

IMPACT OF EARLY CAMPAIGNING ON GOVERNANCE AND POLICY DELIVERY IN NIGERIA: A CASE STUDY OF THE 2027 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT: In recent years, Nigeria has experienced a consistent pattern of early campaigning in the election cycle, which influences the political behaviour of elites. This poses a serious threat to democratic governance and service delivery in Nigeria. The paper critically analyses the phenomenon of early campaigning and mobilisation by political aspirants and their supporters before the official campaign period begins. It examines how ruling parties and opposition groups use early campaigning tactics without regard for existing electoral laws. Public Choice Theory and Good Governance Theory were adopted as the theoretical frameworks of analysis. Secondary data collected from internet sources, journals, official documents, including NBS release, foreign and local newspapers, legal documents, and academic literature were analysed, using the content analysis method to identify macro-governance constraints and policy gaps that hinder the realisation of democratic benefits in Nigeria. Evidence from other democracies was compared to Nigeria's experience to extract lessons. The findings indicate that early campaigning has had a negative impact on governance and service delivery, exploiting weaknesses in the Constitution and the Electoral Act 2022. This phenomenon has impacted public funds and eroded the foundations of governance and service delivery objectives. The paper concludes with policy and institutional recommendations aimed at closing legal loopholes and ensuring strict compliance with electoral laws in Nigeria, particularly by strengthening INEC's capacity to enforce these laws and prevent distractions from governance and service delivery.

Keywords: Early Campaigning, Governance, Policy Delivery, Electoral Cycle

BACKGROUND

Early campaigning has emerged as a persistent feature of Nigeria's democratic politics, shaping the behaviour of political elites and the trajectory of governance. The phenomenon refers to sustained mobilisation and electoral messaging by aspirants and their supporters before the official campaign window as defined by the Electoral Act 2022 and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) guidelines. While early mobilisation is not inherently undemocratic, its prevalence in Nigeria has raised questions about its impact on state capacity and the delivery of core government policies (Nwozor & Olanrewaju, 2022; Adetula, 2024).

The problem lies in the interaction between political incentives and weak institutional enforcement. Nigeria's presidential system is often characterised by patronage politics, fragile party structures, and intense elite competition that distort the policy agenda (Yagboyaju, 2019; Agbese, 2023). These conditions encourage politicians to prioritise electoral advantage over public service delivery. Historical patterns indicate that as elections approach, typically two to three years in advance, coalitions often redirect resources and attention to politically visible projects, sometimes at the expense of ongoing reforms or long-term development plans (World Bank, 1992; Kramon, 2017).

The roots of this pattern can be traced back to the post-1999 democratic era, during which successive administrations faced mounting campaign pressures that disrupted governance. For instance, the Obasanjo government's focus on succession politics between 2003 and 2007 diverted state resources to internal party contests and the controversial third-term agenda (Suberu, 2007; Ojo, 2007). Similarly, under President Goodluck Jonathan's administration, partisan realignments and early presidential contestation between 2013 and 2015 contributed to policy drift in sectors such as power and security (Oloruntoba & Falola, 2020). More recently, President Muhammadu Buhari's second-term administration faced criticism for governance slowdown from 2018 onward as political actors shifted attention to the 2019 polls (ICG, 2019). These historical experiences reveal a recurring pattern where premature political manoeuvring undermines policy consistency and weakens institutional accountability.

However, the period after the 2023 general elections has already shown signs of similar dynamics. Reports indicate that by mid-2025, leading figures within the ruling All Progressives Congress and opposition parties had begun consolidating alliances, unveiling billboards, and engaging in endorsement campaigns for the 2027 presidential race (Reuters, 2025; Punch, 2025). There is a tendency for premature political positioning to risk further distracting the federal government from pressing governance priorities, including implementing fuel-subsidy savings, stabilising the naira, and addressing widespread insecurity (Guardian, 2024; World Bank, 2023).

Since Nigeria resumed democratic rule in 1999, elections have played a central role in expressing citizen choice and legitimising government. However, politics in Nigeria has increasingly seen campaigns starting far ahead of official timelines, with politicians beginning visible mobilisation, alliance-building, and political positioning well in advance of the presidential election. This phenomenon of early campaigning raises serious concerns about its implications for governance, policy delivery, and the performance of administrations in Nigeria. Understanding the connection between early campaigning and governance policy implementation is therefore essential for Nigeria's democratic strengthening. It demonstrates how electoral incentives can undermine policy consistency, divert public resources to politically advantageous projects, and foster public mistrust in state institutions (Transparency International, 2023; Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023). It therefore raises a pertinent question: how does early campaigning shape governance priorities and policy delivery in Nigeria with reference to the lead-up to the 2027 presidential election? In this context, the 2027 presidential election cycle presents a key opportunity to determine whether lessons from previous administrations have been learned or if the cycle of campaign-driven governance disruptions will continue.

This paper, therefore, examines the effects of early campaigning on governance and policy delivery in Nigeria, focusing on the 2027 presidential election. By clarifying this relationship, the study seeks to contribute to evidence-based policy recommendations that can improve electoral management and strengthen governance outcomes.

Conceptual Clarifications

Early Campaigning: This refers to political activities such as mobilization, alliance-building, political rallies, and public messaging that commence before the official campaign period declared by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). In the Nigerian context, INEC regulations stipulate specific timelines for campaigns; however, politicians often begin canvassing and projecting political ambitions long before the legal campaign window opens. Consequently, premature campaigning politicizes governance and diverts resources away from developmental priorities (Omilusi, 2020; Amao & Ambali, 2023).

Governance: This concept denotes the exercise of political authority and the management of a country's resources in accordance with established legal and institutional frameworks. It encompasses transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to citizens (World Bank, 1992).

Policy Delivery: It connotes the effective implementation of government programmes and public services as a vital component of governance. In essence, there is an indication that improvements in public service delivery (especially via digital or electronic mechanisms) are strongly linked with greater public trust in government institutions (Olumide, Ishola & Ajadi, 2020; Adejuwon, 2012).

Electoral Cycle: This concept refers to the continuous process through which elections are prepared, conducted, and reviewed within a given democratic system. It includes pre-election activities (such as voter registration, party primaries, and campaigns), election-day processes, and post-election adjudication or reforms (International IDEA, 2006). In Nigeria, the electoral cycle is legally regulated by the Electoral Act 2022 and INEC guidelines, which specify timelines for campaigns, party activities, and elections.

The Nigerian Constitutional and Legal Framework on Electioneering

A cursory look at the Nigerian Constitution (1999, as amended) and the Electoral Act 2022 provides the legal foundation for regulating electioneering, including timelines for campaigns and sanctions for violations.

- Section 94(1) of the Electoral Act 2022 explicitly stipulates that campaigns by political parties shall commence 150 days before polling day and end 24 hours before Election Day. Any political activity outside this window constitutes a breach of the law (Electoral Act, 2022).
- Section 88(1–9) also regulates campaign financing by prescribing ceilings for political expenditure. This is aimed at curbing excessive spending and ensuring a level playing field.

- INEC, empowered by Section 153(f) of the 1999 Constitution, issues guidelines for campaign conduct, including the use of public resources, hate speech regulation, and campaign schedules.

Thus, while the legal framework is clear, the persistent gap between law and practice demonstrates a recurring challenge in Nigeria's electoral process in terms of compliance and enforcement. The persistence of such practices highlights the gap between Nigeria's legal framework and actual political behaviour, which this study seeks to interrogate.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Clientelism, Electoral Incentives, and Early Mobilisation This body of research argues that when political returns to office are large and institutional oversight is weak, politicians engage in early mobilisation and clientelist spending to secure votes. The case is clearly made by *Money for Votes*, which shows that in sub-Saharan Africa, electoral clientelism often involves investments in visible goods and services before formal campaign seasons. These visible strategies are deployed early because they help build a reputational advantage when policy credibility is uncertain. For this paper, this framework explains why Tinubu and other elites might invest in infrastructure branding or public endorsements well ahead of 2027 (Kramon, 2017). This act has the potential to divert the attention of political leaders from pursuing policy goals and neglecting good governance, thereby detracting from democratic consolidation.

Political Economy of Early Campaigning: A growing body of literature focusing on the nexus between early campaigning and governance outcomes has become increasingly salient in Nigeria's contemporary political environment. Nigeria's socio-economic realities, characterized by over-dependence on oil, widespread poverty, fragile institutions, and external shocks, have transformed clientelism from a short-term electoral tactic into a dominant mode of governance (Aiyede & Isumonah, 2020). Nigeria's political economy is dominated by oil rents, which have historically shaped both state-society relations and the conduct of governance. The overreliance on oil revenue weakens fiscal accountability, as governments rely on resource rents rather than broad-based taxation to fund public expenditure (Watts, 2021). This rentier structure has institutionalized a political culture where access to state power equates to access to wealth. Consequently, political competition revolves around controlling distributive mechanisms rather than advancing programmatic or policy-based governance (Agbaje & Adejumobi, 2021).

Institutional Weakness and Extended Campaign Dynamics: Other works examine how legal and institutional constraints shape the timing of campaign behaviour. For example, analyses of Nigeria's electoral management point out that despite formal rules (such as those now codified in the Electoral Act 2022), enforcement is often lax. Elite contestation continues outside official campaign periods through intra-party politics, defections, and endorsements. Such behaviour signals that institutional authority (INEC, judiciary, law) matters less than political power configurations when it comes to early campaigning. These findings underscore the importance of examining how enforcement (or the lack thereof) affects governance outcomes during the 2025-2027 period (Nwozor & Olanrewaju, 2022; Omotola, 2010). These challenges imply that the rule

of law, a cardinal goal of good governance theory, is severely undermined, leading to undemocratic practices and a lack of trust among citizens in democracy.

Macro Governance Constraints and Policy Delivery Gaps: Concerning Nigeria's broader governance challenges, studies reveal that even when governments undertake reforms, issues such as weak capacity, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and corruption persist and are compounded by political distraction. Studies show that policy implementation in sectors requiring long-term commitment (health, education, security) is especially vulnerable during times of heightened political competition. When government attention is divided, reform momentum lapses, resources shift toward politically visible rather than technically necessary projects, and institutional stability is eroded. This is central to understanding the risks to policy delivery in the forthcoming campaigns (Yagboyaju, 2019; World Bank, 1992). By implication, these political distractions leading to a lack of development and weak institutional capacity affect democratic consolidation.

Political Finance, Transparency, and Public Trust: Another strand of literature focuses on the relationship between funding transparency, campaign finance regulation, and trust in government. The policy report *Political Finance in the Digital Age* provides current data showing how weak disclosure rules, opaque procurement, and corrupted incentives allow early spending to be hidden or mixed with government functions. These conditions generate public suspicion and erode legitimacy. For the current study, these findings suggest that how early campaign funds are used, reported, and perceived will influence not only policy output but also service delivery and citizen compliance (Adetula, 2021/2024).

Governance Continuity, Lame-Duck Effects, and Implementation Disruption: Empirical work and comparative analysis indicate that when administrations are nearing the end of their term or when political elites begin repositioning for future elections, policy continuity tends to suffer. Projects may be delayed, reform programmes postponed, bureaucratic reshuffles occur, and long-term planning is disrupted. These "lame-duck" dynamics have been documented in Nigeria under previous regimes and appear likely in upcoming electoral cycles. Thus, this literature provides a framework for examining whether the Tinubu administration's early campaigning is already creating similar disruptions to governance and policy delivery ahead of 2027 (BudgIT Nigeria, 2023; Carbone, 2024).

Democratic Consolidation and Recent Post-2023 Evidence: Early campaigning also affects Nigeria's democratic consolidation by undermining the rule of law's credibility and weakening civic trust. Comparative studies indicate that when parties prioritise electoral survival over service delivery, citizens become disillusioned, leading to reduced civic participation and compliance (Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023). Reports emerging after the 2023 election cycle, such as those by Premium Times (2025) and the Guardian (2024), highlight how rapid post-election defections and billboard campaigns have already reshaped political alignments ahead of 2027. Incorporating this evidence underscores the timeliness of the present study.

Empirical studies have shown that electoral integrity, which refers to the freedom, fairness, and credibility of elections, significantly affects good governance in Nigeria (Amao & Ambali, 2023). Voters' confidence in elections is correlated with their perceptions of government transparency,

the rule of law, accountability, and service delivery. When campaigns begin too early, they may undermine these linkages by diverting attention and resources away from pressing governance tasks; encouraging populist promises over long-term policy; and taxing institutional capacity (Amao, Ambali, & Araba, 2024).

In the study, INEC and the Challenges of Monitoring Campaign Finance in Nigeria, Assessment of the 2023 General Election, Ajayi (2025) aptly observed that INEC struggled with transparency, tracking, and enforcement of rules. This is attributed to inadequate legal and institutional capacity (in terms of manpower and resources) and a limited ability to monitor off-book funds. An indication that early campaigning may go unchecked, therefore influencing resource allocation and policy priorities without accountability.

Again, Arowolo & Ogande (2024), in a study Evaluating Social Media Influence on Political Mobilisation in the 2023 General Elections, however, found that 69.8% of respondents frequently interacted with political content, while 62.4% said that such content influenced their voting decisions. Also, misinformation and verification challenges were significant. These patterns suggest that early campaigning may gain traction through digital channels even before formal campaign periods, influencing public expectations and potentially affecting governance promises.

Moreover, past studies on electoral irregularities and political interference have revealed that weak regulatory enforcement, vote buying, and campaign finance abuses erode the credibility of elections and public trust. Such deficits are likely exacerbated when political actors engage in early campaign behaviour (Obiagu et al., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts two theories: Public Choice Theory **and** Good Governance Theory to analyze how early campaigning affects governance and policy delivery in Nigeria.

Public Choice Theory, advanced by Buchanan and Tullock (1965), views politicians as rational actors driven by self-interest, especially the pursuit of re-election. In Nigeria, this perspective explains why early campaigning has become entrenched: incumbents and aspirants calculate that entering the political contest early increases their chances of electoral survival. For example, incumbents may channel public funds into politically visible projects, expand patronage networks, or launch populist programmes to boost their appeal before official campaign periods. Opposition candidates likewise invest early in mobilization to compete with state-backed rivals (Kramon, 2017). This theory is particularly relevant to the 2027 elections, as it frames early campaigning not as accidental but as the logical outcome of political incentives in a highly competitive democracy.

Good Governance Theory, popularized by the World Bank (1989, 1992) and UNDP (1997), stresses principles such as transparency, accountability, and effective service delivery as the benchmarks of democratic governance. In the Nigerian context, the theory underscores how early campaigning undermines these governance principles. When leaders devote more energy to political survival than to policy implementation, developmental priorities are sidelined, and state resources are politicized. This erodes citizens' trust in government institutions and weakens the

legitimacy of democratic processes (Hyden, Court, & Mease, 2004; Fukuyama, 2013). Taken together, these frameworks illuminate both the cause and the effect of early campaigning. Public Choice Theory explains *why* political elites engage in premature electoral mobilization because it serves their rational self-interest. Good Governance Theory highlights '*what happens as a result*' of a diversion of attention and resources from governance, leading to weak policy outcomes and diminished democratic stability. This dual perspective is essential for understanding the Nigerian case, where the pressures of the 2027 Presidential Election risk distorting governance priorities in ways that threaten democratic consolidation.

Historical Context of Early Campaigning in Nigeria

This chapter situates the phenomenon of early campaigning in Nigeria within a historical trajectory that stretches from the return to civilian rule in 1999 to the present. It first highlights the general pattern of prolonged electoral mobilization in Nigeria and then offers four detailed case studies; Olusegun Obasanjo (2003–2007 succession politics), Goodluck Jonathan (2011–2015), Muhammadu Buhari (2019–2023 second term), and the early indications of the 2027 campaign season following the 2023 elections to show how early campaigning has interacted with governance and policy delivery.

Pattern of Early Campaigning in Nigeria since 1999

Since the transition to civilian rule in 1999, Nigerian electoral politics have exhibited a recurring pattern of prolonged pre-election manoeuvring and elite bargaining. Political actors routinely begin building coalitions, cultivating godfathers, and projecting successors well ahead of formal campaign seasons. Observers have documented how succession struggles, intra-party zoning arrangements, and elite bargaining often produce extended campaign-like activity that blurs the line between governance and politics (Ojo, 2006; Ojo, 2017). These extended pre-election dynamics have frequently coincided with uneven policy attention and instances where governmental projects or expenditures are timed for political advantage rather than driven by technocratic planning (Ojo, 2006; Nwozor & Olanrewaju, 2022).

Table 1: Pattern of Early Campaigning in Nigeria since 1999

Regime / Period	Early Campaigning Features	Campaign Pattern	Implications for Governance and Policy Delivery
Olusegun Obasanjo (2003; 2007 succession politics)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Push for constitutional amendment to allow a third term (2005–2006). - Strong elite competition over succession. - Endorsement and grooming of Umaru Musa Yar'Adua as PDP candidate ahead of 2007 polls. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elite-driven, intra-party bargaining and heavy use of incumbency power. - Campaigns centered on succession politics, not issues. - Early mobilization through political 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political attention diverted from governance to elite rivalries. - Politicized public appointments weakened policy execution. - Third-term saga destabilized

		endorsements and state structures.	institutions. - 2007 elections marred by irregularities, undermining public confidence.
Goodluck Jonathan (2011–2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intense politicking while facing Boko Haram insurgency. - Heavy campaign mobilization in the lead-up to the 2015 elections. - Security challenges politicized in campaign discourse. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personality-centered campaigns emphasizing continuity. - Heavy use of media and patronage networks. - Opposition framed campaigns around insecurity and corruption. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Political distractions reduced focus on counter-insurgency. - Security sector reforms weakened by electoral calculations. - Public services in conflict zones deteriorated. - 2015 defeat seen as a referendum on governance failures.
Muhammadu Buhari (Second term: 2019–2023)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Governance is intertwined with transition politics. - Visible projects and symbolic policies tied to political positioning. - Anti-corruption and security messaging used for political branding. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Issue-symbolic campaigns highlighting infrastructure projects. - Selective anti-corruption enforcement projected as achievements. - Reliance on incumbency advantage, elite alliances, and media messaging. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visible projects prioritized over long-term reforms. - Politicisation of anti-corruption and security eroded neutrality. - The social sector is underfunded relative to political projects. - Policy choices shaped by electoral incentives rather than technocratic planning.

Across these cases, a recurring pattern is evident: extended pre-election activity, whether in the form of succession politics, campaign distractions amid security crises, symbolic projects, or early endorsements, tends to reallocate political attention toward electoral calculation. The historical cases reveal three recurrent governance implications:

Distraction of political leadership: Extended politicking often coincides with uneven attention to long-term policy tasks (Obasanjo; Jonathan).

Politicisation of public resources: Projects and spending are sometimes timed or framed for reputational/political gain (Buhari-era indicators).

Institutional disruption: Elite manoeuvres, alliances, and reshuffles can impact bureaucratic continuity and hinder policy implementation (in all cases).

These historical dynamics underscore why the 2027 presidential cycle requires scrutiny: the same incentives that drove earlier early-campaign behaviours are in operation again, potentially amplifying governance risks identified by the Good Governance and Public Choice frameworks.

Comparison with Other Democracies

Kenya, Ghana, and the United States offer instructive contrasts in how institutional design, legal rules, and political culture shape the relationship between campaigning and governance. In Kenya, the Election Campaign Financing Act of 2013, as amended in 2022, establishes disclosure requirements and other controls aimed at increasing transparency in campaign financing. The law requires candidates, parties, and campaign committees to disclose contributions and issue receipts for certain donations (Republic of Kenya 2013, 2022). In practice, however, attempts to limit spending have been contested. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission proposed spending ceilings for the 2022 general election, but those limits were revoked amid political pushback and legal controversy. This illustrates both the potential and the enforcement challenges of campaign finance regulation (IEBC 2021; Mwakilishi, 2021; Standard Media, 2021).

Ghana's elections demonstrate the power of strong electoral institutions and community-level engagement in moderating the governance costs of prolonged campaigning. Research on Ghana's 2016 and 2020 campaigns finds that campaigning is socially embedded, with candidates cultivating long-term ties through local networks such as market associations and occupational groups. These forms of continuous engagement can sustain accountability and responsiveness if overseen by credible institutions (Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023). Still, Ghana's case also shows that early mobilisation is not automatically beneficial; it can become a vehicle for clientelist exchanges if not accompanied by transparency and accountability.

The United States exemplifies the permanent campaign in which candidates begin organising and fundraising years ahead of Election Day. Landmark judicial rulings, notably *Citizens United v FEC*, transformed the campaign-funding landscape by enabling substantial independent expenditures, thereby intensifying early mobilisation and the role of outside money (Federal Election Commission 2010). The US example illustrates both the costs of a long campaign season, such as increased fundraising pressure and potential short-term policy compromises, and the mitigating value of robust transparency and oversight mechanisms, including disclosure rules, investigative journalism, and judicial review (Caulfield, 2023; Reuters, 2024).

Lessons for Nigeria

From these comparative cases, several practical lessons emerge for Nigeria. First, legal rules on campaign finance and disclosure matter, but they must be designed in a way that allows for their enforcement. Kenya's experience shows that disclosure requirements and proposed spending caps can be useful instruments, but they require political will and institutional capacity to be effective (Republic of Kenya, 2013 2022; IEBC, 2021).

Second, strong electoral management bodies and independent judiciaries help sustain public trust and adjudicate disputes, as Ghana's relative stability suggests (Bob-Milliar & Paller, 2023).

Third, transparency mechanisms for advertising and political spending, as applied in parts of the United States and in state-level reforms such as Alaska's disclosure rules, can reduce the influence of opaque dark money and make early campaign activity more visible to citizens and watchdogs (AP News, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

Finally, Nigeria can adopt a mixed approach that combines enforceable disclosure rules, realistic spending limits, institutional strengthening for INEC, and civic education programs that encourage constructive early engagement rather than purely clientelist mobilisation.

Analysis of Tinubu's Early Campaigning in Nigeria (Post-2023 Alignments)

The aftermath of the contentious 2023 elections has shown an accelerated transition into the 2027 campaign cycle. By 2025, major political actors had begun visible mobilization. Political parties, such as the All Progressives Congress (APC), publicly endorsed President Bola Tinubu as their 2027 candidate, while opposition leaders signalled coalition-building to challenge the ruling party (Reuters, 2025; Financial Times, 2025; AP News, 2025). Media reports documented the renaming of government projects, the rise of billboards, elite defections, and early endorsements, all hallmarks of pre-campaign practices (Financial Times, 2025; Reuters, 2025; AP News, 2025).

Since taking office in May 2023, Tinubu's administration has been criticised for exhibiting signs of political repositioning ahead of the next election. In April 2025, the presidency publicly disowned campaign billboards and materials promoting Tinubu's second-term prospects in Abuja and Kano, citing breaches of the Electoral Act 2022 (Punch NG, 2025). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) also warned that open campaigning before 150 days to the election remains unlawful, yet noted that posters and rallies by groups supporting Tinubu were conducted well before official timelines (ThisDayLive, 2025).

Opposition parties such as the African Democratic Congress accused the ruling party of orchestrating premature rallies, endorsements, and billboard campaigns despite ongoing economic hardship, rising inflation, and insecurity (Vanguard, 2025). Furthermore, a surge in defections, particularly into the APC, illustrates how political actors have prioritised electoral expectations over governance performance, as local government chairmen, legislators, and governors aligned with perceived frontrunners for 2027 (Global Upfront, 2025; Premium Times via AllAfrica, 2025).

These unconstitutional political activities have been conducted with disregard for the existing laws of the country. For instance, Section 94(1) of the Electoral Act 2022 explicitly stipulates that campaigns by political parties shall commence 150 days before polling day and end 24 hours before Election Day. Any political activity outside this window constitutes a breach of the law (Electoral Act, 2022). This law not only provides when the political parties shall commence campaigning, but it also goes further in Section 88(1–9), which regulates campaign financing by prescribing ceilings for political expenditure. Interestingly, the constitution empowered INEC, as per Section 153(f), to issue guidelines for campaign conduct, including the use of public resources, regulation of hate speech, and campaign schedules. Despite these provisions, enforcement remains weak, leading politicians to often exploit loopholes by engaging in “subtle” forms of early campaigning, such as billboards, public endorsements, and charity events. Early campaigning also

takes the form of commissioning projects with political undertones, public endorsements, and charity events disguised as governance activities, which blur the line between governance and politicking, making legislation more difficult to enact (Obiagu et al., 2025; Idowu, 2023). The early movement into campaign mode already exhibits several governance-related dynamics. Government-linked projects and visible infrastructural interventions have, in some instances, been quickly framed as political achievements, with critics arguing that public works are being leveraged to build political capital rather than systematically address long-term development bottlenecks (Financial Times, 2025).

One of the most immediate consequences of prolonged politicking is the diversion of public funds toward activities that yield political returns. Political actors frequently exploit the weak oversight of campaign financing and public procurement systems to divert state resources into election-related purposes (Nwangwu, 2025). For example, social protection initiatives and emergency funds are periodically repackaged as welfare payouts tied to political mobilization (Nwangwu, 2025). Media accounts likewise show that as campaign cycles lengthen, governance operations slow down: scheduled administrative activities, policy meetings, and bureaucratic coordination are delayed or suspended under the logic of political expediency (DailyTrust, 2023). Such disruptions suggest subtle but pervasive diversion of resources and attention in favour of election readiness. Widespread media focus on 2027 manoeuvring has the potential to overshadow urgent governance problems: persistent insecurity, cost-of-living pressures, post-subsidy removal, and public service shortfalls, prompting concerns about democratic accountability and the timing of reform implementation (AP News, 2025; Financial Times, 2025).

Brazil has witnessed a transformation in digital campaigning due to regulatory changes and local fiscal impacts. The rise of digital tools and campaign finance rules, including new online ad regulations, has altered how campaigns reach and target voters. Online microtargeting and paid promotions reduce time and costs, enabling year-round campaigns that focus on media-friendly or populist policies and quick, visible projects rather than slow structural reforms (IDEA, 2024).

The Philippines serves as a clear example of entrenched local patronage and vote-buying, where politicians exchange material benefits for votes and manipulate local administration to direct resources to supporters. Evidence shows that patronage networks significantly influence local governance, as elites utilize public jobs and targeted public works as electoral tools. During lengthy campaign periods, these practices intensify, leading to uneven service delivery and a decline in essential public goods in favour of clientelist handouts (Anastacio & Morandante, 2023).

But when political actors prioritize short-term electoral gain over long-term governance goals, policy consistency suffers. The electoral logic encourages populist measures (e.g., sudden palliative schemes or consumer subsidies) that are politically salable but not always sustainable (Kramon, 2017). In Nigeria, policy reversals in sectors such as subsidy regimes, education funding, or health interventions are often timed to coincide with political cycles. These reversals create uncertainty for implementing agencies and development partners, who struggle to maintain continuity when every election cycle resets priorities (Akanke, 2022). Since bureaucrats sense that political priorities may shift quickly, they may hesitate to commit to long-term strategies. This

hesitation undermines implementation fidelity and discourages innovation or reforms requiring sustained support.

Each of these dynamics, resource diversion, policy inconsistency, governance paralysis, and trust erosion, is interlinked. Diverted resources fuel short-term projects, which in turn create discontinuities and fuel public suspicion, further undermining the institutional capacity to deliver. The cumulative effect is a governance environment skewed toward electoral survival rather than service to citizens. In the coming 2027 cycle, these patterns are likely to intensify unless structural reforms, vigilant oversight, and citizen pressure intervene to recalibrate the governance campaign balance.

During periods of early campaigning, this tendency becomes particularly visible as development initiatives are frequently politicized or delayed as leaders prioritize electoral advantage over sustained developmental outcomes (Omotola, 2019). Budgetary allocations are redirected toward short-term, highly visible projects located in electorally strategic zones, while broader developmental needs are sidelined (BusinessDay, 2023). Long-term reforms in key sectors, such as health, education, and infrastructure, are often undermined in favour of projects that deliver immediate political returns (Agbaje & Adejumbi, 2021). Additionally, inequalities are deepened through the patronage-based distribution of state resources, which reinforces socio-economic divides, and access to public goods is tied to political loyalty and electoral considerations rather than common entitlement (NBS, 2022).

Risks to Governance between 2025-2027

Early campaigning under Tinubu's administration poses several interlinked risks for governance and democratic consolidation:

1. **Neglect of policy priorities:** Political focus on the 2027 race could sideline urgent issues such as inflation management, insecurity, infrastructure rehabilitation, and investments in health and education (Premium Times via AllAfrica, 2025).
2. **Budgetary misallocation and waste:** Funds may be diverted toward visible but short-term projects or absorbed by political consultations, defections, and campaign branding (AllAfrica, 2025).
3. **Institutional distraction and fatigue:** Frequent political reshuffles, elite defections, and shifting alliances risk slowing bureaucratic processes and service delivery.
4. **Heightened political polarisation:** Intensified early rhetoric and identity-based appeals may deepen ethnic, religious, and regional divides, heightening the risk of misinformation and potential conflict.
5. **Legitimacy erosion and public distrust:** Citizens observing politicians prioritising re-election over welfare delivery may further lose confidence in institutions, potentially weakening civic engagement and democratic accountability.
6. **Impact on democratic consolidation:** Persistent focus on electioneering over governance could weaken the rule of law, dilute accountability, and compromise electoral integrity. Conversely, visible public displeasure may spur demand for reforms to strengthen campaign-finance regulation, internal party democracy, and institutional checks.

These developments reflect the Public Choice Theory expectation that rational office-holders prioritise re-election incentives over public goods, especially in resource-rich but weakly regulated contexts. At the same time, they highlight the Good Governance Theory's warning that a lack of transparency, weak institutional enforcement, and the politicisation of public projects undermine effective policy delivery and citizen trust. The government defended Tinubu's removal of the fuel subsidy in 2023 as a fiscal reform aimed at transparency (Independent Nigeria, 2025), but it was widely criticised for aggravating inflation and eroding trust due to perceived insufficient mitigation for vulnerable groups (Financial Times, 2024; Guardian, 2024). This case exemplifies how electoral calculations and campaign-style messaging can interact with critical reforms, complicating implementation and undermining public confidence.

A comparative perspective shows that similar dynamics have been observed elsewhere. In Ghana, intense pre-election spending and project commissioning have historically produced post-election fiscal stress and stalled reforms. Additionally, in Kenya, prolonged early politicking after 2017 resulted in delays in the implementation of the "Big Four Agenda" programmes, while in the United States, "lame-duck" presidential periods often witness declining legislative productivity. These cases suggest that early campaigning is not unique to Nigeria, but its effects are amplified by Nigeria's weaker regulatory enforcement and more fragile institutional capacity.

Overall, the Tinubu case demonstrates how premature politicking through resource diversion, institutional disruption, and erosion of public trust can jeopardise policy delivery and democratic resilience during the inter-election period. The analysis confirms that without stronger institutional checks and sustained governance focus, early campaigning will continue to threaten Nigeria's developmental commitments and the consolidation of its democracy.

Conclusion

The effect of early campaigning has led to the diversion of public funds, undermining the core goals of governance and service delivery. Historical evidence from the Obasanjo, Jonathan, and Buhari administrations indicates that the diversion of state resources, loss of policy focus, and politicisation of public institutions often intensify as election cycles approach. The emerging signs of early mobilisation for the 2027 presidential election suggest that these challenges may persist if not addressed.

The analysis demonstrated that early campaigning undermines service delivery, weakens public trust, and diminishes the legitimacy of democratic governance. The application of Public Choice Theory revealed how political actors, as rational self-interested agents, often prioritise electoral advantage over developmental goals. The Good Governance framework emphasised that sustained and transparent policy delivery is essential for strengthening accountability and consolidating democracy.

For Nigeria's democratic project to remain credible, a balance must be struck between legitimate political competition and responsible leadership. Strengthening institutional checks on early campaigning, safeguarding public resources, and prioritising service delivery throughout the electoral cycle are crucial steps. Ultimately, democratic legitimacy depends not merely on periodic

elections, but on the government's ability to deliver tangible improvements in the lives of citizens, even amid political contests.

Policy Recommendations

1. Evidence from past administrations shows that early campaigning often leads to governance paralysis in the last years of a term. To avoid this, the Office of the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (OSGF), working with the Chief of Staff to the President, the Ministry of Budget & National Planning, and any established Delivery Units like SERVICOM, should adopt a policy-delivery monitoring framework, with quarterly performance reviews published publicly between 2025 and 2027.
2. Historical patterns since 1999 demonstrate repeated violations of campaign timelines. INEC, supported by the judiciary, should tighten enforcement of the Electoral Act 2022 by clearly specifying sanctions for early mobilisation, including fines, disqualification of candidates, or restrictions on party activities.
3. Case studies revealed that public funds and state infrastructure are often diverted for political activities. Independent audit mechanisms, coordinated by the Auditor-General, the Office of the Fiscal Responsibility Commission, the Code of Conduct Bureau, and civil society partners, should be activated in pre-election years to monitor public expenditure during pre-election periods, ensuring that budgets are used strictly for service delivery.
4. The dominance of political godfathers and interest groups has weakened accountability and policy consistency. INEC should ensure that political parties institutionalise transparent internal primaries and limit the influence of external financiers to ensure that candidates are accountable to members rather than patrons.
5. Early politicking has contributed to declining public trust in Nigeria's democracy. Civil-society organisations, the media, and academic institutions should increase voter education campaigns emphasising the importance of governance performance over premature electoral contests.
6. Ghana's adherence to official campaign periods, Kenya's experience with campaign-finance regulation, and the United States' focus on governance in early presidential years provide useful models. Nigeria should strengthen open-budget and e-procurement systems to curb diversion of state resources to political mobilization, and to reduce the negative effects of early campaigning on policy delivery.

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