



Citizens Perception on the 2020 Edo State Governorship Pre-Election Survey Report

Executive Summary

- Ahead of the September 19, 2020 governorship elections in Edo state, Yiaga Africa conducted a survey among 657 randomly-sampled phone-owning adult Nigerians (18 years and above) residing in Edo State between 28th July and 3rd August 2020 to gauge their opinions about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic and the campaign environment on the credibility of the governorship elections. This report summarizes some of the main findings from the survey and makes recommendations for promoting the credibility of the upcoming elections.
- Although approximately seven-in-ten survey respondents (68%) support INEC's decision to hold Nigeria's first off-cycle governorship election during the COVID-19 pandemic, a plurality (42%) remain concerned that voters and election officials could contract the virus on election-day. Respondents were evenly split on INEC's effectiveness in communicating the new COVID-19 voting guidelines, and more than a quarter of those surveyed (27%) report having been exposed to information about COVID-19 voting procedures from political parties and candidates.
- Survey respondents expressed major concerns about violence carried out by political parties (56%) and security officials (48%) during the elections. With more than 3 weeks to go before the governorship election, approximately one-in-ten respondents have directly experienced violence and intimidation related to the elections, while over one-third have heard political candidates using hate speech on the campaign trail. Fifty-six percent of those surveyed were worried about the widespread practice of trading money and other material benefits for votes, while so far, four percent personally experienced vote buying.
- Public attitudes towards INEC in Edo are very polarized. Forty-six percent of respondents lack confidence in INEC's ability to promote credible elections, 50% question the electoral umpires' independence and 44% doubt the institutions' preparedness for election.
- Despite the COVID-19 epidemic and the ongoing political crisis, an overwhelming majority of registered voters (85%) in our survey are likely to vote in the September 19 elections. Furthermore, 54% of all respondents are optimistic that the elections will be credible, and a plurality (42%) believe the quality of elections will increase relative to the 2019 presidential elections.
- Based on the results from the pre-election survey, Yiaga Africa recommends that INEC, Presidential Task Force on COVID-19 and State Task Force COVID-19 should ensure strict compliance with INEC policy on voting amidst COVID-19 and other health safety protocols. Polling officials should be

required to undergo COVID-19 testing before and after the election. Public engagement on new health protocols and Voters Code of Conduct should be intensified across LGAs and communities.

- Given the pervasive threat to safety and security in the Edo election, Yiaga Africa urges the federal and state government to desist from partisan use of the police and security forces to manipulate the electoral process. Security agencies should neutralize existing security threats in Edo state to enable the voters to exercise their constitutional right to vote in a peaceful and secured environment. More proactive and preemptive interventions like peace meetings, peace accords, curtailment of proliferation and use of firearms and other weapons, appropriate sanctions for those implicated in thuggery and violence should be taken. If caution is not exercised, the outcome of the September 19 governorship polls may be determined by violence not voters.
- Lastly, INEC should take concrete steps to address the perceptions of its lack of independence, impartiality and professionalism through proactive and timely disclosure of election-related information; effective management of election day logistics; consistent application of electoral guidelines and lastly, transparent collation and transmission of election results.

Introduction

On September 19, 2020 registered voters in the state of Edo state will cast votes to elect the next governor. The conduct and outcome of the upcoming governorship election in the state will have important implications for elections and democracy in Nigeria for several reasons. To begin with, Edo's governorship poll is the first state-wide election to be held in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, Edo is the only state in the South South geopolitical zone that, until recently, was controlled by the ruling APC and so for the APC, it is a battle to recapture lost ground and the opposition PDP, a struggle to retain reclaimed territory. Third, and perhaps most importantly, the state has been embroiled in a political standoff between the current governor Obaseki and his erstwhile 'political godfather' and former governor of the state Adams Oshiomhole. The political standoff has led to a politically charged campaign period and many fear that as the election draws nearer, opposing camps will engage in violence and vote rigging in order to win the election.

It is with these issues in mind that Yiaga Africa, a non-profit civic hub of changemakers working to promote sustainable democracy and development in Nigeria and Africa, decided to conduct a pre-election survey in Edo state. Yiaga Africa randomly sampled 657 phone-owning adult Nigerians (18 years and above) residing in Edo State between 28th July and 3rd August 2020 with three goals in mind.

- First, to provide a scientific gauge of the opinions of the electorate regarding the impact of COVID-19 on the campaign and election environment, including INEC's ability to organize elections during the pandemic and citizens' willingness to engage in election-related activities.
- Second, to assess the electorates' attitudes towards, and experience with, election violence, votebuying, and INEC's election preparedness and to understand how these issues may impact voter turnout and perceptions of election credibility.
- First, to provide high-quality evidenced-based information in the run-up to the Edo governorship contest that can inform suitable interventions to promote the credibility of the electoral process and safety of the electorate.

There are five key findings that emerged from the survey:

- First, while a majority of respondents' support INEC's decision to hold Nigeria's first off-cycle governorship election during the COVID-19 pandemic, 42% remain concerned that voters and election officials could contract the virus on election-day, and a further 40% are dissatisfied with INEC's effectiveness in communicating the new COVID-19 voting guidelines.
- Second, within Edo's politically charged pre-election context a majority of respondents expressed concerns that political parties (56%) and security officials (48%) would use violence during the elections. Approximately one-in-ten respondents have directly experienced violence and intimidation related to the elections, while over one-third have heard political candidates using hate speech on the campaign trail.
- Third, attitudes towards INEC in Edo are very polarized. Forty-six percent of respondents' lack confidence in INEC's ability to promote credible elections, 50% question the electoral umpires' independence and 44% doubt the institutions' preparedness for election.
- Fourth, despite the COVID-19 epidemic and the ongoing political crisis, an overwhelming majority of registered voters (85%) are likely to vote in the September 19 elections.
- Finally, a slim majority of all respondents (54%) are optimistic that the elections will be credible, and a plurality (42%) believe the quality of the governorship elections will increase relative to the 2019 presidential elections.

Based on these findings and Yiaga Africa's observation of the pre-election processes in Edo this report makes the following recommendations.

- First, INEC should take concrete steps to address the perceptions of its lack of independence, impartiality and professionalism. This will include proactive disclosure of election-related information, consistency in the application of electoral guidelines and transparency in the results collation process.
- Second, more proactive and preemptive interventions like peace meetings, peace accords, curtailment of proliferation and use of firearms and other weapons, appropriate sanctions for those implicated in thuggery and violence. The federal and state government to desist from partisan use of the police and security forces to manipulate the electoral process.
- Third, INEC, Presidential Task Force and State Task Force should ensure strict compliance with COVID-19 guidance enunciated in INEC policy on voting amidst covid-19 and other health safety protocols. Polling officials should be required to undergo COVID-19 testing before and after election. Public engagement on new health protocols and Voters Code of Conduct should be intensified across LGAs and communities.
- Fourth, to promote issue-based campaigns, political parties and candidates should subject themselves to public scrutiny on their campaigns manifestoes through debates, townhalls and direct public engagement.
- Fifth, voters should exhibit a high sense of responsibility by complying with health safety guidelines before, during and after the election. This will reduce the prevalence rate of COVID-19 infections in the state.

The next section of the report provides a brief background to the 2020 governorship election. Thereafter, the report describes the survey methodology and outlines the main findings. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for the main electoral stakeholders.

Background to 2020 Edo State Governorship Election

Located in the South-South geo-political zone, Edo state has a population of 4.2, 2.2 million of whom are registered voters.¹ Edo is one of 7 states that holds off-cycle governorship elections, based on the 2008 post-Edo state Governorship Petition Tribunal decision.² According to INEC, candidates from 14 parties have registered to compete in the 2020 governorship elections scheduled for September 19. Nonetheless, the upcoming poll is essentially a rematch of the 2016 contest that saw Godwin Obaseki of the All Progressive Congress (APC) defeat Osagie Ize-Iaymu of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) by 11% (or a margin of 66,310 votes.) This time around, however, the main candidates have switched party-platforms. Incumbent Governor Obaseki is now the flagbearer of the PDP after being disqualified by the APC screening committee from participating in the APC primaries.³ Following his disqualification, Obaseki decamped from the APC and won the PDP governorship primaries. Meanwhile, Ize-Iaymu returned to the APC and competed in the APC primaries where he emerged with a majority of the votes.

Edo state has the fourth-highest record of cases of COVID-19 with 2,555 total cases, 186 active cases, 2,269 discharged and 100 deaths recorded as at 27 August 2020 and during this reporting period, an average of 10 confirmed cases were recorded per day.

2016 Governorship Elections

The 2016 Edo governorship elections were controversial for several reasons. First, the campaign period was politically charged. Observers reported widespread use of inflammatory language by both major parties, destruction of campaign materials, and complaints by the opposition PDP of being denied access to public venues for campaigns. Second, INEC postponed the election less than 48 hours before it was scheduled to hold on September 10, 2016. According to INEC, the decision to postpone the election was made on the advice of the State Security Services (DSS) and Nigeria Police Force (NPF) who warned that election security could not be guaranteed. The sudden postponement of the election to September 28, heightened public concerns of INEC's ability to exercise independence from the ruling APC.

Third, although the September 28, 2016 elections were generally peaceful and orderly, domestic observers, including Yiaga Africa, criticized the electoral umpire for a slow and non-transparent collation process. In the end, Ize-Iyamu and the PDP rejected the results of the election citing massive inconsistencies in the vote totals announced by INEC. Violent protests involving PDP supporters erupted in and around Benin city, the Edo state capital, in the days that followed announcement of results.

¹ Population statistics based on the 2016 projection by the National Population Commission. Registration statistics based on INEC as of February 2019.

² The off-cycle governorship election is a result of the Courts' decisions which either nullified governorship elections or declared the petitioners as the winners, and the new governors were to commence fresh terms which no longer followed the previous uniform gubernatorial election dates in Nigeria. However, by virtue of the Section 18 of the Constitution of Federal Republic of Nigeria (First Alteration) Act 2010, Section 180 of the Constitution was altered to end any further incidences of off-cycle elections where an election is annulled or a new Governor emerges.

³ Many believe that Obaseki's disqualification is a direct consequence of the rift that developed between him and his political godfather, Comrade Adams Oshiomhole—former governor of Edo state and former chairperson of the APC.

2020 Governorship Pre-Election Environment

Two main issues have overshadowed the pre-election and campaign period for the 2020 Edo governorship election. The 2020 Edo governorship elections represent the first off-cycle governorship election to be held in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on every sphere of life in Nigeria including the management of, and engagement in, electoral processes. According to the Nigerian Center for Disease Control (NCDC), since the first confirmed COVID-19 case in Nigeria on February 25 and up to September 2, 54,463 Nigerians have contracted the virus and 1023 have lost their lives. Edo state ranks fifth out of the 36 states in terms of contracted cases (2,587) and second in terms of reported casualties (100).

In response to the pandemic, INEC took the bold decision to go ahead with Edo governorship poll citing constitutional constraints to do otherwise. INEC also developed a series of new policies and procedures to ensure the health and safety of voters, election officials and other stakeholders during all stages of the electoral cycle.⁴ This includes a new Voters Code of Conduct for Elections which stipulates, among many things, the mandatory use of facemasks and social distancing by voters and INEC officials on election-day. INEC's first test of its COVID-19 election policies came during the August 8 Nasarawa Central State constituency bye-election. Yiaga Africa Watching the Vote report of the bye-elections revealed widespread non-compliance with physical distancing and use of face masks.

The second major issue concerns the conflict between incumbent Governor Obaseki and former governor (and former National Chairman of the APC) Adams Oshiomhole that has been brewing since Obaseki's election in 2016. The division between Obaseki and Oshiomhole has spilled over into the Edo State House of Assembly. Since the 2019 State Assembly elections, legislators loyal to each faction have engaged in actions to frustrate or sabotage all forms of legislative activities or the normal running of the State Assembly. As a consequence of the political infighting, the 2020 campaign period has witnessed high levels of insecurity, threats of violence, and several violent episodes between supporters of the APC and PDP at campaign rallies. Rights groups such as Amnesty international have voiced concerns about the growing insecurity and asked for President Buhari's intervention into the crisis.⁵ Furthermore, as recently as August 21, INEC warned that the federal government may have to declare a state of emergency in the state, unless the political tensions are resolved ahead of the polls.⁶

Since 1999, Edo state has been a two-party dominant state: PDP and APC (earlier ACN). Between them, the two parties have won all executive and legislative elections at the federal, state and local government levels and are the major contenders in the 2020 governorship election. To that extent, all other parties, including the other 12 that are contesting the governorship election, are minority parties.

Notwithstanding the flawed notions of representation and collective interests, party politics and elections have always provoked issues of inclusiveness, power holding, access, control and domination in Edo state, and the 2020 governorship election, which is a critical election as we have characterized it, has done no less. The issues have been raised around identities and identity-sets, mainly ethnicity, religion, geopolitical zones, gender and youth. In terms of politicization or the extent to which identities have been mobilized as a basis for conflict or for demanding equitable and protective rights, ethnicity and geopolitical district have been the most important. Religion, gender and youth, which have gained traction on the national agenda, are still relatively under-mobilized political identities in Edo. The evidence is abundant: almost all the

⁴ See INEC Policy on Conducting Elections in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

⁵ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/more-news/409662-violence-may-mar-edo-election-if-buhari-govt-fails-to-take-active-steps-amnesty-international.html>

⁶ <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/south-south-regional/410108-political-tension-in-edo-may-lead-to-state-of-emergency-inec.html>

governors and their deputies have been Christian and male (although it is important to point out that there has been a female speaker of the state legislature, two female chief judges, and two female heads of service in addition to scores of female commissioners). For the 2020 governorship election only one of the candidates for governor is a female while there are three female deputy governorship candidates.

With regard to the more politically salient ethnic identities, the preponderance of the Benin who constitute 53% of the state's population, 7 of the 18 local government areas, and one of the three senatorial districts, is a major source of tension and fears and allegations of domination. The larger issues of politicized ethnicity relate to the balance of power among the major ethnic groups. Here, an unwritten code of power alternation or rotation for the position of governor as well as a balanced governor-deputy governor ticket among the major ethnic groups in the senatorial zones (Benin, Edo south; Esan, Edo central; and Etsako, Edo north) has so far worked to allay fears of domination. The political configuration in the state has shown that relative to Benin and Etsako the Esan have not had a fair share of the governorship, either as governor or deputy. This has provoked political mobilization and agitation on the part of Esan nationalists, especially as the scope of alleged marginalization and exclusion extends to other top elective and appointive positions in the state's legislature, judiciary and executive (Speaker, Chief Judge, Secretary to the State Government, Head of Service, etc.). The high number of Esan candidates (5 governorship and 4 deputy governorship) for the 2020 governorship election even when the position has been conceded to the Benin could be taken as an indication of protest and eagerness to get the Esan back to reckoning.

Survey Methodology

Yiaga Africa contracted NOIPolls to conduct the pre-election survey between 28th July and 3rd August 2020. The sample consisted of 657 phone-owning adult Nigerians (18 years and above) residing in Edo State. With this sample size, and the selection method, the results obtained represents the opinions of Edo residents based on +/- 4% margin of error (with 95% confidence level).

NOIPolls used to proportionate, stratified random sampling to select respondents (adults, 18 years and above) from the three senatorial districts in the state. Probability Proportionate to Population Size (PPPS) was used to determine the sample size in the senatorial districts in Edo state (based on 2006 National Population Census official figures). Strata considered in the random selection are 'Gender' and 'Senatorial district' of respondents. Every adult Nigerians in Edo State in the sampling frame has equal chance of being selected.

The main mode of data collection was Computer Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) on a Questionnaire Processing Software for Market Research (QPSMR) platform. NOIPolls conducted a 1-day training with the enumerators followed by another 1-day pilot of the survey instruments to check the ease of conducting the interviews, unambiguity of questions, average interview time, skip patterns, question flow and response formats. Observations during the training and the pilot exercise were incorporated into the final survey instruments before the commencement of the interviews. The interviews were mainly conducted in English and Pidgin English languages.

Main Survey Findings

COVID-19 and Election Preparedness

The 2020 Edo governorship elections represent the first off-cycle governorship election to be held in Nigeria during the COVID-19 pandemic. As of August 24, Edo state ranks fourth out of the 36 states in

terms of contracted cases (2,537) and second in terms of reported casualties (100). In response to the pandemic, INEC developed a series of new election policies and procedures including a new Voters Code of Conduct for Elections which stipulates, among many things, the mandatory use of facemasks and social distancing by voters and INEC officials on election-day.

To understand the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Edo governorship elections, Yiaga Africa asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with INEC's decision to hold the poll during the pandemic. More than two-thirds of those surveyed (68%) "strongly agreed/agreed" with the decision. However, support for holding the elections was lowest among women, youth, and residents in Edo Central senatorial district.

How concerned are Edo residents about their exposure to COVID-19 during the elections? Edo residents are somewhat divided on this matter. Approximately four-in-ten (42%) respondents believe that voters and election-day workers are at increased risk of contracting the virus. But a plurality (46%) were either "not concerned" or "not-concerned at all" about the impact of COVID-19 on voters and election officials. Apprehension about pandemic and its implications for voting were highest among the youth (i.e. those 35 and younger), and respondents in Edo Central and Edo South (relative to Edo North). When respondents' views about holding the Edo governorship elections during the pandemic and concern for contracting the virus are considered in tandem, they suggest that Edo residents are less likely to think that the pandemic should disrupt fundamental democratic processes, including elections.

While support for INEC's decision to hold the elections is high, respondents were evenly split about INEC's effectiveness in communicating the new COVID-19 policies for voting. Specifically, 40% of respondents "strongly agree/agree", while an identical proportion (40%) "strongly disagree/disagree" with how well the new policies are being publicly disseminated. Across the sample, we find that women, youth, and residents of Edo Central and Edo South were more likely to express dissatisfaction with INEC's communication of the new guidelines. With less than three weeks to go before the election-day, INEC should revise its voter education strategy, especially considering the concerns that 48% have about contracting COVID-19 and the increasing number of COVID-19 positive cases in the state.

Finally, more than a quarter of those surveyed (27%) report having been exposed to information about COVID-19 voting procedures from political parties and candidates. This is an encouraging finding, and emphasizes the important role that other stakeholders should play in educating the public on COVID-19 procedures in the weeks before the election. Rates of exposure to information on the campaign trail was highest among men, 36 and over, and residents in Edo North and Edo South.

Concerns about Violence and Vote buying

Since the reintroduction of multiparty elections in 1999, political parties and their followers, state and non-state actors have used electoral violence and intimidation at different stages of the electoral cycle.⁷ A climate of fear and insecurity has enveloped the pre-election period of the 2020 Edo governorship elections. Several rights groups and CSOs have asked political parties to sue for peace and pleaded for the intervention of president Buhari and the Federal government. In this climate, Yiaga Africa asked respondents their level of concern about electoral violence associated with the upcoming polls. Fifty-six percent report being "very concerned/concerned" about violence perpetuated by political parties, while 48% were "very concerned/concerned" about violence carried out by security agencies. Even more worrying is that with

⁷ See Orji, N. and N. Uzodi, 2012. The 2011 Post Election Violence in Nigeria. *Published by Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) with Open Society Initiative for West Africa.*

more than a month to the election, 7% of respondents admitted that they were threatened with intimidation or violence by a political candidate or political party representative. Rates of experience with threats of violence were higher among youth (9.3%) relative to respondents over 35 (5.3%). Additionally, the use of hate speech by political candidates and party officials is becoming alarming as one-in-three respondents (32%) have been exposed to inflammatory language during the campaign.

The buying and selling of votes is another form of electoral malpractice that has become commonplace in Nigerian elections.⁸ Yiaga Africa's survey results reveal that concern about violence associated with the 2020 governorship elections is identical to concerns about vote-buying. Fifty-six percent of those surveyed were worried about the widespread practice of trading money and other material benefits for votes. Although only 4% of respondents admit having been offered some benefit in return for their vote, if the rate of vote buying is anywhere similar to previous elections⁹, personal experience with vote trading expected to increase as election-day approaches.

Opinions of INEC and other Stakeholders

Scholars and practitioners agree that citizens' confidence in institutions involved in the administration of elections, such as INEC and security agencies, is pivotal to the credibility of electoral processes.¹⁰ When it comes to citizens' trust in INEC's ability to ensure the integrity of the upcoming elections, Edo citizens are evenly divided. A plurality of Edo residents (46%) do not consider the institution trustworthy (i.e. "no trust/no trust at all" in INEC) compared to 44% who report trust the electoral umpire "a lot/a little".¹¹ Distrust in INEC is highest among females, but does not vary by senatorial district or age.

Around the world, independence and impartiality have become cornerstones of effective election management.¹² When asked to assess the independence of INEC, a majority of Edo respondents (50%) disagree that "INEC has been an independent institution that is not influenced by political considerations," while only 31% consider the institution independent. Perceptions of INEC independence was lowest among citizens in Edo Central. Although respondents were not asked why they believed INEC lacked independence, these perceptions may date back to the 2016 Edo governorship elections, where public perceptions of INEC's independence were adversely affected by its decision to postpone the election, as well as the Ize-Iyamu's, then candidate for the PDP, rejection of the election outcome and the resulting protests by PDP supporters.

Furthermore, the survey results indicate that respondents are evenly divided on their evaluations of INEC's readiness to organize the September 19 elections. Forty-two percent of respondents expressed concern that INEC would not be prepared for the election ("concerned/very concerned"), relative to 44% who have faith in INEC's logistical and election-day capacity. Concerns about INEC's preparedness is highest among the youth, and residents in Edo Central and Edo South.

⁸ See Onapajo, H., S. Francis, and U. Okeke-Uzodike. 2015, 'Oil Corrupts Elections: The Political Economy of Vote Buying in Nigeria, *African Studies Quarterly*, 15(2), pp. 1–21.

⁹ For instance, a recent survey conducted by the International Foundation of Electoral Systems after the 2019 elections revealed that 22% of Nigerians were offered a material reward in exchange for their vote.

¹⁰ See Kerr, N., 2013. Popular Evaluations of Election Quality in Africa: Evidence from Nigeria. *Electoral Studies*, 32(4), pp.819-837.

¹¹ The percentage difference between those that agree or disagree that INEC is independent is within the margin of error of +/- 4.

¹² See Wall, A., & International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (Eds.). (2006). *Electoral Management Design: The International IDEA Handbook*. International IDEA

Achieving high quality elections is not only the responsibility of INEC, but other stakeholders, including the security agencies (Nigerian Military and Police Force), the courts, and domestic observers. Of the five institutions that can influence the credibility of the upcoming Edo governorship elections, respondents expressed the highest levels of trust in the military (56%) followed by election observers (53%), the courts (48%), INEC (46%), and finally the police (39%).

Turnout Intentions

Since 2003, turnout in Nigeria's federal and state elections have declined substantially.¹³ Voter apathy has also been evident in Edo state during the 2016 governorship and 2019 presidential elections where only 32.7% and 35.6%, respectively of registered voters cast their ballots. With the COVID-19 pandemic and the looming climate of insecurity in the lead up to the September 19 polls, there is overwhelming concern among stakeholders that registered voters in Edo may not be motivated to vote.

Ninety-four percent of Edo respondents in our survey identify themselves as registered voters. Among the registered voters, approximately seven-in-ten (71%) report being "very likely" to vote in the September 19 election, and a further 14 percent "somewhat likely". When combined, an overwhelming majority of registered voters in Edo state (85%) are seemingly enthusiastic about casting their ballots for one of the 14 governorship candidates. A deeper examination of the results indicate that men are almost 10 points more likely to report being "very/somewhat likely" to vote than women and residents in Edo Central are also slightly more positively disposed to voting relative to those in Edo North.

Perceptions of Election Quality

The final section of our findings focuses on citizens' opinions of the quality of the 2020 Edo governorship elections. Several academic studies find that when citizens believe that their elections are credible, they are more likely to trust the newly elected government, express satisfaction with democracy, and actively engage in the political process between elections.¹⁴ Yiaga Africa asked respondents to evaluate the integrity of the upcoming governorship elections and found that a little more than half of respondents (54%) expect the upcoming contest to be "completely free and fair/ free and fair with minor problems". Positive opinions of election quality were highest among men, 36 and over, and respondents living in Edo North and Edo Central.¹⁵

Scholars and policy experts suggest that several factors including the performance of election management bodies and expectations of violence and electoral fraud may influence citizens' perceptions of election quality.¹⁶ With this in mind, we consider whether Edo residents expectations of the quality of the upcoming elections are associated with their concerns about COVID-19, electoral violence and vote buying and INEC's independence and election preparedness. Our survey results indicate that perceptions that the upcoming Edo elections will be free and fair are lower among those who are concerned about violence

¹³ See Hamalai, L., S. Egwu, and J. Omotola. 2017. *Nigeria's 2015 General Elections: Continuity and Change in Electoral Democracy*. Springer.

¹⁴ Norris, P. 2014. *Why Electoral Integrity Matters*. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ The percentage of DK is 30% in Edo Central almost twice that of Edo North.

¹⁶ See Kerr, N. (2018). Election-Day Experiences and Evaluations of Electoral Integrity in Unconsolidated Democracies: Evidence from Nigeria. *Political Studies*, 66(3), 667–686.

perpetuated by political parties and security agencies; those concerned about vote buying; and those worried about the spread of COVID-19 on election day. Although, positive evaluations of election quality are not associated with INEC's election preparedness, perceptions of election quality are lower among those dissatisfied with INEC's independence.

As a follow up question, respondents were also asked to compare the quality of the upcoming 2020 Edo governorship elections with the general elections held in early 2019. Again, the results provide additional confirmation that Edo citizens are generally optimistic about the quality of the upcoming elections. Specifically, a plurality of respondents (42%) believe that the quality of the upcoming governorship elections will increase "a lot/somewhat" relative the 2019 general elections. However, 19 percent think it will decrease "a lot/somewhat" and a further 15 percent believe that quality of the elections will not change. The relatively positive election quality expectations among Edo residents are particularly encouraging and provide somewhat of a silver lining to the report's findings.

Conclusion and Recommendations

- First, INEC should take concrete steps to address the perceptions of its lack of independence, impartiality and professionalism. This will include proactive disclosure of election-related information and consistent in the application of electoral guidelines and transparency in the results collation process.
- Second, more proactive and preemptive interventions like peace meetings, peace accords, curtailment of proliferation and use of firearms and other weapons, and appropriate sanctions for those implicated in thuggery and violence. The federal and state government should desist from partisan use of the police and security forces to manipulate the electoral process.
- Third, INEC, Presidential Task Force and State Task Force should ensure strict compliance with COVID-19 guidance enunciated in INEC policy on voting amidst COVID-19 and other health safety protocols. Polling officials should be required to undergo COVID-19 testing before and after election. Public engagement on new health protocols and Voters Code of Conduct should be intensified across LGAs and communities.
- Fourth, to promote issue-based campaigns, political parties and candidates should subject themselves to public scrutiny on their campaigns manifestoes through debates, townhalls and direct public engagement.
- Fifth, voters should exhibit a high sense of responsibility by complying with health safety guidelines before, during and after the election. This will reduce the prevalence rate of COVID-19 infections in the state.
- Sixth, security agencies should improve the training of security official and ensure timely investigation and prosecution of electoral offenders.