamphlets she received only indicated where to vote, without information about parties or candidate plans, limiting her ability to make informed electoral choices. Similarly, a PWD advocate stressed that voter education content was "not just inadequate; it's not inclusive," citing the absence of accessible formats for blind, deaf, or physically challenged persons. These

perspectives reveal a pattern of systematic exclusion in content design, which risks disenfranchising vulnerable groups and undermines equity in electoral participation.

Religious and academic stakeholders further broadened the critique. A religious leader observed that voter education is currently “too transactional, not transformational,” while an educator lamented the lack of ideological and historical grounding to help citizens situate democracy as a system. Both comments underscore a critical gap: voter education is not fostering long-term civic culture or political maturity. The implication here is profound—without embedding moral, ideological, and contextual dimensions, voter education may fail to sustain democratic values beyond immediate electoral cycles.

Synthesis of Themes and Broader Implications

The findings across stakeholder groups revealed three dominant patterns. First, INEC’s voter education content was found to be heavily procedural, focusing primarily on the technical steps of voting. While this provides citizens with basic instructions on how to cast their ballots, it neglects deeper issues such as accountability, disinformation, and citizen empowerment, which are central to fostering a robust democratic culture. Second, there were significant gaps in relevance across demographic groups. Youths, women, and rural dwellers often perceived the content as detached from their lived realities, which contributed to disengagement and reduced trust in the programmes. Third, the exclusion of vulnerable populations, particularly persons with disabilities (PWDs) and marginalized communities, was a recurring concern. The lack of accessible formats and inclusive design highlighted systemic shortcomings in ensuring that all citizens benefit equally from voter education. These findings carry wider implications for Nigeria’s electoral process and democratic development. The inadequacy of INEC’s voter education programmes has consequences for electoral literacy, transparency, and institutional legitimacy. Without comprehensive and relevant content, citizens risk remaining passive voters rather than empowered democratic participants. Similarly, the exclusion of marginalized groups perpetuates structural inequalities by denying them equal access to civic knowledge and participation. Furthermore, the persistence of surface-level, procedural content suggests an institutional bias toward preserving electoral order rather than promoting transformative democratic engagement. INEC’s voter education programmes offer a foundational level of procedural literacy, they fall short of equipping Nigerians with the broader knowledge, skills, and values necessary for meaningful participation in democratic governance.

Research question 2: Are voters aligned with INEC’s Voter Education Programmes (VEPs) in addressing the needs for participation in Nigerian elections?

The analysis revealed mixed perceptions of alignment between INEC’s voter education programmes and the diverse needs of Nigerian voters. While some stakeholders acknowledged efforts to provide inclusive and gender-sensitive content, the majority emphasized misalignment, limited accessibility, and inadequate tailoring of messages to different voter groups. An INEC official candidly noted that materials are often developed for a generic “Nigerian voter,” admitting that *“better data and profiling could help align messages to specific groups.”* This acknowledgement explains an institutional challenge that sees voter education is treated as a one-size-fits-all project rather than being segmented to address specific demographics. The implication is that generic messaging undermines effectiveness, as it fails to resonate with the lived realities of different audiences. Young voters, in particular, pointed out the digital gap. A university student argued that *“messages don’t align with how we consume content. We’re on social media, not just listening to the radio.”* Similarly, an urban youth described INEC’s online presence as *“limited and boring.”* These perspectives illustrate a generational mismatch: while Nigerian youths are digitally engaged, voter education remains anchored in traditional platforms. The broader implication is that ignoring digital engagement risks alienating the largest and most politically volatile demographic.

CSOs and grassroots voices stressed the exclusion of vulnerable populations. A CSO worker highlighted that *“displaced persons, migrants, [and] women in purdah”* are rarely considered in content design, while a market woman explained that messages *“don’t speak to my life”* or connect voting to her daily struggles. These reflections point to a recurring theme: content is not contextualized to everyday socio-economic realities. If voter education does not connect elections to livelihoods, safety, or community welfare, alignment with citizens’ priorities remains weak. Issues of accessibility were repeatedly raised by persons with disabilities (PWDs). A PWD leader emphasized that *“when content is not designed for all audiences, it becomes exclusionary,”* and another advocate lamented the absence of braille, sign language, and audio versions. These statements reveal systemic exclusion, where equity (tailoring content to different groups) is mistaken for equality (distributing the same message to all). The implication is that INEC’s programmes inadvertently marginalize groups that already face political barriers, contradicting democratic ideals of inclusivity.

Community leaders and educators pointed to the importance of localisation and trusted messengers. A traditional leader stressed that *“people listen more to what we say in the palace than what’s on a poster,”* while a religious

leader emphasised the role of community voices in gaining trust. These comments explain that alignment is not only about *what* is communicated but also *who* communicates it. Similarly, a teacher suggested adapting content for schools, explaining the need for age-appropriate civic education to instill early democratic consciousness. On the positive side, some respondents acknowledged that INEC has attempted inclusivity in terms of language and gender representation. A woman participant noted that pamphlets and flyers are produced in major Nigerian languages, such as in Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, and Pidgin English, and that pictorial representations are gender-neutral and accessible to a broad age range. This suggests that while language translation and basic inclusivity are addressed, deeper issues of cultural relevance, socio-economic connection, and accessibility for marginalised populations remain unresolved.

Synthesis of Themes and Broader Implications

The analysis of participants' views revealed three recurring patterns. First, INEC's voter education programmes were characterized by generic messaging that failed to recognize the diversity of the electorate. By designing content for a "general voter," the programmes often overlooked the distinct needs of groups such as youth, rural women, displaced persons, and persons with disabilities (PWDs). Second, significant platform and delivery gaps were identified. While youth and urban respondents highlighted the underutilization of digital platforms such as social media, mobile applications, and interactive videos, rural and grassroots participants stressed the importance of localized formats, including folk drama, dialect translations, and radio skits, which would resonate more directly with their communities. Third, challenges of accessibility and inclusivity were repeatedly emphasized. Despite some progress in translating materials into local languages, voter education was still exclusionary for PWDs and for communities with unique cultural and socio-economic realities.

These patterns have broader implications for Nigeria's democratic development. Audience misalignment weakens the capacity of voter education to effectively promote participation, as generic messaging privileges institutional convenience over meaningful engagement. Similarly, the limited use of digital platforms risks alienating technologically inclined youth, while insufficient accessibility measures perpetuate structural inequalities that marginalize vulnerable groups. Although efforts such as gender-neutral representation and multilingual pamphlets represent modest gains, they remain inadequate in addressing deeper concerns of inclusivity, contextual relevance, and equity. In sum, the findings suggest that while INEC's voter education programmes demonstrate some intent toward broad suitability, they fall short of aligning fully with the lived realities of Nigeria's diverse electorate. Without deliberate reforms that prioritise strategic segmentation, localised delivery, and inclusive design, voter education risks reinforcing apathy and exclusion rather than fostering active democratic participation.

Research question 2: What are the major challenges facing the effective delivery of voter education in Nigeria?

The qualitative analysis revealed that the delivery of INEC's Voter Education Programme (VEP) is hindered by structural, institutional, and operational challenges. These include inadequate funding, limited staff capacity, poor timing, weak collaboration, lack of inclusivity, and broader systemic governance issues. While participants highlighted different dimensions of the problem, a consistent narrative emerged: voter education remains underfunded, reactive, and poorly adapted to Nigeria's diverse socio-political realities. Funding and resource shortages were repeatedly identified as critical obstacles. An INEC officer explained that "funding delays and limitations" disrupt planning, material production, and outreach, while a CSO partner described budget discrepancies between allocated and released funds. These observations point to a systemic problem of financial inconsistency and leakage, which not only undermines programme effectiveness but also erodes trust in electoral institutions. The broader implication is that without sustainable and transparent funding, voter education risks being piecemeal and ineffective.

Institutional capacity constraints further complicate delivery. Participants highlighted inadequate staffing, over-reliance on ad hoc workers, and insufficient training for those tasked with delivering education. For instance, an INEC staff member noted "inadequate members of staff, finance issues, delay in decision making... [and] the use-and-dump of ad hoc staff." Such reliance weakens institutional memory and continuity. The implication is that voter education cannot achieve long-term impact when it depends on temporary personnel without sustained expertise. Timing and irregularity of programmes also emerged as significant concerns. A rural woman explained that voter information often arrives only a few days before elections, making it ineffective in shaping participation. Similarly, a political analyst criticized the reactive nature of VEPs, which "spike near elections and fade after." These perspectives reveal that short-term, event-driven approaches undermine the cultivation of democratic culture, reducing voter education to an electoral ritual rather than an ongoing civic process. Trust and perception issues also weaken the impact of voter education. A media practitioner emphasized that "many young people believe voter education is propaganda," reflecting a credibility gap between INEC and its intended audience. This

skepticism reduces the willingness of citizens, especially youths, to engage with VEP messages. Without addressing institutional trust deficits, even well-crafted content may fail to change attitudes or behaviours.

Inclusion and accessibility were also noted as recurring challenges. A PWD representative lamented that INEC “rarely includes us in the planning phase,” while another stressed the absence of accessible formats for persons with disabilities. Youths and rural participants added that VEPs rarely penetrate hard-to-reach areas or reflect local realities, leaving large segments of the population excluded. These observations highlight systemic inequities in programme design and delivery, undermining the democratic principle of equal participation. Finally, wider governance issues, including corruption, weak political will, and lack of government support, were seen as fundamental barriers. Respondents described how approved budgets were sometimes “cornered by political merchants” and how corruption within agencies impeded proper execution. Others argued that government pays “lip service” to civic education, mirroring failures in other sectors like higher education. These accounts suggest that voter education challenges are not merely operational but are symptoms of deeper governance weaknesses in Nigeria’s democratic system.

Synthesis of Themes and Broader Implications

The findings from participants’ perspectives highlight five dominant patterns shaping the challenges of INEC’s voter education programmes. First, financial constraints and corruption emerged as a recurring concern. Delayed, inadequate, or mismanaged funding was reported to undermine effective planning and delivery, often leaving programmes poorly resourced and inconsistent. Second, institutional weaknesses such as a shortage of trained staff, dependence on ad hoc personnel, and bureaucratic bottlenecks were identified as key barriers that compromise programme quality and sustainability. Third, timing and irregularity of initiatives were emphasized. Voter education is typically reactive and concentrated around election periods, rather than being sustained as a continuous civic culture. Fourth, trust and credibility deficits were noted, particularly among youth, who often perceive voter education messages as biased, propagandistic, or disconnected from their realities. Finally, exclusion and accessibility gaps remain persistent. Vulnerable groups—including rural dwellers, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and internally displaced persons—are disproportionately underserved, revealing systemic inequities in programme design and delivery.

Taken together, these patterns reveal that the limitations of INEC’s voter education are not isolated technical challenges but are deeply embedded within Nigeria’s broader structural and institutional weaknesses. Resource inadequacies, weak institutional capacity, and exclusionary practices restrict the reach and inclusiveness of the programmes. At the same time, governance deficits such as corruption, lack of transparency, and weak political will undermine credibility and erode public trust. The cumulative effect is a voter education system that primarily reinforces procedural participation, teaching citizens how to vote, but falls short of cultivating the deeper knowledge, skills, and values required for empowered and engaged democratic citizenship. Unless these systemic and structural barriers are deliberately addressed, INEC’s voter education risks remaining a symbolic exercise rather than a transformative tool for democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Research question 4: What are the major reform prospects in rejigging INEC Voter Education Programmes for effective service delivery in Nigeria?

The analysis revealed a shared recognition among stakeholders that INEC’s voter education requires a fundamental shift from ad hoc awareness campaigns to systemic civic learning frameworks. For instance, an INEC senior official noted ongoing initiatives to integrate civic education into the national curriculum and expand digital platforms, signalling institutional awareness of the need for long-term reform (Respondent 1). This shows a move towards embedding electoral literacy structurally rather than treating it as a seasonal activity. The implication is that voter education could evolve into a sustained civic habit, particularly if linked with formal schooling. CSO executives and community leaders, however, emphasised co-creation and decentralisation as critical reform prospects (Respondents 2 & 5). Their argument explains that reforms will be ineffective if they remain top-down. Instead, inclusivity in the design phase, youth, women, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and educators contributing directly, ensures both ownership and relevance. This reflects broader democratic values of participation and transparency, suggesting that institutional power must be more collaborative for effective voter education.

Digital media experts and youth influencers pushed for digital-first strategies, such as mobile-friendly apps, interactive videos, gamified learning, and influencer-led civic campaigns (Respondents 3 & 6). Their emphasis explains the reality of Nigeria’s youthful, tech-savvy demographic, where digital engagement could bridge gaps left by traditional methods. These reforms reflect a pattern of shifting from passive to interactive learning, potentially countering youth apathy. Similarly, educators and religious leaders underscored the need for long-term civic education blueprints, rooted in schools, communities, and faith-based institutions (Respondent 4). This proposal

illustrates a recognition that electoral literacy should be continuous, not reactive to election cycles. It also suggests that institutional partnerships will be central to achieving a sustainable culture of electoral participation. Finally, PWD advocates reiterated the principle of universal design (Respondent 7). Their input stresses that any reform not accessible to all citizens is inherently exclusionary. This aligns with global discourses on inclusive governance, showing that equity is not an optional reform but a fundamental condition for legitimacy.

Deductions and Implications

The study's findings point to four interconnected reform prospects that could reshape the effectiveness of voter education in Nigeria. First, there is a pressing need to institutionalise civic education through school curricula and sustained long-term planning, ensuring that democratic values and electoral literacy become embedded in everyday learning rather than episodic interventions. Second, the design of voter education content must become more inclusive and participatory, reflecting the diversity of voices across Nigeria's socio-cultural and political spectrum. Third, the adoption of digital innovation and youth-focused strategies is essential for enhancing engagement, particularly given the demographic weight and technological orientation of Nigeria's younger population. Finally, universal accessibility remains critical. Prioritising the needs of marginalised groups, especially persons with disabilities (PWDs), will help dismantle entrenched inequities in political participation. The implication of these findings is twofold. On the one hand, failure to adopt such reforms risks trapping INEC in recurring cycles of low-impact, procedural voter education that teaches the mechanics of voting without nurturing deeper democratic competencies. On the other hand, embracing these reform pathways holds the potential to transform voter education programmes into a cornerstone of Nigeria's democratic consolidation. By fostering informed participation, strengthening trust in electoral institutions, and building resilience against disinformation and malpractice, such reforms could reposition voter education as a transformative instrument for inclusive and sustainable democratic governance.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Content Adequacy of INEC's Voter Education Programmes

The content of the INEC Voter Education Programme (VEP) was not adequate. This means that the content of INEC voter education is not good enough to help attain INEC VEP objectives, as well as the promotion of knowledge of a sound democratic electoral process. The findings of the study agreed with those of Osayi (2024), who claimed that adequate voter education is a veritable vehicle for positive electoral outcomes. Ochi et al. (2023) argued that a political education programme significantly relates to political participation. Oyoru (2023) corroborated the finding of the study that an adequate voter education programme mobilizes the cognitive capacity and efficacy of individuals to process complex political events or information and engage actively in political activities. It could be deduced from their findings that political education is a platform for enhanced political skills, knowledge, and participation in democracy; thus, it is sacrosanct to ensure that the content of any voter education is adequate. von Borzyskowski and Kuhn (2020) stated that electoral competition is becoming more common, and the need for an adequate voter education programme cannot be overemphasized. The implication of this is that voters are likely to be erroneously informed, thus the advocacy of the content of the voter education programme is likely to guide against some of the erroneous teachings.

The findings of the study are at variance with those of Ubong (2024) and Ochi et al. (2023), who found an increased polarization along ethnic-religious and political divides, which does not give room for adequate voter education. That is, voter education content is likely to be affected by people's sentiments arising from their ethnic and religious worldview. It has been accepted in wider climes that democracy should be a celebration of the informed and involved public, but findings from Nweke and Etido-Inyang (2020). is at variance with this assertion. The study found that democracy as a system of government guarantees popular participation, and it also institutionalizes competition, hence people strive to attain political power at all costs. This negates the need for a voter education programme, whether adequate or not. By implication, INEC voter education content needs to be widened in terms of making citizens see the reason why involvement is not tantamount to ultimate holding of political power or positions

This implies that the contents of INEC Voter Education could be enriched. When this is done, it is likely to reduce election-related violence as well as cushion the effects it has on electoral outcomes, such as invalid votes cast and declining voter turnout. The finding of the study agrees with the theory of Cognitive Mobilisation of Political Literacy and Political Participation, which was used in the study, that political education (CMPLPP, 1984) has strong positive effects on the electoral process, thereby reducing the costs, as well as increasing citizens' interest in exhibiting right behaviour and participating in politics before, during and after elections. Also, the findings of the study confirmed Kristine Hoglund's Analytical framework for Election-related Violence model (2009), which

stated that an ill-prepared political orientation and mobilisation programme is likely to produce citizens who are not rooted in positive voting practices, knowledge of electoral concepts, themes, generalisations, and topics. This implies that the voting population is likely to be lopsided in the electoral system, or simply put, participating in elections and other civil activities may be difficult. Thus, with this, the voting populations are likely to enforce participation using violence or even be paid to foment trouble before, during, and after elections.

The findings suggest that the content of INEC's voter education programmes, while informative in procedural terms, lacks the depth, comprehensiveness, and transformative focus necessary for meaningful electoral literacy. Across interviews with INEC officials, civil society actors, and voter groups, a consensus emerged that current materials are primarily focused on voting logistics—how to register, where to vote, and what constitutes valid voting. While these are necessary, they are insufficient for building democratic citizenship. For instance, several respondents noted that voter education content does not delve into the broader implications of political participation, such as understanding the policy positions of candidates, post-election accountability, or resisting electoral manipulation like vote-buying. This aligns with Ogunmokun et al. (2024), who posit that voter education in Nigeria has remained overly administrative, limiting its transformative potential. Furthermore, youth and academic respondents pointed out the absence of ideological engagement, suggesting that INEC's content fails to encourage critical political thinking or civic empowerment. This gap implies a narrow conceptualization of voter education that prioritizes electoral event management over sustained democratic culture-building. In essence, content adequacy is currently defined in operational rather than educational terms, indicating a need for expansion. A more adequate content framework would incorporate civic values, democratic norms, policy literacy, and post-election engagement, enabling citizens to move from knowledge to action.

Audience Alignment and Message Resonance with INEC VEPs

The findings further demonstrate that INEC's voter education often fails to align effectively with the informational needs and media habits of its various audience segments. Respondents repeatedly emphasized that current messaging is delivered in uniform formats to a heterogeneous population, thereby diluting its resonance. This is in line with the works of Odionye et al. (2024). This is because audience alignment requires recognizing that the Nigerian electorate is stratified along age, gender, literacy, geography, disability status, and socio-economic lines. Yet INEC largely deploys a generalized approach, which limits its effectiveness. For instance, market women noted that they received pamphlets without contextual explanation or relevance to their daily struggles, making the message seem irrelevant. Similarly, young people observed that the voter education materials do not consider their political anxieties or use the platforms they frequent. The study revealed a significant misalignment between the content, messenger, and medium. This position was confirmed by the works of Musa (2023) and Ochi et al. (2023).

Traditional leaders and religious institutions, who command high levels of trust in many communities, are underutilized as conduits for voter education. Likewise, the potential for peer education, especially among youth and women's groups, remains largely untapped. The lack of demographic targeting suggests a knowledge gap within INEC regarding audience profiling. Without data on how different groups consume information, what issues resonate with them, and what barriers they face, voter education becomes a one-size-fits-all approach. The implication is that voter education must be reimagined as a relational, not just informational, process, one that adapts to its audience rather than assuming their uniformity. Another major finding concerns the limited suitability of INEC's voter education content across Nigeria's diverse population. Respondents consistently argued that current materials do not effectively address the linguistic, cultural, educational, and physical needs of different audience groups. This lack of adaptation contributes to political exclusion.

For example, persons with disabilities (PWDs) highlighted the near absence of materials in Braille, audio, or sign language formats, thereby reinforcing systemic marginalization. This is a violation of Section 30 of the 2018 INEC Framework on Access and Participation of Persons with Disabilities. Similarly, respondents from rural and traditional communities lamented the excessive use of English in voter education materials, suggesting that critical information often fails to penetrate grassroots populations who speak predominantly local languages. Youth respondents further criticized the formal and outdated tone of INEC's messaging, noting that it fails to resonate with digital natives who prefer visual, interactive, and mobile-friendly content. This supports Mohammed et al. (2024), who observed that the disconnection between INEC's voter education approach and emerging media consumption habits undermines youth engagement.

The findings, therefore, indicate that content suitability remains low, not necessarily due to lack of effort, but due to insufficient customization, innovation, and inclusivity in content development. For content to be suitable, it must speak directly to the lived realities, preferences, and capacities of target groups.

Challenges Facing INEC Voter Education Programmes

The analysis of the qualitative interview for INEC Voter education staff members revealed that inadequate members of staff, finance issue, delay in decision making in terms of approval of policies and programmes designed to be carried out, the use-and-dump of ad hoc staff, who have been rooted in the process of disseminating and mobilising citizens about specifics and mechanics of elections were some of challenges affect INEC Voter education programme. This implies that insufficient material resources, little or no support from government, inadequate staff members, and difficulty in accessing some of the difficult terrains, such as the hard-to-reach areas, as well as the riverine were top-ranked challenges facing the INEC Voter Education Programme in Southwestern Nigeria. Okon (2014) stated that electricity supplies, insufficient materials, poor timing, people's attitude to voter education programmes, limited personnel, and poor remuneration are some of the challenges to INEC voter education programmes. The study also agrees with Ijeh and Abimbola (2023), who stated that the efficacy of the programme can promote sound knowledge and democratic practices if properly sustained with the provisions of needed manpower and resources to galvanise the process. In the administration of elections in Nigeria's fourth republic, Boeke (2012) found that INEC is being challenged by several factors, among which are financial and security issues of their facilities as well as frontline workers.

Challenges confronting INEC's voter education initiatives are multifaceted, ranging from institutional inefficiencies to strategic limitations. Participants identified chronic underfunding and late budgetary releases as primary constraints, often resulting in delayed production and dissemination of educational materials. INEC officials admitted that such delays hinder proactive planning, forcing last-minute campaigns that have limited reach and depth. Moreover, respondents from CSOs and the media pointed out a lack of strategic coordination between INEC and other key stakeholders. This fragmented approach often leads to duplication of efforts and inefficient resource use. Despite having community-based organizations with deep-rooted grassroots access, INEC's engagement with such actors remains ad hoc and under-optimized.

Another recurring issue was the episodic nature of voter education. Most programmes spike during election cycles and quickly disappear afterward. This cyclical model fails to support the long-term cultivation of civic consciousness. As Igiebor (2022). asserts, democratic education must be continuous, not event-driven, to foster sustainable civic engagement. There is also a trust deficit. Youth and civil society respondents noted that a segment of the electorate perceives INEC's voter education efforts as state propaganda rather than neutral civic engagement. This perception, whether accurate or not, diminishes the credibility and reception of messages. The lack of participatory design also reinforces this gap between producer and audience, limiting effectiveness. Together, these challenges reveal an ecosystem that lacks strategic coherence, sustainability, and community ownership, which are factors that must be addressed if INEC's voter education is to be impactful.

Reform Prospects and Future Directions for INEC Voter Education

Amidst the critiques, the study also uncovered a strong appetite for reform both within INEC and among its stakeholders. There was widespread agreement that voter education must transition from a narrow focus on election procedures to a more holistic model of civic and democratic education. This was in line with the position of Ochi et al. (2023) and Ijeh and Abimbola, (2023). It is believed that key reform propositions include the institutionalization of civic education beyond the election period. Scholars and CSOs suggested integrating electoral literacy into school curricula and civic clubs, thereby cultivating informed citizens from a young age. This aligns with the argument of Mudau (2022), who advocates for a shift from sporadic voter sensitization to a national culture of civic learning. Another major reform prospect lies in digital transformation. Respondents recommended that INEC develop mobile applications, gamified learning tools, and social media campaigns tailored for youth engagement. This would require partnerships with tech firms, influencers, and content creators who can design messages that are both informative and entertaining.

Inclusivity also emerged as a core reform pillar. This position was supported by the works of Ubong (2024). Respondents from PWD communities demanded that all materials adhere to universal design principles. Additionally, rural-focused adaptations such as radio drama, town hall meetings, and local language translations were proposed to enhance reach and effectiveness. Stakeholders called for the institutionalization of participatory planning. This means involving representatives from youth groups, gender advocates, disability organizations, and traditional authorities in the co-creation of content. Such co-design would not only improve content relevance but also restore public trust. Finally, there is need for monitoring and evaluation systems. Respondents emphasized that voter education programmes must be routinely assessed for impact, using feedback loops to refine future interventions. Without evaluation, INEC risks recycling ineffective models. In sum, the findings suggest a clear roadmap for reform: one that prioritizes inclusive content development, audience-responsive strategies, continuous civic learning, and collaborative governance. These are not just technical changes but structural shifts towards a more participatory and democratic model of electoral education.

Implications of the Study

1. INEC should embed inclusivity benchmarks (youth, women, PWDs, IDPs) into all VEP designs and reporting, making them measurable indicators of programme success.
2. Partnerships with community-based organisations, religious groups, and youth movements can extend VEP reach to rural and marginalized constituencies.
3. VEP must explicitly address digital literacy, misinformation, and electoral technology (BVAS/IREV) to build voter confidence.
4. Future studies should empirically evaluate the effectiveness of VEP across different Nigerian regions, using mixed methods to capture citizen comprehension and trust outcomes.
5. Insights from Nigeria can inform African peers where electoral commissions face similar challenges of inclusivity, low trust, and digital transition.

CONCLUSION

This study critically examined the content adequacy, audience alignment, challenges, and reform prospects of the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) voter education programmes in Nigeria. Against the backdrop of persistent electoral apathy, misinformation, and uneven civic engagement, the study explored how INEC's voter education programmes are perceived, structured, and deployed, especially within the Nigerian democratic environment. Results revealed that INEC's voter education efforts are largely operational, focusing more on the mechanics of voting than on cultivating enduring civic consciousness. While these initiatives provide basic information on registration, voting processes, and electoral timelines, they often neglect deeper civic themes such as political accountability, critical electoral choice, democratic values, and post-election engagement. The study further established that the content is insufficiently patterned to Nigeria's diverse characteristics, thereby limiting its effectiveness across groups such as youths, women, persons with disabilities, and rural communities.

Building on the argument outlined in the introduction is that electoral literacy must be redefined beyond procedural knowledge to encompass inclusivity, technology comprehension, and resilience against disinformation, the analysis confirms that while INEC has made progress in content coverage, serious challenges remain. First, the adequacy of content was mixed: voters were provided with essential guidance on procedures such as BVAS accreditation and IREv uploads, but the clarity and completeness of this content varied, leaving gaps in citizen comprehension. Second, audience alignment was uneven: while urban voters and media-connected groups were engaged, rural citizens, young first-time voters, persons with disabilities, and internally displaced persons were insufficiently reached, reproducing inequities already flagged by earlier scholarship. Third, the reform prospects are promising but contingent: INEC's Strategic Plan (2022–2026) and post-election reviews signal institutional commitment, yet effective reforms will depend on embedding inclusivity standards, expanding digital literacy, and tackling information disorder head-on.

These findings reaffirm earlier studies on electoral trust and turnout in Nigeria, which suggest that information provision alone is insufficient to secure participation and confidence. By situating VEP within the broader democratic consolidation agenda, this study explains the importance of rethinking electoral literacy as a multidimensional capacity—legal, procedural, civic, and digital. The Institutional and structural challenges such as funding delays, limited stakeholder coordination, and sporadic implementation further weaken the impact of voter education. Additionally, INEC's communication strategies often suffer from weak audience alignment, outdated messaging formats, and limited use of trusted messengers or emerging digital platforms. The study has uncovered robust reform prospects, particularly around content innovation, inclusive design, digital transformation, sustained civic education, and participatory governance in content development. In essence, redefining electoral literacy requires a shift from event-based voter sensitization to a continuous, inclusive, and transformative civic learning framework. INEC must reimagine its voter education model as a dynamic tool for democratic deepening, one that empowers all segments of the Nigerian electorate to not only participate in elections but also engage in governance meaningfully and consistently.

Limitations of the Study

This study focused on two selected local government areas due to resource and time constraints. As such, the findings may not fully capture the variations in voter education experiences across all geopolitical zones in Nigeria. While efforts were made to interview INEC officials and grassroots stakeholders, access to some official documents and high-ranking electoral officers was limited. This may have restricted a more in-depth understanding of institutional policy decisions. Given the evolving nature of Nigeria's electoral processes and reforms, some developments or pilot innovations that emerged after data collection may not have been captured in the analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study provides significant information into how voter education programmes in Nigeria can be reformed to enhance civic engagement and electoral credibility.

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the support and contributions of many individuals and institutions. I am deeply grateful to the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) officials who granted interviews and provided access to relevant data and documentation, despite their busy schedules. I sincerely appreciate the civil society organizations, youth advocates, grassroots leaders, and persons with disabilities who participated in this study and shared their experiences and insights with honesty and enthusiasm. Their perspectives were invaluable in shaping the findings and recommendations of this research. Special thanks to my academic supervisors and mentors at the University of Ibadan, whose guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement sustained this study from inception to completion. I also extend my appreciation to the postgraduate research committee for their support and institutional facilitation.

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