Research paper

Relevant, Timely, and Inclusive? A Qualitative Appraisal of INEC's Voter Education Programme (VEP) in Ondo City, Nigeria

Timilehin Olayinka Omoniyi *

University of Ibadan, NIGERIA

Corresponding Author: timmylayinka@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Voter education programme (VEP) is fundamental to democratic consolidation as it equips citizens with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to participate meaningfully in electoral processes. In Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) is constitutionally mandated to design and implement voter education programmes. However, stakeholders' concerns persist regarding the content relevance, timeliness and inclusiveness of INEC VEP. The study was anchored on Cognitive Mobilisation Theory of Political Literacy and Participation. This study qualitatively appraised INEC's voter education initiatives to examine the extent to which they are contextually relevant, timely, and inclusive to Nigeria's diverse electorate. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with INEC officials, civil society actors, and community leaders. Document analysis of INEC's VEP materials and public outreach records complemented primary data sources. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and draw inferences from stakeholders' experiences. Result reveals that content often focuses narrowly on procedural aspects of voting while neglecting broader civic and political education which should align with local realities. Findings reveal that voter education programmes are predominantly ad hoc, and election-cycle driven, lacking continuity and early mobilisation. Moreover, inclusiveness remains partial, with limited reach to rural dwellers, youth, women, and persons with disabilities (PWDs). These limitations undermine voter awareness, confidence, and turnout, while creating opportunities for misinformation and electoral disengagement. The study concludes by recommending strategic reforms, including early planning, continuous civic engagement, participatory content development, and targeted inclusion strategies. These reforms are critical to strengthening Nigeria's democratic culture and enhancing the efficacy of INEC's voter education mandate.

Keywords: voter education programme (VEP), INEC, content relevance, inclusiveness, democratic consolidation

Elections are the cornerstone of democratic governance (Lin, 2023). In democratic societies, citizens are not only entitled to choose their leaders through periodic elections, but they are also expected to make informed and meaningful choices that reflect their values, preferences, and developmental aspirations (Ijeh & Abimbola, 2023; Norman & Eslami, 2023; Rochmansjah & Saputra, 2024). For this to occur, electorates must be sufficiently equipped with civic knowledge and electoral literacy. These functions are largely fulfilled through effective voter education. In Nigeria, the responsibility of voter education falls primarily on the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which is constitutionally mandated to undertake public enlightenment and civic education

(Omoniyi, 2022; 2023). Despite this responsibility, voter education programmes (VEP) in Nigeria have been plagued by several critical shortcomings, particularly concerning their content relevance, timeliness and inclusiveness. These folds have been identified as the three pillars that are essential for shaping an informed and participatory electorate.

Voter education is a critical component of democratic development, particularly in emerging democracies like Nigeria where electoral processes are often undermined by low political literacy, misinformation, voter apathy, and electoral violence (Nokshuwan, Abubakar, Gaadi & Bamgbade, 2020; Omoniyi, 2026). Despite repeated electoral cycles and growing investments by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in voter education, Nigeria continues to face fundamental challenges related to voter awareness, participation, and informed decision-making. The persistent prevalence of electoral malpractice, vote-buying, underage voting, invalid ballots, and poor voter turnout across several constituencies indicates that large segments of the Nigerian electorate may not be receiving or are not adequately internalising voter education messages. Although INEC has developed and implemented various voter education programmes using traditional media, social media, and community outreach mechanisms, questions abound regarding the content, relevance, timing, and inclusivity of these interventions.

For instance, voter education campaigns are often launched very close to election dates, leaving insufficient time for wide-reaching civic engagement, particularly in rural areas or among marginalized populations. Furthermore, the content is frequently criticized as too procedural or legalistic, failing to connect meaningfully with citizens' everyday realities, civic needs, or sociopolitical concerns (Nwali & Nwogbaga, 2019). In many instances, these campaigns are perceived as centrally driven and urban-focused, thereby excluding key demographics such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and internally displaced persons. Moreover, the strategies deployed by INEC for voter education appear inconsistent and lack sustained follow-up. In the same vein, the reliance on top-down approaches, limited community involvement, and weak collaboration with grassroots organizations and local stakeholders contribute to the disconnect between INEC and the electorate. Added to this are institutional and structural limitations such as inadequate funding, poor inter-agency coordination, and limited monitoring and evaluation frameworks, all of which constrain the effectiveness and reach of voter education efforts.

The increasing use of digital media and technology in political communication also presents both opportunities and challenges, particularly as INEC navigates issues of digital literacy, misinformation, and access inequality (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Despite the existence of a legal framework and institutional mandate for voter education, there is a notable lack of qualitative evidence that explores how INEC's voter education efforts are perceived, received, and experienced by the Nigerian public (Omoniyi 2026). Most existing studies focus on quantitative analyses of voter turnout or civic engagement levels without probing into the contextual and subjective realities of the target audiences. Consequently, there remains a critical gap in understanding the lived experiences of citizens in relation to the quality, timing, cultural suitability, and inclusiveness of voter education initiatives.

Relevance speaks to the resonance and practical applicability of voter education content in the lived realities of the intended audiences (Omoniyi, 2025). It is believed that INEC's voter education programme often provides procedural information such as how to register, how to vote, and what constitutes electoral offences (WFD & INEC, 2021). However, it was discovered by some scholars such as Osayi (2024) and Ochi, et al., (2023) that it rarely addresses why voting matters, what roles citizens play beyond election day, and how elections are linked to development outcomes. This overemphasis on mechanics at the expense of meaning results in a knowledge gap that impairs political consciousness and civic responsibility. In many communities, voter education materials are not contextualised to local realities (Adejumobi, 2010). For instance, regions with histories of electoral violence, ethno-religious tension, or high illiteracy may require customised voter education programmes that acknowledge and address their unique challenges. Yet, INEC often employs a uniform, top-down communication model that treats all constituencies as homogenous, thereby ignoring the cultural, social, and linguistic diversity of the Nigerian populace.

Another critical issue is the lack of participatory content development. It is discovered that several voter education programme materials are often designed by technocrats or communication consultants without sufficient input from grassroots stakeholders, local educators, community leaders, or target audiences. By implication, this detachment from the field produces messages that are sometimes out of touch, overly technical, or poorly received, reducing their effectiveness. Furthermore, the relevance of VEP is compromised by the absence of civic follow-up (Ilaya et al., 2023). VEP should ideally be integrated with wider civic education initiatives that promote political awareness, accountability, and governance literacy (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Fernández et al., 2024). However, INEC's VEP is frequently decoupled from post-election civic engagement, creating the false impression that citizenship ends with voting. This contributes to a narrow, transactional understanding of democracy that weakens political institutions and reduces public trust.

One of the most glaring challenges undermining the effectiveness of INEC's voter education is its lack of timeliness (Nwogbaga & Nwali, 2019). Ideally, voter education should be a continuous, year-round activity that not only prepares citizens for the mechanics of voting but also nurtures a culture of civic engagement, political participation, and democratic accountability. However, in Nigeria, voter education often assumes a reactive and event-driven character. This is typically rolled out only a few weeks or months before general elections. This reactive approach severely constrains the reach and depth of the education provided (Ogunmokun et al., 2024). The delayed initiation of voter education campaigns fails to provide ample time for public sensitisation, especially in rural and hard-to-reach areas where traditional information dissemination channels are weak. For example, communities with limited access to digital media or literacy resources are often the last to receive civic information, if at all. As a result, large swathes of the electorate remain uninformed or misinformed about critical electoral issues, such as voter registration procedures, polling unit locations, voting guidelines, and the importance of electoral integrity (Olatunji & Ayo, 2024).

Furthermore, the late commencement of voter education activities hinders collaboration with civil society organisations (CSOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and the media, all of whom require adequate time to mobilise resources, develop content, and execute outreach campaigns effectively. These constraints are even more acute during off-cycle and local elections, where voter education is sometimes non-existent or poorly executed due to limited planning time and reduced public interest (Stier et al., 2018). In essence, the lateness of voter education programme compromises their strategic impact, leading to widespread voter apathy, low turnout, and procedural errors such as invalid votes (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). It also opens the space for misinformation and disinformation to thrive, as electorates often fill the information void with unverified content, hearsay, and propaganda.

Another critical concern in VEP by INEC is the question of insclusivity. This implies that no segment of the population is excluded from receiving timely, relevant, and accessible electoral information. It also requires that VEP be sensitive to the diverse demographic, socio-economic, linguistic, and geographic characteristics of the electorates. While INEC has made some efforts to ensure inclusivity, particularly in targeting women, youth, and persons with disabilities (PWDs), these efforts remain inconsistent, uneven, and often superficial. For example, INEC has occasionally partnered with organisations such as the National Orientation Agency (NOA), the Albino Foundation, and youth advocacy groups to disseminate VEP materials in local languages and formats accessible to People With Disabilities. However, these initiatives are largely donor-driven and sporadic (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012). In many parts of the country, especially in rural, marginalised, and conflict-affected communities, INEC's VEP materials are unavailable or incomprehensible due to language barriers, literacy constraints, or lack of culturally relevant messaging (Ijeh & Abimbola, 2023; Natsi & Vitsou, 2025).

Youth and first-time voters constitute a significant proportion of the Nigerian electorate. It is discovered that they are often treated as peripheral audiences, despite their electoral potential. Although INEC maintains a presence on digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, these efforts are not sufficiently interactive or youth-centric to generate sustained engagement (Loader & Mercea, 2011). Moreover, the digital divide continues to exclude millions of Nigerians who lack internet access, smartphones, or digital literacy, particularly in rural and underserved communities. Similarly, women and PWDs face structural and cultural barriers that limit their access to VEP and political participation. It is discovered that the patriarchal norms, mobility restrictions, and inadequate attention to gender-sensitive programming mean that several women, particularly in the North, remain under-informed or deliberately excluded from electoral discourse (Nwali & Nwogbaga, 2019); Nwaokoma & Nyoyoko, 2023). For PWDs, the absence of sign language interpretation, braille materials, or voter education venues with disability-friendly access points further deepens their exclusion. Inadvertently, the partial inclusiveness of INEC's voter education efforts undermines the democratic principle of equal political participation. An inclusive VEP system must go beyond tokenism to embrace the principle of universal civic empowerment, ensuring that all citizens. By implication, regardless of gender, age, location, or ability, voters should be able to understand and engage with electoral processes in a meaningful way.

The study was premised on Cognitive Mobilisation Theory of Political Literacy and Participation (CMTPL&P) which was propounded by John Dalton in the year 1984. The theory postulates that political education and political engagement is exhibited by citizens using their mental capabilities in dealing in politics. It explains the process in which citizens receive cognitive cues to take decisions on constitutionally backed up activities such as voting, campaigns, public opinions, and other participation. The theory states that political education 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. It is believed that education increases citizens' cognitive skill sets which promote learning of politics. This implies that better educated citizens receive more gratification from electoral participation. Hence, cognitive mobilisation

theorists submit that political education helps citizens to surmount bureaucratic obstacles involved in the electoral process.

Although numerous studies such as Bovaird and Loeffler, (2012), Olatunji and Ayo (2024); Obi, Asogwa and Ibenekwu, (2024) and Omoniyi (2023) have explored electoral participation and political engagement in Nigeria. In the same vein, relatively few have focused on the qualitative dimensions of VEP, especially from the perspective of content relevance, timeliness and inclusiveness. Also, only a few studies have considered this type pof research from the stakeholders' point of view in the realm of assessment. Thus, this study relied on qualitative research design using semi-structured in-depth interviews analysed through thematic analysis which is found appropriate to assess stakeholders' experiences and perceptions that shape the effectiveness of voter education. There is also a lack of established studies that assess the content relevance, timeliness and inclusivity of INEC in relation to its VEP mandate. The following research questions; How relevant is the content of INEC's voter education programme to the political, social, and cultural contexts of the target populations?; To what extent are INEC's voter education programmes timely and strategically planned to engage the electorate before elections? and, How inclusive are INEC's voter education efforts in reaching diverse demographic groups such as women, youth, rural voters, and persons with disabilities?. These research questions remain largely unanswered. Without qualitative angle into these critical dimensions, efforts to improve VEP are likely to be speculative and fragmented. The 21st century research in participatory democracy needs empirical angle of these core concerns.

This study, therefore, seeks to fill this gap by conducting an in-depth qualitative appraisal of INEC's VEP, with a focus on three central issues: their relevance, timeliness, and inclusiveness to the Nigerian electorates. Through in-depth interviews the study will provide a grounded understanding of how INEC's VEP is experienced by different stakeholders, what works, what doesn't, and what can be improved. In doing so, the research aims to inform the design of more effective, context-sensitive, and participatory VEP that not only prepare citizens for elections but also empower them as active democratic agents. This is because strengthening VEP is not merely a technical task, it is a democratic imperative central to building a more inclusive, informed, and resilient political culture in Nigeria.

Objectives of the study

1. To what extent are INEC's voter education programmes timely and strategically planned to engage the electorate before elections?
2. How inclusive are INEC's voter education efforts in reaching diverse demographic groups such as women, youth, rural voters, and persons with disabilities?
3. How relevant is the content of INEC's voter education programmes to the political, social, and cultural contexts of the target populations?

METHODOLOGY

Research design and context

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the content relevance, timeliness, and inclusiveness of the Independent National Electoral Commission's (INEC) Voter Education Programme (VEP) in Nigeria. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate because it allows for in-depth exploration of stakeholder perceptions, institutional practices, and contextual dynamics shaping the design, implementation, and reception of voter education initiatives. The study was conducted in Ondo City, focusing on Ondo East and Ondo West Local Government Areas (LGAs). These LGAs were selected due to their urban–rural mix, relatively high voter literacy, ethnic and religious diversity, and history of election-related tensions, making them analytically suitable for understanding varied experiences of voter education across demographic and geographic contexts. The study population included INEC officials (particularly those in the Voter Education and Publicity Department), Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), community and traditional leaders, educators, media practitioners, political party representatives, National Orientation Agency (NOA) officials, election observers, youth leaders, women leaders, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and general voters.

Sampling strategy and sample selection

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to ensure representation of diverse electoral stakeholders with direct or experiential knowledge of voter education processes. This approach facilitated experiential diversity, institutional breadth, and contextual depth in capturing perspectives on INEC's VEP. Sampling occurred at three levels. First, Ondo East and Ondo West LGAs were purposively selected due to their history of election-related conflict and heightened electoral contestation. Second, three INEC VEP personnel who had participated

in the last two general elections were selected. Third, key stakeholder groups—including community leaders, traditional rulers, CSOs, religious leaders, media practitioners, political party representatives, NOA officials, educators, school administrators, and local election observers—were identified and recruited. A total of 17 participants were interviewed, with the final sample size determined by the principle of data saturation, defined as the point at which no substantively new insights or themes emerged from additional interviews.

Recruitment Procedure

Participants were recruited through community gatekeepers, civil society networks, and local political structures (Table 1). Invitations were extended based on participants' roles in civic mobilisation, electoral engagement, voter education, and governance leadership, ensuring access to information-rich cases capable of yielding analytically meaningful insights.

Table 1

Participant profile

ID	Stakeholder Group	Gender	Age	LGA
P01	Community Leader	Male	56	Ondo East
P02	Retired Civil Servant	Male	60	Ondo East
P03	Trader	Male	59	Ondo East
P04	Community Mobiliser	Male	56	Ondo West
P05	Youth Leader	Male	44	Ondo West
P06	Teacher	Female	55	Ondo East
P07	Market Leader	Female	48	Ondo East
P08	Political Party Agent	Male	53	Ondo West
P09	Farmer	Male	39	Ondo East
P10	Women Leader	Female	51	Ondo East
P11	Security Volunteer	Male	50	Ondo East
P12	NGO Worker	Female	47	Ondo West
P13	Disability Advocate	Female	50	Ondo East
P14	Media Practitioner	Female	43	Ondo East
P15	Traditional Leader	Male	50	Ondo West
P16	Women Rights Activist	Female	48	Ondo East
P17	Community Elder	Male	59	Ondo West

Data collection procedure

Data were generated through semi-structured in-depth interviews, guided by an Interview Guide (IIG) structured into two sections: Section A: Demographic and role-based information and Section B: Thematic questions addressing content relevance, timeliness, inclusiveness, delivery mechanisms, and perceived impact of INEC's VEP. The interview format allowed flexibility, contextual probing, and participant-led meaning construction, supporting emergent insights beyond predefined categories. For face and content validity, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in test and measurement, political science, and civic engagement. Additionally, INEC document analysis was conducted on voter education manuals, election guidelines, outreach materials, press releases, and policy briefs to triangulate institutional narratives with stakeholder experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised using participant identifiers to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis process

Data were analysed using a thematic analytic approach, progressing through five iterative stages: Familiarisation through repeated reading of transcripts; Open coding to generate initial meaning units; Axial coding to cluster related codes into conceptual groupings; Theme abstraction into higher-order analytical categories and Interpretive synthesis across themes and research questions. This process enabled systematic identification and interpretation of patterns related to content relevance, timeliness, inclusiveness, and institutional effectiveness of INEC's voter education interventions.

Credibility, dependability, and confirmability

To enhance methodological rigor, multiple trustworthiness strategies were employed. Credibility was strengthened through peer debriefing, prolonged field engagement, thick description, and triangulation across stakeholder groups and documentary sources. Dependability was ensured through the maintenance of an audit trail documenting coding decisions, theme development, and analytical memos. Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling and analytic memoing, reducing researcher bias and grounding interpretations in participant data.

Transferability

Detailed contextual descriptions of electoral settings, stakeholder roles, and institutional dynamics were provided to enable analytic generalisation to similar voter education and electoral governance contexts in Nigeria and comparable emerging democracies.

Analytical integration model: three-layer civic system

INEC's voter education programme was conceptualised as a three-layer civic system:
1. Procedural Literacy Layer – knowledge of voter registration, accreditation, voting processes, and election logistics
2. Normative Democratic Layer – democratic values, accountability norms, civic responsibility, and ethical political participation
3. Adaptive Electoral Layer – responsiveness to digital politics, youth mobilisation, misinformation, vote-buying, and electoral violence

Analytical synthesis indicates that current implementation is strongest in the Procedural Literacy Layer, weaker in the Normative Democratic Layer, and underdeveloped in the Adaptive Electoral Layer, suggesting a need for deeper value-based civic education and more adaptive, digitally responsive engagement strategies.

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 participating. 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 data collected were used solely for academic purposes. Ethical approval was obtained.

RESULTS

Research question 1: content relevance of INEC voter education programme

Theme 1: baseline relevance but procedural narrowness

Participants generally agreed that INEC's voter education content is relevant at a basic procedural level, especially in informing citizens about registration, voting procedures, and electoral rules. However, relevance was mostly framed in terms of minimum compliance knowledge, rather than deeper civic empowerment.

"INEC focuses on voter registration, accreditation, voting process, and citizens' rights. At least people know what to do. It is relevant." (P01, Male, 56, Ondo East).

"The content is relevant and adequate, but it mostly covers procedures rather than deeper democratic values." (P02, Male, 60, Ondo East)

These accounts indicate that INEC successfully builds procedural electoral literacy, but its content remains functionally conservative, limiting broader political learning.

Theme 2: weak emphasis on electoral values and civic accountability

Beyond procedures, participants emphasized that INEC's voter education underplays democratic values, such as accountability, ethical participation, post-election engagement, and resistance to inducement.

"They tell us how to vote, but not how to hold leaders accountable after elections." (P03, Male, 59, Ondo East)

"They give the 'what', but not the 'why' or the 'how' in democracy." (P04, Male, 56, Ondo West)

This suggests that the programme supports surface participation but does not sufficiently cultivate normative democratic commitment, weakening long-term civic engagement.

Theme 3: limited adaptation to emerging electoral challenges

Participants noted that INEC's content lags behind contemporary electoral realities, including vote-buying, election violence, youth mobilisation, and digital political engagement.

"INEC still neglects issues like vote buying, online political influence, and youth manipulation." (P05, Male, 44, Ondo West)

"They repeat the same messages every election without going deeper." (P06, Female, 55, Ondo East)

This reflects a content stagnation problem, where voter education fails to evolve alongside Nigeria's changing electoral environment, reducing relevance for younger and politically active voters. Overall, INEC's voter education is thematically relevant but cognitively limited; strong in procedural awareness, weaker in value-driven civic education, and insufficiently adaptive to emerging electoral risks.

Research question 2: timeliness of INEC voter education programme

Theme 1: perceived late and event-driven delivery

A dominant perception among participants is that INEC's voter education is introduced too close to elections, functioning as a short-term campaign rather than a sustained civic process.

"How can you educate over 100,000 voters in just two weeks? That is unrealistic." (P07, Female, 48, Ondo East)

"INEC only becomes active a few weeks before elections. That is fire-brigade politics." (P08, Male, 53, Ondo West)

Late delivery constrains learning, reflection, and behavioural change, limiting the programme's ability to shape informed and confident voters.

Theme 2: disproportionate impact on vulnerable groups

Participants stressed that first-time voters, rural residents, and low-literacy populations are most affected by late voter education.

"Late education confuses illiterate and first-time voters." (P09, Male, 39, Ondo East)

"Young people missed PVC deadlines because information came too late." (P10, Female, 51, Ondo East)

Timeliness gaps reinforce participation inequalities, marginalising groups that require longer exposure and simpler explanations.

Theme 3: link between untimeliness and electoral risks

Participants consistently linked late voter education to electoral violence, vote buying, invalid voting, and political manipulation.

"Poor voter education contributes to violence and vote buying." (P11, Male, 50, Ondo East)

"When citizens are uninformed, they are easier to manipulate." (P12, Female, 47, Ondo West)

Untimely education does not only reduce knowledge—it heightens electoral vulnerability by increasing confusion, frustration, and susceptibility to inducement. INEC's voter education is widely perceived as reactive, compressed, and insufficiently continuous, limiting democratic preparedness and exacerbating electoral risks.

Research question 3: inclusiveness of inec voter education programme

Theme 1: structural exclusion of persons with disabilities and the elderly

Participants reported that people with disabilities and elderly voters remain inadequately served, despite policy commitments.

"INEC does not practically cater for the deaf, blind, or physically challenged." (P13, Female, 50, Ondo East)

"Sign language on TV is good, but accessible materials are still limited." (P14, Female, 43, Ondo East)

There is a gap between policy and practice, resulting in symbolic rather than functional inclusion.

Theme 2: geographic and rural marginalisation

Participants highlighted limited outreach to rural communities, nomadic populations, IDPs, and remote settlements.

"Rural communities and Fulani nomads are mostly ignored."
(P15, Male, 50, Ondo West)

INEC's voter education shows a spatial bias, concentrating outreach in urban centres and reinforcing regional inequalities.

Theme 3: gender and language barriers to full inclusion

Although women appear in voter education materials, participants noted insufficient attention to gender-specific risks and minority language exclusion.

"Women face harassment at polling units, but INEC rarely addresses this." (P16, Female, 48, Ondo East)

"Many elders cannot understand messages because they are not in our language." (P17, Male, 59, Ondo West)

Inclusion remains descriptive rather than substantive, with language and gender-specific realities insufficiently addressed. INEC's voter education shows partial inclusion, but significant gaps persist across disability, geography, gender, and language, limiting equitable democratic participation.

DISCUSSION

Content relevance of INEC voter education programme

The finding that INEC's voter education programmes are widely perceived as relevant suggests that the Commission has achieved a foundational level of cognitive mobilisation by aligning its messages with voters' core informational needs. Through the lens of Cognitive Mobilisation Theory, this reflects the effective provision of cognitive cues and political learning resources, enabling citizens to interpret electoral processes and recognise their democratic roles. Prior studies have similarly observed that voter education content anchored in real electoral challenges tends to enhance awareness and engagement (Adetoye & Omilusi, 2015; Loader & Mercea, 2011). However, this study extends earlier scholarship by demonstrating that relevance in theme does not automatically translate into depth in cognitive empowerment.

While earlier research has emphasised the importance of procedural knowledge in transitional democracies, the present findings reveal a growing dissatisfaction among voters with content that remains introductory, repetitive, and insufficiently adaptive to emerging political realities. This contrasts with the assumption in some earlier literature that procedural literacy alone is adequate for democratic participation. Instead, the findings align more closely with Loader's (2007) argument that substantive civic education—covering accountability, governance processes, and citizen oversight, is essential for sustained democratic engagement. In this sense, the study confirms the relevance of existing voter education themes but challenges the sufficiency of their scope, complexity, and responsiveness.

Moreover, the concern about limited localisation and cultural sensitivity highlights a gap between national-level messaging and local cognitive resonance. While Jungherr (2014) argues that political communication must adapt to micro-contextual realities in plural societies, this study empirically demonstrates how failure to localise voter education content weakens cognitive internalisation, particularly among women and youth in culturally distinct communities. Thus, the present findings extend existing literature by showing that content relevance is not only a matter of topic alignment but also of contextual fit, without which political learning remains shallow. Additionally, respondents' fatigue with repetitive messages suggests that static content undermines sustained cognitive stimulation. Earlier studies have noted the importance of innovation in political messaging (Ngoka, Ezeani, & Ugwuozor, 2024), but this research deepens that insight by linking message stagnation to declining cognitive engagement and reduced persuasive impact. The expressed demand for year-round voter education further supports the theoretical proposition that political learning is cumulative and requires continuous exposure, rather than episodic election-cycle interventions. Collectively, these findings confirm the general direction of prior research while extending it by demonstrating that relevance must evolve alongside voters' cognitive sophistication and contextual realities.

Timeliness of content in INEC voter education programmes

The strong perception that INEC's voter education is untimely underscores a central constraint in its ability to mobilise voters cognitively. Cognitive Mobilisation Theory posits that political competence develops through early exposure, repetition, and reinforcement, yet respondents consistently reported that voter education often begins too late in the electoral cycle to meaningfully shape attitudes or behaviour. Earlier research has acknowledged timing as an operational challenge in voter education (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Nokshuwan et al., 2020), but the present study goes further by illustrating how delayed communication compresses the cognitive learning window, limiting voters' ability to process information reflectively and internalise democratic norms. Unlike prior studies that frame late voter education primarily as an administrative or logistical weakness, these findings reveal its cognitive and behavioural consequences. Participants' metaphors—such as INEC "planting a seed a day before harvest"—capture a broader frustration with short-term, election-driven communication that fails to cultivate long-term democratic orientations. This insight extends earlier work by demonstrating that timeliness is not merely about operational efficiency but about enabling sustained cognitive development, which is critical for durable political participation (Nwaokoma & Nyoyoko, 2023).

Furthermore, respondents' limited awareness of electoral innovations, such as BVAS and procedural updates, reflects a recurring challenge noted in earlier electoral studies (Adejumobi, 2010; Ubong, 2024). However, this research highlights that late dissemination of technical electoral information disproportionately disadvantages less technologically adept and rural populations, thereby reinforcing existing inequalities in political preparedness. While previous scholarship has documented uneven access to electoral information, the current findings provide empirical evidence that timing itself functions as a mechanism of exclusion, shaping differential cognitive readiness among voter groups. The reported urban–rural disparities in the timing of voter education further substantiate Cognitive Mobilisation Theory's claim that unequal access to information produces unequal political competence. By linking timing gaps to variations in preparedness, turnout potential, and procedural confidence, this study advances prior research by demonstrating that delayed and uneven voter education contributes not only to informational deficits but to structural inequalities in democratic participation.

Inclusivity of INEC voter education programme

Respondents' acknowledgement of INEC's efforts to expand outreach reflects an institutional attempt to broaden cognitive access to electoral information, consistent with Cognitive Mobilisation Theory's emphasis on equitable distribution of political learning resources. Similar to earlier findings that highlight the growing role of digital platforms, civil society partnerships, and youth-oriented campaigns in political engagement (Stier et al., 2018), this study confirms that diversified communication channels can enhance the reach of voter education initiatives. However, it also complicates this optimistic narrative by revealing that expanded reach does not necessarily translate into meaningful inclusion. While prior research has often treated inclusivity in terms of coverage and representation, the present findings suggest that inclusivity must also be evaluated in terms of cognitive usability and sustained engagement. For instance, although multilingual materials exist, respondents noted that technical language and culturally misaligned translations often limit comprehension among rural and low-literacy populations. This challenges the implicit assumption in some previous studies that translation alone ensures accessibility, demonstrating instead that effective cognitive mobilisation requires simplification, cultural adaptation, and pedagogical sensitivity.

Similarly, although initiatives targeting persons with disabilities and women indicate progress, inconsistent implementation and urban-centric resource allocation constrain their impact. Earlier scholarships have documented gender and disability-related barriers in electoral participation (Osayi, 2024; Nokshuwan et al., 2020), but this study extends those insights by showing that episodic and election-bound voter education interrupts the cumulative learning processes required to overcome long-standing structural disadvantages. In effect, marginalized groups not only receive less information but also less sustained cognitive reinforcement, limiting their capacity for long-term political empowerment. Thus, the findings suggest that INEC's voter education programme reflects partial but uneven cognitive inclusivity. While it confirms earlier claims that institutional outreach efforts are expanding, it simultaneously challenges the depth and consistency of their impact. By demonstrating that true inclusivity depends on sustained exposure, contextual sensitivity, and cognitive accessibility, this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of how voter education can either reduce or reproduce inequalities in political competence. Strengthening decentralised delivery, embedding voter education within community and educational institutions, and prioritising long-term civic learning would enhance both equity and effectiveness in Nigeria's democratic development (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2012; Ogunmokun, Ayanlade, & Olaposi, 2024).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Voter education plays an indispensable role in democratic societies by equipping citizens with the knowledge, awareness, and civic responsibility required for meaningful political participation. In Nigeria, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has the statutory responsibility to ensure that voter education is comprehensive, inclusive, and effective. However, this study reveals significant gaps in the execution and impact of INEC's voter education programmes, particularly in relation to timeliness, inclusivity, and relevance. The first key issue is relevance. Many of INEC's voter education materials are generic and procedural in nature, lacking the contextual sensitivity necessary to resonate with diverse local populations. Messages are frequently delivered in formal or technical language and often omit critical content on civil rights, democratic values, post-election engagement, and accountability mechanisms. In essence, the focus tends to be on "how to vote" rather than "why to vote" and "how voting connects to governance and development." This results in a narrow, mechanical understanding of democratic participation that does not translate into long-term civic engagement.

The second major concern is the relevance of INEC voter education. The study found that INEC's voter education efforts are predominantly reactive, often initiated just months or weeks before elections. This last-minute approach limits the reach, depth, and effectiveness of the educational content, leaving many Nigerians

under-informed or confused about electoral procedures. A voter education programme that lacks continuity cannot build sustained civic awareness or adequately prepare voters for active democratic engagement. Infrequent and inconsistent voter education also fails to counteract misinformation, disenfranchisement, and apathy, especially in conflict-prone or marginalised communities. Thirdly, the inclusiveness of INEC's voter education remains limited. Although there are efforts to include various stakeholders such as youth, women, and persons with disabilities, the initiatives are neither systematic nor sustained. Rural dwellers, internally displaced people (IDPs), and communities with low literacy or language barriers are often sidelined in programme design and delivery. The digital divide further excludes many Nigerians who lack access to internet-based voter education platforms. Without deliberate inclusion strategies, a large segment of the population will continue to be politically alienated and underrepresented.

In conclusion, while INEC's voter education mandate is vital for democratic sustainability in Nigeria, the current approach falls short in several critical dimensions. Timeliness, inclusiveness, and relevance are not just desirable attributes, they are essential criteria for any meaningful voter education initiative. Addressing these shortcomings will require strategic rethinking and a shift from periodic election-focused communication to a more continuous, inclusive, and context-sensitive civic education strategy. A more participatory, decentralised, and feedback-oriented approach would ensure that voter education becomes a tool for empowerment, not just information. The future of Nigeria's democracy depends on how well its citizens are informed, engaged, and included in electoral processes—and this begins with a reformed and robust voter education framework.

Limitation of the study

This study was limited by geographical scope, focusing on selected communities and stakeholders, which may not reflect nationwide voter education realities. Also, the reliance on qualitative data limits generalizability, although it provides in-depth perspectives. Logistical challenges and time constraints affected broader participant recruitment. Lastly, potential bias in participant responses due to political sensitivity may have influenced some findings.

Recommendations

The following five recommendations are proposed:
1. INEC should institutionalise voter education as a continuous, year-round civic process rather than an election-period activity. This should be embedded within its statutory operations and annual budgetary framework to ensure sustainability and consistency. Continuous voter education will enhance citizens' democratic competence, reduce last-minute confusion, and strengthen electoral preparedness.
2. INEC should expand voter education beyond procedural voting instructions to include electoral ethics, democratic values, citizens' rights and responsibilities, and post-election accountability. This approach would promote informed participation, discourage electoral malpractices, and deepen democratic culture.
3. Voter education programmes should be patterned to the sociocultural, linguistic, and demographic contexts of different voter groups, particularly youths, first-time voters, and rural populations. Participatory and innovative communication tools—such as community dialogues, social media campaigns, and peer education—should be prioritised to address voter apathy and election-related violence.
4. INEC should commence voter education well ahead of voter registration and election timelines, with deliberate targeting of first-time voters, youths, and rural communities. Early engagement will promote gradual civic learning and reduce electoral misinformation and disengagement.
5. Disability-inclusive communication strategies—such as braille materials, sign language interpretation, audio formats, and accessible digital platforms—should be mainstreamed across all voter education initiatives. In addition, gender-responsive content addressing women lived electoral challenges should be integrated to promote equitable participation.
6. INEC should intensify outreach to rural, nomadic, internally displaced, and diaspora populations through decentralised voter education structures and partnerships. Producing voter education materials in minority languages and simplified formats will enhance inclusiveness and comprehension.
7. INEC should establish structured partnerships with relevant government agencies, civil society organisations, educational institutions, and the media to improve coordination, content delivery, and outreach effectiveness. Such collaboration will ensure consistency in messaging, reduce duplication of efforts, and enhance programme impact.
8. Action-based strategies should be developed for engaging underrepresented groups such as women, youth, rural dwellers, and persons with disabilities. This includes use of local languages, disability-friendly materials, and grassroots-level partnerships with NGOs and community leaders.

Ethical statement

The research followed ethical standard for qualitative research in terms of ensuring compliance with research ethics principles, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the protection of participants' rights and privacy. All participants provided written or verbal consent prior to inclusion in the study.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Author contributions

OTO. Conceptualization, study design, data collection, qualitative data analysis, and manuscript drafting. Literature review, methodological support, data coding, and manuscript editing. Authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Data availability

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, in accordance with ethical guidelines and participant confidentiality agreements.

AI disclosure

No AI-assisted tools were used in the writing, analysis, or interpretation of the study findings. All content, analysis, and conclusions were developed solely by the authors.

Biographical sketch

Timilehin Olayinka Omoniyi, Ph.D is a Lecturer and Researcher in the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. He holds a PhD in Social Sciences Education and has expertise in political science education, social studies, civic, environmental and sustainability education. His research interests include public socialization, civic engagement, voter education, electoral literacy, political participation among youths, and the role of education in democratic consolidation.

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