

ELITE CAPTURE AND THE PARADOX OF DEMOCRACY IN NIGERIA: WHO GAINS AND WHO LOSES

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Abstract

This study examines elite capture (power, resources, and decision-making process) and the paradox of democracy in Nigeria, where democratic institutions exist but produce inequitable governance. Employing a qualitative methodology, it integrates case studies (2012 fuel subsidy scandal, 2023 elections), document analysis, and secondary data to investigate how elites politicians, business tycoons, and traditional leaders dominate power and resources through patronage, resource control, electoral manipulation, and policy capture. The findings reveal that elites amass significant wealth and influence, while the masses, including the rural poor, youth, and marginalized groups, endure high poverty (40.1%), unemployment (33%), and limited access to education and healthcare. This disparity fuels voter apathy, with only 27% turnout in the 2023 elections, and widespread institutional distrust, posing risks to democratic stability. The study highlights how mechanisms like oil revenue mismanagement and vote-buying entrench elite dominance, exacerbating inequality (Gini coefficient 35.9) and undermining democratic ideals. It proposes institutional reforms, equitable policies, and enhanced roles for civil society, media, and technology to counter elite capture. Contributing to political science and African studies, this article offers insights into Nigeria's governance challenges and suggests pathways for democratic consolidation, with potential applications to other resource-rich African states. Future research could explore comparative analyses and digital platforms' roles in fostering accountability.

Keywords: *Elite capture, Paradox of democracy, Nigeria, Patronage, Governance, Electoral manipulation, Inequality*

Introduction

Since Nigeria transitioned to democracy in 1999, the promise of equitable governance has been undermined by elite capture, a process in which a small group of influential actors—politicians, business tycoons, and traditional leaders—monopolises resources, power, and decision-making, leaving the majority marginalised (Rigon & Ohenhen, 2021). This creates a paradox of democracy, where formal democratic institutions, such as elections, parliaments, and constitutions, coexist with undemocratic outcomes, such as pervasive inequality and weak accountability (Cheeseman & Peiffer, 2022). Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation and a major oil producer, exemplifies this paradox. Despite regular elections and constitutional frameworks,

governance challenges persist, including corruption, patronage, and institutional weaknesses, which entrench elite dominance and exacerbate poverty and exclusion (Mustapha & Campbell, 2022). This article investigates how elite capture manifests in Nigeria's democracy, as described earlier, identifies its winners and losers, and explores its implications for democratic consolidation.

Elite capture in Nigeria is rooted in historical patterns, from colonial indirect rule to military and civilian regimes, where elites-controlled resources through patronage networks (Falola & Heaton, 2022). Mechanisms such as political patronage, control over oil revenues, electoral rigging, and policy capture enable elites to amass wealth while the masses face stark disparities. For instance, Nigeria's Gini coefficient of 35.9 and 40.1% poverty rate highlights the economic toll, with 88 million Nigerians living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2022). Politically, voter apathy (27% turnout in 2023) and distrust in institutions threaten democratic stability (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

This article in essence, addresses three research questions: (1) How does elite capture manifest in Nigeria's democratic system? (2) Who are the winners and losers of this process? (3) What are the implications for democratic consolidation? Using a qualitative approach, the article combines case studies (e.g., 2012 fuel subsidy scandal), document analysis (e.g., government budgets, anti-corruption reports), and secondary data (e.g., media, academic studies) to analyse elite capture's mechanisms and impacts. It draws on elite theory and political economy to frame how elites exploit democratic structures, offering a lens to understand Nigeria's governance challenges (Higley & Pakulski, 2020).

This article, therefore, contributes to political science and African studies by illuminating how elite capture undermines democratic ideals in Nigeria, offering insights for policymakers and scholars. It proposes reforms to strengthen institutions, promote equitable policies, and empower civil society, while suggesting comparative studies with other African democracies to deepen understanding of governance challenges in resource-rich states.

Statement of the Research Problem

Despite over two decades of uninterrupted democratic governance since 1999, Nigeria continues to experience persistent inequality, weak accountability, and widespread socio-economic exclusion. This presents a fundamental paradox: while democratic institutions such as elections, legislatures, and constitutional frameworks are firmly in place, their outcomes have largely failed to deliver equitable governance or broad-based development.

A growing body of literature attributes this contradiction to elite capture of power, resources, and decision-making process; however, existing studies tend to treat elite capture as a general feature of weak governance or corruption without sufficiently interrogating how democratic institutions themselves enable, legitimise, and reproduce elite dominance. In particular, there remains limited empirical and analytical clarity on how elite capture operates

within democratic structures, who specifically benefits from these processes, and which segments of society are systematically disadvantaged.

Furthermore, much of the Nigerian literature is either descriptive or historically oriented, with insufficient integration of contemporary empirical cases, distributional analysis (winners vs losers), and theoretical linkage between elite theory and the paradox of democracy. This creates a gap in understanding the dynamic interaction between democratic governance and elite domination in Nigeria.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following core problem: How does elite capture operate within Nigeria's democratic system in ways that reproduce inequality, undermine accountability, and generate a paradox where democratic institutions exist but fail to deliver democratic outcomes?

By focusing on mechanisms, actors, and distributional consequences, this study seeks to provide a more analytically grounded and empirically supported explanation of Nigeria's democratic paradox and its implications for democratic consolidation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Conceptualising Elite Capture: Power, Resources, and Decision-Making

Elite capture refers to the process through which a narrow group of politically and economically powerful actors appropriate state power, public resources, and decision-making processes to serve their interests at the expense of the broader population (Rigon & Ohenhen, 2021). While widely discussed in development and governance literature, there is increasing recognition that elite capture is not merely a governance failure but a structurally embedded feature of many contemporary political systems.

A dominant strand of the literature conceptualises elite capture as a function of extractive institutions that allow elites to design and manipulate rules in their favour (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2020). While this perspective highlights institutional constraints, it often underplays the agency of elites in actively reshaping these institutions.

In contrast, governance-oriented studies emphasise corruption, patronage, and clientelism as mechanisms through which elites capture resources and influence policy (Khan & Sundaram, 2023). However, this approach tends to frame elite capture as institutional breakdown rather than as a deliberate and strategic process.

Recent scholarship bridges these perspectives by conceptualising elite capture as both structural and strategic. Studies on Nigeria demonstrate how elites exploit procurement systems, development programmes, and bureaucratic processes to sustain their dominance (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2024; Rigon & Ohenhen, 2021).

Nevertheless, the literature reveals two critical gaps. First, insufficient attention is given to how elite capture operates within democratic systems. Second, the distributional consequences—who benefits and who loses—remain underexplored. This study addresses these gaps by analysing elite capture within Nigeria's democracy and its socio-economic outcomes.

The Paradox of Democracy and Elite Domination

The paradox of democracy arises when democratic institutions coexist with outcomes that undermine democratic ideals, including inequality, exclusion, and weak accountability (Cheeseman & Peiffer, 2022). In such contexts, elections and political participation may legitimise elite dominance rather than constrain it.

One explanation lies in clientelism, where elites exchange material benefits for political support, thereby weakening programmatic governance (Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020). Empirical evidence from African democracies shows that electoral processes often reinforce elite control rather than promote accountability (Cheeseman et al., 2024).

Another perspective highlights the role of economic structures, particularly in resource-rich states. Dependence on resource rents reduces incentives for inclusive governance, allowing elites to consolidate power (Collier & Venables, 2023). External pressures, such as debt and global financial dynamics, further concentrate power among political elites (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2022).

However, these approaches often treat democratic institutions as passive arenas. This study advances the argument that democratic institutions in Nigeria are actively instrumentalised by elites, making the paradox of democracy a product of deliberate political strategies rather than institutional failure alone.

Elite Capture in Nigeria's Political Economy

Nigeria's political economy provides a compelling context for analysing elite capture within democracy. Since 1999, the country has maintained formal democratic structures, yet governance outcomes remain highly unequal (Adebanwi, 2021).

The concept of prebendalism captures this dynamic, where public offices are used for personal enrichment and patronage distribution (Olarinmoye & Awogbenle, 2023). These practices are sustained by access to oil revenues, which provide elites with significant economic leverage (NEITI, 2021).

Empirical studies document widespread corruption, resource diversion, and institutional weakness (Transparency International, 2023; Mustapha & Campbell, 2022). However, existing research often examines these issues in isolation, without linking them to the broader functioning of democratic institutions.

This study builds on existing scholarship by integrating institutional, economic, and political dimensions of elite capture. It argues that Nigeria's democratic system provides both the structure and legitimacy for elite domination, thereby reinforcing inequality and exclusion.

Theoretical Framework

This article integrates elite theory and political economy to analyse elite capture in Nigeria's democracy. Elite theory posits that a small, cohesive group dominates power structures, regardless of institutional design (Higley & Pakulski, 2020). In democracies, elites manipulate policies and resources to entrench their influence (Gilens & Page, 2021). Political economy complements this by examining how economic resources, particularly Nigeria's oil rents, shape power dynamics (Collier & Venables, 2023). The framework argues that Nigeria's elites—politicians, business magnates, and traditional leaders—exploit democratic processes through three mechanisms: (1) patronage and clientelism, exchanging resources for loyalty; (2) institutional manipulation, such as electoral fraud or weakening accountability mechanisms; and (3) policy capture, influencing legislation to favour elite interests. These mechanisms create a paradox where democratic institutions exist but fail to deliver equitable outcomes, benefiting elites while marginalising the poor, youth, and marginalised groups. This framework guides the analysis of winners and losers, informing recommendations for democratic reform.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how elite capture operates within Nigeria's democratic system and to analyse its distributional consequences. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given that elite capture is a complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon embedded in institutional practices, informal networks, and political behaviour, which cannot be adequately captured through purely quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study employs a multiple-case study strategy, allowing for an in-depth exploration of elite behaviour across different contexts while also identifying recurring patterns and mechanisms through which democratic institutions are utilised to sustain elite dominance.

The study draws on multiple sources of qualitative data to ensure depth, credibility, and triangulation. These include official documents such as Federal Government of Nigeria annual budgets (2010–2024), reports of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) audit reports (2015–2021), and reports from the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which provide insights into public resource allocation, institutional performance, and governance practices. In addition, international and policy reports from organisations such as the World Bank, Transparency International, and the African Development Bank are used to provide comparative indicators and contextual understanding of governance and inequality. The study also relies on investigative and analytical reports from reputable Nigerian media outlets, including Premium Times, The

Guardian, and Daily Trust, to trace specific instances of elite-driven practices such as corruption, vote-buying, and policy manipulation.

To provide empirical grounding, the study incorporates two purposively selected case studies: the 2012 fuel subsidy scandal and the 2023 general elections. These cases were selected based on their relevance, data availability, and their clear illustration of key mechanisms of elite capture, including resource control, electoral manipulation, and policy capture. In addition, selected posts from X (formerly Twitter) between 2020 and 2025 are analysed to capture public perceptions of governance and elite behaviour, with careful selection to ensure relevance and credibility.

The study employs purposive sampling, selecting documents and cases based on their direct relevance to elite capture and democratic governance in Nigeria. Inclusion criteria include the credibility of sources, their analytical relevance to elite behaviour and governance, and their coverage of the democratic period from 1999 to 2025. This ensures that the data analysed are both contextually grounded and analytically robust.

Data are analysed using thematic content analysis, which allows for the systematic identification and interpretation of patterns across qualitative sources. The analysis proceeds through several stages. First, all documents and case materials are carefully reviewed to achieve familiarity with the data and identify recurring patterns related to elite behaviour and institutional dynamics. Second, the data are coded into key analytical categories derived from the study's theoretical framework, including patronage and clientelism, resource control, electoral manipulation, policy capture, and institutional weakness. Third, these codes are organised into broader themes that reflect the mechanisms of elite capture and their socio-economic and political impacts. Finally, the findings are interpreted through the combined lens of elite theory and political economy, enabling the study to link empirical observations to broader theoretical debates on democracy and power. To enhance analytical rigour, the study employs triangulation by comparing findings across different data sources, including official reports, media accounts, and case studies.

The unit of analysis for this study is the interaction between elites and democratic institutions in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, covering the period from 1999 to 2025. The analysis focuses specifically on how elites influence electoral processes, public resource allocation, and policy formulation, thereby providing a comprehensive assessment of how democratic structures are utilised in the reproduction of elite dominance.

To ensure reliability and validity, the study relies on multiple strategies, including the use of credible and verifiable data sources, triangulation across different types of evidence, and transparency in the analytical process. By systematically documenting the coding and thematic procedures, the study enhances the reproducibility and credibility of its findings.

Notwithstanding these strengths, the study acknowledges certain limitations. The opaque nature of elite networks limits direct access to primary data on elite decision-making processes. Additionally, reliance on secondary data introduces the possibility of bias, particularly in government reports and media sources. Data derived from digital platforms such as X may also not fully represent broader public opinion. These limitations are mitigated using Capture multiple data sources and triangulation; however, they point to the need for future research incorporating primary fieldwork and quantitative methods to further deepen understanding of elite capture in Nigeria.

Historical Context of Elite Capture of State Power and Resources in Nigeria

Pre-Democratic Era (1861-1999)

Elite capture in Nigeria has deep historical roots, originating in the colonial and military periods. During colonial rule (1861-1960), the British established indirect rule, empowering traditional elites—such as Emirs in the north and Obas in the south—to control local governance and resources, creating a legacy of centralized power (Falola & Heaton, 2022). After independence in 1960, political elites, often drawn from educated and regional power bases, inherited these structures, consolidating control over state resources. The discovery of oil in the 1950s amplified elite dominance, as political leaders and their allies monopolised oil revenues, fostering patronage networks that rewarded loyalty with access to wealth (Ogbuigwe, 2021). For example, the First Republic (1960-1966) saw regional elites manipulate ethnic divisions to secure power, leading to political instability and the 1966 military coup.

Military rules (1966-1979, 1983-1999) entrenched elite capture further. Military regimes, such as those of Yakubu Gowon, Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha, and Abdulsalami Abubakar, centralised resource control, with oil revenues funnelled through state-controlled enterprises like the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (NNPC), established in 1977 (Adebanwi, 2021). Elites, including military officers and their civilian allies, amassed wealth through corrupt contracts and oil bloc allocations (Ogbuigwe, 2021), while most Nigerians languished in poverty (World Bank, 2022). Patronage networks expanded, binding elites to regional and ethnic constituencies (Chatham House, 2022), which deepened social divisions. By 1999, these networks had solidified a political class adept at exploiting state resources, setting the stage for elite capture in the democratic era (Adebanwi, 2021; Campbell, 2013).

Transition to Democracy (1999)

The transition to democracy in 1999, following decades of military rule, promised accountable governance but instead perpetuated elite dominance. The Fourth Republic, inaugurated with Olusegun Obasanjo's presidency, saw the emergence of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) as a dominant force, controlled by elites who had thrived under military regimes (Mustapha & Campbell, 2022). These elites, including former military officers, business tycoons, and traditional leaders, leveraged their wealth and networks to dominate political parties

and elections. The 1999 elections, marred by allegations of rigging, exemplified how elites used financial power to secure political office (Olarinmoye & Awogbenle, 2023).

Political parties became vehicles for elite capture, with party primaries controlled by “godfathers”—powerful patrons who selected candidates in exchange for loyalty (Agbiboa, 2023). This system marginalised grassroots participation, as candidates relied on elite financing rather than popular support (Oji & Eme, 2014). Oil wealth continued to fuel patronage, with elites controlling budget allocations and public contracts (Ezirim, 2013). The 1999 Constitution, while establishing democratic institutions, granted significant powers to the executive, enabling presidents and governors to distribute resources to loyalists (Egemonu, 2022). This transition, rather than disrupting elite power, entrenched it within democratic structures, creating a paradox where democratic processes legitimised elite control.

Institutional Weaknesses

Weak institutions have been a critical enabler of elite capture in Nigeria’s democracy (Mustapha & Campbell, 2022). The judiciary, intended to check elite excesses, is often compromised by corruption and political interference. For example, high-profile corruption cases, such as those involving former governors, frequently stall due to judicial delays or elite influence (Transparency International, 2023). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), responsible for conducting elections, faces accusations of bias and logistical failures, as seen in the 2003 and 2007 elections, which were widely criticised for rigging (Cheeseman et al., 2024). These weaknesses allow elites to manipulate electoral outcomes, ensuring their dominance.

Other institutions, such as the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), struggle with limited autonomy and selective prosecutions, often targeting opponents of the ruling elite while sparing allies (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2024). The legislature, meant to provide oversight, is co-opted through patronage, with lawmakers receiving lucrative allowances to align with executive interests (Fagbadebo, 2023). These institutional failures, rooted in the pre-democratic era’s legacy of centralised power, enable elites to exploit democratic processes, perpetuating a system where the benefits of democracy—accountability, equity, and representation—remain elusive for most Nigerians.

Mechanisms of Elite Capture in Nigeria’s Democratic Governance

Since Nigeria’s return to democracy in 1999, elite capture has persisted through deliberate mechanisms that allow a small political and economic elite—politicians, business tycoons, and traditional leaders—to dominate democratic processes, undermining equitable governance. This section examines four key mechanisms—political patronage and clientelism, resource control, electoral manipulation, and policy capture—supported by case studies that illustrate their operation in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic.

Political Patronage and Clientelism

Political patronage and clientelism are central to elite capture, enabling elites to maintain power by exchanging resources for loyalty (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). Elites use political appointments to reward allies, ensuring control over state institutions (Demarest, 2022). For instance, governors often appoint loyalists to key positions, such as commissioners or agency heads, who facilitate access to public funds (Olarinmoye & Awogbenle, 2023). Contracts for infrastructure or public services are awarded to cronies, often at inflated costs, as seen in the recurrent over-budgeting of road projects in states like Lagos and Rivers (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2024). Vote-buying is another prevalent tactic, with elites distributing cash or goods during elections to secure votes. During the 2023 general elections, reports documented candidates paying voters as little as ₦5,000 (approximately \$3) to influence outcomes, particularly in rural areas (*Premium Times*, 2023). These practices entrench a cycle where elites maintain power by co-opting supporters, marginalising the broader electorate.

Resource Control

Control over Nigeria's oil revenues, budgets, and state-owned enterprises is a cornerstone of elite capture. Oil, accounting for over 80% of government revenue, is managed through the Nigerian National Petroleum Company (NNPC), which has been criticised for opacity and elite-driven mismanagement (Chatham House, 2022). Elites, including politicians and their business allies, secure lucrative oil bloc licenses and contracts, diverting billions in revenue (Ovadia, 2016). For example, in Nigeria, a 2021 audit revealed \$6.3 billion in unremitted oil funds, implicating elite networks within the NNPC (NEITI, 2021). Budgetary processes also enable capture, as elites influence allocations to favour their interests. State governors, for instance, manipulate local budgets to fund patronage networks, leaving critical sectors like health and education underfunded (World Bank, 2022). State-owned enterprises, such as the Nigerian Ports Authority, serve as cash cows for elites through inflated contracts and non-competitive tenders, perpetuating a system where public resources benefit a few (Transparency International, 2023).

Electoral Manipulation

Electoral manipulation ensures elites retain power through undemocratic means within democratic structures (Omotola, 2022). Rigging, voter suppression, and control over party structures are common tactics (Turnbull, 2021). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has faced criticism for logistical failures and bias, as seen in the 2007 elections, which were widely regarded as flawed due to vote rigging (Mustapha & Campbell, 2022). Voter suppression tactics, such as delayed polling materials in opposition strongholds, were reported in 2023 (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Elite-controlled party structures further entrench capture, with political "godfathers" selecting candidates during primaries. For example, in Anambra State, godfathers like Chris Uba have dictated party nominations, sidelining

grassroots candidates (Agbiboa, 2023). These practices ensure that elections, while formally democratic, reinforce elite dominance, limiting genuine political competition.

Policy Capture

Policy capture occurs when elites influence legislation and policies to favour their economic and political interests (Khan & Sundaram, 2023). Tax exemptions and subsidies, particularly in the oil and gas sector, are prime examples. In 2021, the Nigerian government granted tax holidays to oil companies linked to political elites, costing the treasury billions in revenue (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2024). Subsidy policies, such as the fuel subsidy regime, have been manipulated to benefit elite-owned firms. Until its partial removal in 2023, the fuel subsidy system enriched importers with political connections, while ordinary Nigerians bore the cost of inflated prices (*Premium Times*, 2023). Elites also influence privatisation policies, acquiring public assets at undervalued prices, as seen in the 2000s power sector reforms, where politically connected firms secured lucrative deals (Adebanwi, 2021). Such policies entrench economic inequality, prioritising elite wealth over public welfare. According to the House of Representatives Ad-Hoc Committee Report (2012), over ₦1.7 trillion was fraudulently claimed under the subsidy regime.

Case Studies

Two case studies illustrate these mechanisms. The 2012 Fuel Subsidy Scandal exposed how elites siphoned billions through fraudulent subsidy claims (Agbiboa, 2013). Investigations revealed that firms linked to political elites, including relatives of PDP officials, received over \$6 billion in payments for unverified fuel imports, facilitated by lax oversight and patronage networks (Agbiboa, 2013). This scandal exemplifies resource control and policy capture, as elites manipulated subsidy policies for profit, while fuel shortages persisted for citizens. The 2023 General Elections further highlight electoral manipulation and clientelism. Reports documented widespread vote-buying and INEC's failure to deploy electronic voting systems effectively, allowing elite-backed candidates to dominate (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In Lagos, for instance, APC elites allegedly used thugs to suppress opposition voters, ensuring their candidates' victories (*Premium Times*, 2023). These cases demonstrate how elites exploit democratic processes, consolidating power and wealth at the expense of the masses.

Winners and Losers: A Distributional Analysis

Elite capture in Nigeria's democracy creates stark disparities, concentrating wealth and power among a small elite while marginalising the majority. This section analyses who gains and who loses, quantifies the social and economic impacts, and examines the political consequences, highlighting the paradox of democratic institutions failing to deliver equitable outcomes.

Who Gains?

The primary beneficiaries of elite capture are Nigeria's political, economic, and traditional elites, who leverage democratic structures to accumulate wealth, consolidate power, and enhance social influence (Hoffmann & Patel, 2020). Politicians, particularly governors, senators, and party leaders, amass wealth through control over budgets and contracts. For instance, state governors often award inflated infrastructure contracts to allied firms, pocketing kickbacks (Ogunleye & Adeyemo, 2024). Business tycoons, such as those in the oil and telecommunications sectors, benefit from favourable policies and licenses secured through political connections (NEITI, 2021). Traditional leaders maintain influence by aligning with political elites, securing patronage in exchange for mobilising community support (Agbibo, 2023). These elites consolidate power through patronage networks, ensuring loyalty from subordinates, and wield social influence by shaping public narratives, often through media ownership or religious affiliations (Hoffmann & Patel, 2020). Their ability to exploit democratic institutions—elections, budgets, and policies—entrenches their dominance, creating a cycle of self-reinforcing privilege (Adebanwi, 2021).

Who Loses?

The losers of elite capture are the masses, particularly the rural and urban poor, youth, and marginalised groups, who face poverty, unemployment, and lack of access to basic services. Nigeria's rural poor, constituting over 60% of the population, reside in areas with inadequate infrastructure, such as unreliable electricity and poor roads, as resources are diverted to elite-driven projects (World Bank, 2022). Urban poor, including slum dwellers in Lagos and Abuja, face similar challenges, with limited access to clean water and sanitation. Youth, who make up 70% of Nigeria's population, suffer from high unemployment rates—33% in 2023—exacerbated by the elite's monopolisation of economic opportunities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Marginalised groups, such as women and ethnic minorities like the Ogoni, are disproportionately excluded from political and economic participation. For example, women hold only 4% of seats in the National Assembly after the 2019 general elections, reflecting elite gatekeeping (UN Women, 2022). After the 2023 general elections, women occupy 4.2% of the seats in Nigeria's 10th National Assembly. This includes 3 out of 109 seats (2.7%) in the Senate and 17 out of 360 seats (4.7%) in the House of Representatives (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre, 2023). These groups bear the brunt of elite capture, as public funds intended for development are diverted, leaving them without essential services.

Social and Economic Impacts

Elite capture drives profound social and economic disparities, quantifiable through key indicators. Nigeria's Gini coefficient, a measure of income inequality, was 35.9 in 2021, among the highest in Africa, reflecting elite concentration of wealth (World Bank, 2022). The poverty rate stood at 40.1% in 2022, affecting 88 million Nigerians, with rural areas hit hardest due to neglected infrastructure (World Bank, 2022). Access to education is severely limited, with 20 million children out of school in 2023, particularly in northern states where elite-driven budget

misallocations prioritise patronage over public goods (UNICEF, 2023). Healthcare access is similarly dismal; Nigeria's maternal mortality rate of 917 per 100,000 live births in 2020 is among the world's highest, driven by underfunded hospitals (WHO, 2022). Elite control over oil revenues, which account for 80% of government income, exacerbates these disparities, as funds are diverted to private accounts or elite projects rather than social services (NEITI, 2021). These statistics underscore how elite capture perpetuates systemic inequality, undermining the redistributive potential of democracy.

Political Consequences

The distributional impacts of elite capture have severe political consequences, including voter apathy, distrust in institutions, and risks of democratic erosion. Voter turnout in Nigeria's general elections has declined, dropping to 27% in 2023 from 35% in 2015, reflecting disillusionment with elite-dominated politics (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Public distrust in institutions is widespread; a 2022 Afrobarometer survey found that 70% of Nigerians lack confidence in the judiciary and electoral commission, viewing them as tools of elite control (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2022). This distrust fuels apathy, as citizens perceive voting as ineffective against elite manipulation. The risk of democratic erosion is evident in rising political violence and electoral irregularities, as seen in the 2023 elections, where elite-backed candidates used vote-buying and intimidation to secure victories (*Premium Times*, 2023). Persistent elite capture threatens Nigeria's democratic consolidation, as it erodes legitimacy and increases the potential for unrest, particularly among disenfranchised youth, who have fuelled protests like #EndSARS in 2020 (Chatham House, 2022).

The Paradox of Democracy in Nigeria

Nigeria's Fourth Republic, established in 1999, promised accountable governance through democratic institutions, yet elite capture persists, creating a paradox where democratic processes coexist with undemocratic outcomes. Elections, legislatures, and the constitution function as facades that mask elite dominance, while institutional weaknesses and external factors exacerbate the failure to curb elite control. This section analyses the mechanisms sustaining this paradox, highlighting why Nigeria's democracy fails to deliver equitable governance.

Facade of Democratic Processes

Nigeria's democratic processes—elections, legislatures, and constitutional frameworks—often serve as facades that legitimise elite dominance rather than empower citizens (Ashindorbe, 2018). Elections, intended to reflect public will, are undermined by elite manipulation through vote-buying, rigging, and intimidation. The 2023 general elections, for instance, saw widespread vote-buying, with candidates offering cash to voters, particularly in rural areas, ensuring elite-backed candidates' victories (*Premium Times*, 2023). Legislatures, meant to check executive power, are co-opted through patronage, with legislators receiving lucrative allowances to align with elite interests (Olarinmoye & Awogbenle, 2023). The 1999 Constitution, while establishing

democratic structures, grants significant powers to the executive, enabling presidents and governors to control resources and appointments, reinforcing elite dominance (Mustapha & Campbell, 2022). These processes create an illusion of democracy, masking the reality that elites manipulate outcomes to maintain power, leaving citizens with limited influence.

Institutional Weaknesses

Institutional weaknesses, including a lack of accountability, judicial corruption, and a weak civil society, enable elite capture to flourish (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). The judiciary, intended to uphold the rule of law, is compromised by corruption and political interference (Odinkalu, 2023). High-profile corruption cases, such as those involving former governors, often stall due to judicial delays or elite influence, with only 3% of corruption cases resulting in convictions between 2015 and 2022 (Transparency International, 2023). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) lacks autonomy, as seen in its failure to address electoral irregularities in 2023, including delayed voting materials in opposition strongholds (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Civil society, crucial for holding elites accountable, is weakened by limited funding and government repression (Yagboyaju & Akinola, 2019). For example, the #EndSARS protests in 2020, which demanded accountability, faced violent crackdowns, discouraging civic activism (Chatham House, 2022). These weaknesses allow elites to exploit democratic institutions without fear of repercussions, perpetuating the paradox of a democracy that serves elite interests over public welfare.

External Factors

External factors, such as global economic pressures and foreign aid dependency, exacerbate Nigeria's democratic paradox by reinforcing elite control. Global economic pressures, including fluctuating oil prices, limit Nigeria's fiscal capacity, as oil accounts for over 80% of government revenue (NEITI, 2021). Elites exploit this vulnerability by negotiating international loans and contracts that benefit their networks, often at unfavourable terms for the state. For instance, Nigeria's external debt rose to \$43 billion in 2022, with elite-driven projects absorbing much of the funds (Gyimah-Boadi & Logan, 2022). Foreign aid dependency further entrenches elite capture, as aid is often channelled through elite-controlled institutions, with minimal oversight (Andersen, Johannesen & Rijkers, 2020). Corruption, including embezzlement and bribery, significantly hampers the effectiveness of development aid in Nigeria, leading to dependency and elite capture (Development Aid, 2024). These external dynamics empower elites to maintain control over resources and policies, undermining democratic accountability and perpetuating a system where democratic institutions fail to serve the public.

Conclusion

This article has examined elite capture in Nigeria's democracy, revealing a paradox where democratic institutions—elections, legislatures, and the constitution—coexist with undemocratic outcomes. The mechanisms of elite capture—political patronage, resource control, electoral

manipulation, and policy capture—enable elites to monopolise power and wealth, as seen in scandals like the 2012 fuel subsidy fraud and 2023 election irregularities (Agbibo, 2013; *Premium Times*, 2023). These practices benefit politicians, business tycoons, and traditional leaders, who amass wealth and influence, while the masses—rural poor, youth, and marginalised groups—face poverty, unemployment, and limited access to services (World Bank, 2022). Social and economic impacts are stark, with a Gini coefficient of 35.9 and 40.1% poverty rates, compounded by 20 million out-of-school children and high maternal mortality (UNICEF, 2023; WHO, 2022). Politically, elite capture fuels voter apathy (27% turnout in 2023), institutional distrust, and risks of democratic erosion (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The paradox of democracy in Nigeria, driven by institutional weaknesses and external pressures like oil dependency, undermines governance legitimacy (NEITI, 2021). Addressing elite capture is urgent for democratic consolidation, requiring reforms to strengthen institutions, promote equitable policies, and empower civil society and technology (Chatham House, 2022). Without action, Nigeria risks further democratic backsliding, which threatens stability. Future research could explore comparative analyses with other African democracies, such as Kenya or Ghana, to identify transferable solutions, or investigate the role of digital platforms like X in fostering accountability, building on Nigeria's #EndSARS experience.

Recommendations

Based on the empirical findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are advanced to address elite capture and strengthen democratic governance in Nigeria:

First, there is an urgent need for comprehensive legal and constitutional reforms to ensure the financial and operational independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). This should include revising its funding structure to insulate it from executive interference and enhance its capacity to conduct transparent and credible elections.

Second, transparency and accountability in the management of oil revenues must be strengthened through the mandatory public disclosure of all revenue flows. This can be achieved by reinforcing the enforcement capacity of the Nigeria Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (NEITI) and ensuring strict compliance with its reporting standards.

Third, vote-buying should be explicitly criminalised and rigorously enforced through existing electoral laws, complemented by the deployment of digital election monitoring technologies. Such measures would enhance electoral integrity and reduce elite manipulation of the democratic process.

Fourth, the establishment of targeted social investment programmes funded through recovered looted assets is essential to mitigate the socio-economic inequalities perpetuated by elite capture. These programmes should prioritise vulnerable groups, particularly the youth and rural poor.

Finally, judicial reforms are necessary to improve accountability by expediting corruption cases. This includes the establishment of specialised anti-corruption courts and procedural mechanisms designed to reduce delays and limit elite interference in the judicial process.

Collectively, these measures provide a practical framework for curbing elite dominance and promoting a more inclusive and accountable democratic system in Nigeria.

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