

Electoral Process and the Challenges of Persons with Disabilities in the 2023 Presidential Election in Nigeria's Calabar Municipality

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[0203] Abstract

The paper examined the level of inclusivity for persons with disabilities in Calabar Municipal Area of Cross River State in the 2023 presidential election in Nigeria. The study employed a survey research design and randomly recruited participants for the study. Two hundred and eighty (280) self-structured questionnaires were issued to the respondents; two hundred and sixty-four (264) responses were returned and validated for the study. The study employed descriptive analysis and inferential statistics, where data from the field survey were analysed using simple percentages presented in frequencies and tables. The instruments underwent face, content, and empirical validation. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, rate, and tables, were used to present the data. The hypothesis was tested using a chi-square statistical package for social sciences. Findings reveal that the electoral process in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area is not highly accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities. The study recommended the full and effective implementation of the accessibility provisions in the Electoral Act 2022, with a focus on making polling units and other electoral infrastructure truly accessible to persons with disabilities (PWDs).

Keywords: Democracy, Electoral process, Local government, PWDs

Introduction

In every liberal democracy, elections serve as a fundamental mechanism through which citizens exercise their right to choose leaders at various levels of government fairly and transparently. This process ensures that the individuals entrusted with governance have the legitimacy to make critical decisions that influence the socioeconomic and political trajectory of the state. Obkhedo, (2011), asserts that elections play a crucial role in recruiting political leaders within democratic societies. Similarly, Anifowose, (2003), describes elections as a system through which the general population selects elites to occupy leadership positions within a given political framework. Essentially, elections involve the selection of officials or representatives of an organised entity through voting by qualified members. Nigeria operates under a democratic government, with the process of electing political officeholders enshrined in the country's constitution. The 1999 Constitution established the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), which is responsible for organizing and overseeing Nigeria's electoral processes. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) conducts elections by the provisions outlined in the Electoral Act, which serves as the legal framework for electoral activities. The credibility, fairness, and peacefulness of elections largely depend on the extent to which these electoral guidelines and regulations are strictly followed.

The electoral process in Nigeria has a long and complex history, marked by periods of violence, fraud and instability. Since gaining independence from British colonial rule in 1960, Nigeria has experienced several military coups and transitions between military and civilian rule. The country's electoral processes have often been marred by corruption, rigging and human rights abuse. However, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities caters to the rights of persons with disabilities. It particularly recognises the need for persons with disabilities to be fully involved in the electoral process and other rights that impact them. This convention established several guiding principles, including rights related to participation, the right to political participation, the right to education, and the right to vote and be voted for. This convention stated that people with disabilities should be guaranteed the right to vote and inclusive education at all levels, without discrimination, on the basis of equal opportunity. However, upon examining the provisions of the Electoral Acts 2022, it is evident that there are significant inadequacies in the facilities that can enhance the rights of persons with disabilities to vote and be voted for in the electoral process.

Therefore, the Nigerian government have not done very well about these provisions. Minimal provisions are contained in the Electoral Act 2022, as well as the Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act 2018, compared to the provisions of the convention. Notably, Article 29 of the Convention requires that all contracting states protect the rights of persons with disabilities in elections and public referendums. Going by these provisions, every state is obliged to make available the necessary facilities that will guarantee PWDs to vote freely in the polls conducted, but in the case of the Nigeria election, the election officials charged with these responsibilities fail to abide by the provisions of the Electoral Act which makes the individuals with disabilities to face difficulties. However, during the last elections, people with disabilities faced a lot of difficulties and challenges in the voter registration process. The provision in the Electoral Act 2022, intended for individuals, was not prioritised. As a result, only a few individuals with disabilities had access to participate in the election due to a lack of provisions for the required aid. Therefore, the issues faced by PWDs in Nigeria when it comes to electoral participation need to be addressed and checked correctly to foster inclusion and accessibility in the electoral process.

Statement of the problem

People with disabilities in Nigeria face numerous challenges when it comes to participating in the electoral process. They also face restrictions in education, health and employment. This applies to individuals seeking political office, whether through election or appointment, as well as those seeking to exercise their civic rights to vote. Far more significantly, disability discrimination inhibits political participation for a critical mass of Nigeria's electorate. Approximately 29 million people with disabilities (PWDs) continue to be denied their right to vote in national and local elections due to multiple institutional and practice-level barriers. Despite the passage of the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act in 2018, which guarantees the right of people with disabilities to participate fully in political activities, any challenges remain. The lack of enforcement of the law, combined with a general lack of awareness and understanding of disability issues among electoral officials and the general population, further exacerbates the problem.

Therefore, people with disabilities continue to face barriers to their human rights in all parts of the world. They experience mobility restrictions because of the incompatibility of the physical structures of public buildings and transportation systems with disability needs in Nigeria. According to Electoral Act 2022 section 54(2), INEC officials are mandated to "take reasonable steps to ensure persons with disabilities (PWDs), are provided with special needs and vulnerable persons are assisted during voting and provided with suitable means of communication during polls". Although these provisions were not prioritised during the 2023 general elections, they were ignored by the election officials. However, during the last elections, the Nigerian Electoral Commission promised to make the election more inclusive for persons with disabilities, but they failed to adhere to this promise. Thus, PWDs face difficulties and challenges during voter registration, and also inadequate aid is not put in place to ensure that persons with disabilities do not go through problems. Therefore, this research study aims to assess the challenges faced by persons with disabilities during the 2023 presidential election.

Objective of the study: To examine the level of inclusivity of the 2023 electoral process for persons with disabilities in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area of Cross River State

Research question and Research hypothesis: What is the level of accessibility and inclusivity of the electoral process for persons with disabilities in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area of Cross River State. The electoral process in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area is not highly accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities.

Literature Review

The concept of election, electoral Processes: Ighodalo (2012), characterizes elections as the primary means through which citizens in democratic societies select individuals to represent them in public offices. This process is integral to democratic governance as it enables people to exercise their right to choose leaders who will make decisions on their behalf. By participating in elections, voters express their preferences and hold elected officials accountable, ensuring a level of responsibility and responsiveness in governance. Elections serve as a crucial mechanism for public participation in the political process, allowing citizens to influence government policies and leadership choices. Herreros (2006), perceives elections as a tool for selecting competent politicians committed to the public good rather than personal or factional interests. Similarly, Dickerson, (2011), views elections as an

opportunity for citizens to evaluate the performance of those in power, recognizing that electoral promises do not always translate into concrete actions.

Beyond the act of voting, electoral processes encompass a series of pre-and post-election activities, including political party registration, voter enrollment, dispute resolution, and the swearing-in of successful candidates. These processes are fundamental to ensuring elections are conducted within a structured and transparent framework (Osakwe, 2008). Without well-defined rules and procedures, elections could lose their credibility and legitimacy. For democratic elections to be effective and genuinely reflect the will of the people, several key conditions must be met. These include the existence of an independent, competent, and impartial electoral management body; a judiciary capable of interpreting electoral laws and resolving disputes fairly; a free and unbiased media; and law enforcement agencies that ensure electoral security. Any threats to these conditions—such as vote rigging, ballot box snatching, or voter suppression—constitute a violation of democratic principles and undermine the sovereignty of the people (Odinkalu, 2019). The electoral process plays a critical role in shaping democratic systems, influencing party structures, political culture, and the formation of governments. Dickerson, (2011), defines the electoral process as the entire range of activities surrounding elections, from political party registration and voter enrollment to dispute resolution and the formal installation of elected officials. The integrity of this process is essential for maintaining free and fair elections, ensuring that electoral outcomes genuinely reflect the people's choices. Moreover, inclusivity in elections is critical, ensuring that all eligible individuals—regardless of their ethnicity, religion, social status, or disability—can participate without discrimination. Achieving this requires the implementation of robust institutional frameworks and effective administrative mechanisms to manage the electoral process efficiently.

Disability and Electoral Participation in Nigeria: Disability has been defined in multiple ways. According to the 2006 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), persons with disabilities are those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments that, when combined with societal and environmental barriers, hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis with others. This definition highlights that disability is not solely based on an individual's impairment but also results from external obstacles that restrict full engagement in social life (CRPD, 2006). Similarly, the 2011 World Report on Disability (WRD) describes disability as an outcome of the interaction between an individual's condition and societal constraints, such as inaccessible infrastructure, limited access to education and healthcare, and barriers in the justice system. The report emphasizes that physical impairments alone do not define disability; instead, it is the failure of society to provide adequate accommodations that restrict the independence of persons with disabilities (WRD, 2011).

In Nigeria, persons with disabilities (PWDs) represent a significant portion of the population. Estimates suggest that between 10% and 15% of Nigerians live with one form of disability or another (WHO,2011). Despite this, they encounter widespread barriers in various aspects of life, including education, employment, healthcare, and political participation (DPON,2017). A significant challenge PWDs face in Nigeria is the restriction of their political rights, both in terms of contesting for public office and exercising their voting rights. An estimated 29 million Nigerians with disabilities are systematically excluded from participating in elections due to discrimination and inadequate policies. Although Nigeria has ratified international agreements such as the CRPD and enacted the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities Act, the implementation of these frameworks remains weak. The Electoral Act of 2010 and the Election Manual of 2015 also fail to provide comprehensive safeguards to ensure that PWDs can participate fully in the electoral process. Beyond legal barriers, there are also practical challenges that hinder the political engagement of PWDs. Limited physical access to public buildings and transportation makes it difficult for many to reach polling stations. Additionally, societal stigma and neglect by families and communities further restrict their involvement in political life. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-dimensional approach, including the enforcement of existing laws, improvements in accessibility, and public awareness campaigns to combat discrimination. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in advocating for the political inclusion of PWDs and pressuring the government to implement necessary reforms.

In response to the exclusion of persons with disabilities, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006. This international treaty aims to promote, protect, and ensure the full enjoyment of human rights by persons with disabilities. It marks a shift in perspective, recognizing individuals with disabilities as active citizens with equal rights rather than passive recipients of social assistance (UN, 2011). Article 29 of the CRPD

emphasizes explicitly the need for signatory states to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate fully in political and public life, including voting and standing for election. Likewise, Article 12 addresses the legal recognition of persons with disabilities, advocating for equal capacity before the law. This implies that electoral laws should not disqualify individuals from voting based on guardianship status and should instead provide necessary assistance to enable their participation. Regional agreements, such as the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Principles and Guidelines on Democratic Elections, also call for the removal of barriers that hinder the political participation of persons with disabilities (UN, 2011).

To address these concerns, Nigeria took a legislative step in January 2019 when President Muhammadu Buhari signed the Discrimination Against Persons with Disabilities (Prohibition) Act into law. This legislation criminalizes discrimination against PWDs, mandates accessibility measures in public buildings and transportation, and introduces affirmative policies for their inclusion in public institutions (Punch, 2019). Despite this legal progress, the Nigerian government has been slow to implement the required changes. The five-year transition period stipulated by the law has not seen significant improvements in accessibility across public systems and infrastructure. Similarly, Nigeria's commitment to the CRPD, having ratified it in 2007, has yet to be fully realised through practical implementation. (shittu et al, 2024). Policy development within Nigeria's electoral system has also been slow in adopting inclusive measures for people with disabilities (PWDs). While the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) introduced a policy framework in 2018 to enhance electoral participation for persons with disabilities, its implementation has been limited. Following a pilot program during the 2019 general elections, there has been little indication of sustained progress (INEC, 2019).

Barriers faced by people with disability (PWDS) in election in Calabar Municipal: Ugwuibe et al (2021), emphasize that the ability of individuals with disabilities to participate in elections entirely is greatly influenced by the accessibility of polling stations, voting technologies, and other elements of the electoral process. Various interrelated obstacles—spanning social, political, physical, and economic domains—often hinder their civic engagement. For example, research has established a strong correlation between poverty, disability, and reduced voter turnout, underscoring the systemic barriers that many people with disabilities face in exercising their democratic rights. Expanding on these challenges, Aka and Balogun (2022), have highlighted that deep-seated societal biases, particularly those tied to the medical model of disability, have perpetuated stigma against individuals with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, further limiting their political participation. Additionally, physical barriers such as inaccessible polling units, ineffective voting technology, and uninformed election officials reflect ingrained societal assumptions about who is entitled to vote. These discriminatory attitudes often lead to the exclusion of persons with disabilities from the electoral process (Haruna, 2017). Consequently, people with disabilities frequently encounter obstacles at the crossroads of societal expectations regarding normalcy, competence, and civic responsibility. Accessibility issues affect every stage of the electoral cycle, making it difficult for individuals with disabilities to participate fully in political activities. This highlights the need for deliberate strategies to enhance their electoral inclusion (Ugwibe et al, 2022).

Barriers to Political Participation for Persons with Disabilities: The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) developed a framework in 2014 outlining how barriers to political engagement affect persons with disabilities at all phases of the electoral cycle—before, during, and after elections. Using Nigeria's 2023 general elections as a case study, several persistent obstacles can be identified: **(a) Cumbersome Voter Registration Processes:** The voter registration process in Nigeria has long been characterized by inefficiencies, creating difficulties for the general electorate and disproportionately affecting persons with disabilities. Lengthy and poorly organised queues, frequent technical malfunctions, and inadequate staffing discourage participation in the first stage of the electoral process. These logistical challenges serve as deterrents, making it particularly arduous for individuals with disabilities to obtain their voter identification cards and engage in elections. **(b) Inaccessible Electoral Information:** Voter education plays a crucial role in equipping citizens with knowledge about the electoral process, including when and how to vote, the names of available candidates, the importance of civic participation, and their voting rights. However, there is a significant lack of inclusivity in the dissemination of electoral information. While election materials are often translated into multiple languages to cater to Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups, they rarely account for the needs of persons with disabilities. The absence of accessible communication methods—such as sign language

interpretation, easy-to-read formats, and tactile materials—excludes many disabled individuals from the electoral process, further deepening their political marginalization (Ayanleye, 2013). To address this issue, electoral management bodies, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), alongside political parties, must actively engage with the disability community. This can be achieved through the adoption of inclusive communication strategies, including sign language interpretation, visually accessible materials, and simplified pictorial guides that enhance comprehension for individuals with intellectual or sensory impairments. **(c) Lack of Assistive Voting Materials:** Anyaele (2023) criticizes INEC for failing to provide essential voting aids, such as braille ballot papers and magnifying glasses, which would have facilitated voting for visually impaired individuals, including albinos. Furthermore, many temporary election workers were either unfamiliar with these assistive devices or demonstrated an indifferent attitude toward persons with disabilities. This lack of preparedness and sensitivity resulted in the disenfranchisement of many disabled voters, preventing them from exercising their fundamental political rights.

International Perspectives on Electoral Barriers for Persons with Disabilities: Beyond Nigeria, similar challenges persist across other regions. The European Union's report on the political participation of persons with disabilities reveals that approximately one in four individuals within the EU has a disability. However, in the 2019 European Parliament elections, over 800,000 people with disabilities were unable to vote due to various systemic barriers. The report identifies two primary challenges affecting electoral accessibility: **(a) Legal Restrictions:** Legislation in certain EU countries, including Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Malta, Poland, Portugal, and Romania, automatically disqualifies individuals under legal guardianship from voting. These laws create an additional layer of disenfranchisement for persons with disabilities, denying them the right to participate in democratic processes. **(b) Accessibility Constraints:** Despite the introduction of accessibility standards aimed at improving election participation, persons with disabilities still face significant hurdles, particularly in accessing polling stations, using digital platforms, and receiving election-related information through broadcasts. Many visually, hearing, or intellectually impaired voters encounter difficulties due to the absence of necessary accommodations, such as tactile voting devices, Braille materials, and audio or simplified reading formats.

Theoretical Framework

The Democratic Theory of Inclusivity: The Democratic Theory of Inclusivity emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s, with key proponents including political theorists Iris Marion Young, Nancy Fraser, and Bonnie Honig. Young's work argued that inclusive democracy requires the representation of marginalized groups and the acknowledgement of their social standpoints. Fraser, meanwhile, advocated for a "participatory parity" model, where all members of society have an equal opportunity to participate in political and social life. Honig's concept of "agonistic pluralism" highlighted the productive role of political conflict in driving social change and inclusion. At the heart of the Democratic Theory of Inclusivity are several significant assumptions. Firstly, it posits that democracy should extend beyond the formal electoral process to encompass broader social and political participation. Secondly, it recognizes that marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities, women, and persons with disabilities, often face significant barriers to meaningful political engagement and must be actively included in decision-making. Thirdly, the theory suggests that inclusive democracy can lead to better, more representative policies that better address the diverse needs of the community. Ultimately, it views political conflict and disagreement not as threats to democracy, but as productive forces that can drive social change and foster greater inclusion.

The utility and applicability of the theory to the present study can be seen in the argument that the marginalization of people with disabilities is a result of systemic and structural barriers that prevent - their full participation. Elections in Nigeria provide a stark example of how these barriers can operate to exclude people with disabilities from the political process. The physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers that people with disabilities face during the election are a result of systemic and structural issues that need to be addressed through policies and practices that promote accessibility and inclusion.

The implications of the marginalization of people with disabilities are far-reaching and have significant consequences for democratic governance. Firstly, it undermines the legitimacy of the electoral process, as people with disabilities are denied their right to participate fully. This can lead to a lack of trust in the electoral process and democratic institutions, ultimately undermining the stability and effectiveness of democratic governance.

More so, the exclusion of people with disabilities from the political process means that their voices and perspectives are not represented. This can result in policies and decisions that do not take into account the needs and experiences of people with disabilities, further entrenching their marginalization. Furthermore, the marginalization of people with disabilities can perpetuate the cycle of disability poverty. People with disabilities are already disproportionately represented on poverty rates, and their exclusion from the political process can deny them access to resources and opportunities that could help them escape poverty. The 2023 general election in Calabar municipality Local Government Area presents a critical test of the democratic theory of inclusivity, particularly about the political participation of citizens with disabilities. Despite comprising a significant portion of the population, individuals with physical, sensory, or cognitive impairments have long faced systemic barriers to exercising their fundamental right to vote, from inaccessible polling stations to inadequate voter education and support. In the lead-up to the 2023 election, disability advocates and civil society organizations raised urgent concerns about the persistent challenges facing voters with disabilities. They contend that many voters with disabilities encountered significant obstacles in accessing and navigating polling stations on election day. Issues such as lack of ramps, inaccessible voting machines, insufficient signage, and inadequately trained staff prevented a substantial number of disabled citizens from being able to independently and privately cast their ballots.

Furthermore, for voters with disabilities who could not physically reach a polling station, alternative voting methods such as mail-in, curbside, or early voting were either unavailable or severely limited in their availability and promotion. This effectively disenfranchised a sizable portion of the disabled electorate. Moreover, election officials did not make sufficient efforts to inform and educate voters with disabilities about their rights, the accommodations available to them, and the steps they could take to overcome accessibility barriers. As a result, many disabled citizens were unaware of their options and remained excluded from the electoral process. Viewed through the lens of the democratic theory of inclusivity, these systemic shortcomings underscore the extent to which the 2023 general election in Calabar Municipality Local Government Area fell short of upholding the principle of equal political participation for citizens with disabilities. By erecting a constellation of barriers that prevented a sizable segment of the electorate from freely exercising their right to vote, the electoral process fell short of the democratic ideal of full and meaningful inclusion.

Methodology

Research Design: The research design used in this study is the survey research design. This approach allowed for a detailed analysis of electoral process management and disability issues in Nigeria, with a specific focus on the 2023 general election. The survey research design is considered the most appropriate method for critically analyzing the issue of electoral inclusivity for persons with disabilities in Nigerian elections, which is the central focus of this research. The survey design is also seen as a complementary effect to the primary data collected by the researcher. This survey research design provides a blueprint for the entire research work. It enables a comprehensive examination of the electoral processes, management, and disability-related aspects in the context of the 2023 general election in Nigeria. The survey approach is well-suited to gather in-depth insights and a critical understanding of the challenges and opportunities surrounding the electoral inclusion of persons with disabilities in this crucial electoral event.

Area of study: The area of study is located in the Calabar Municipal Local Government Area of Cross River State. Calabar Municipal Local Government Area is located in the Southern Senatorial District of Cross River State. It lies between latitudes 4°15' and 5°N and longitudes 8°25'E. Odukpani Local Government Area bounds the municipal to the north, the Great Kwa River to the northeast, and the Calabar River and Calabar South Local Government Area to the south. Calabar municipal covers an area of 331.551 square kilometers. According to the 2006 national population census, Calabar municipal had a population of 179,392, which was part of Cross River State's total population of 2,892,988. However, the recent estimated population of Calabar municipal is around 279,000. The two main ethnic groups in Calabar municipal are the Efik and Ejagham people. Efik and English are the dominant languages used for commercial and social interactions, while Christianity is the predominant religion in the area.

Population of the study: The population for this study includes the blind, deaf and dumb, crippled, Albinos, and other categories of disabled persons who are eligible voters during the 2023 general election in Calabar Municipality Local Government Area, Cross River State.

Sources of data collection: For this study, both primary and secondary sources of data collection have been employed due to the nature of the work. Primary sources of data are firsthand materials generated by respondents through the use of questionnaires. While secondary data are sourced from textbooks, journals, unpublished papers, newspapers and internet sources.

Sample size: Two hundred and eighty (280) were randomly selected to represent the population size. Thus, 280 questionnaires were distributed randomly across the ten political wards in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area. The questionnaire would be structured in a closed-ended format to ensure good representation. The sample was drawn from the targeted population in the local government area. Those who were randomly selected to respond to the questionnaire represent the entire population.

QUESTIONNAIRE ON INCLUSIVITY OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN CALABAR MUNICIPAL

Political wards in Calabar municipal local government area	Sample size	Percentage
Ward 001	28	10%
Ward 002	28	10%
Ward 003	28	10%
Ward 004	28	10%
Ward 005	28	10%
Ward 006	28	10%
Ward 007	28	10%
Ward 008	28	10%
Ward 009	28	10%
Ward 010	28	10%
Total	280	100%

Sampling techniques: The stratified random sampling technique is used to select the sample from the study population. The study aims to sample a total of 280 respondents for administering the questionnaire. Ten Political wards were identified using the stratified sampling technique to represent the Calabar Municipal Local Government Area. The sample size cut across persons with disabilities.

Instruments of data collection: The research employed a quantitative method to generate and analyze data. This is through the use of questionnaires for survey and statistical computation. It was resolved, at the researcher's discretion, that it provides the necessary and relevant information without undue influence. The questionnaire design consists of two sections. Section A addresses the bio data of the respondents. Section B dealt with the closed-ended questionnaire, which included multiple-choice options. The questionnaire is of two types: closed-ended and open-ended. A closed-ended questionnaire is one where a question offers respondents a limited number of answer choices. The respondent is restricted from choosing without expressing a detailed view; such results are efficiently coded and collated by the researcher.

Open-ended questionnaires, on the other hand, allow respondents to express their views on a given issue or question without limit to the responses.

Therefore, for this study, the researcher has adopted a closed-ended format, using a three-point Likert scale. In other words, respondents will be required to respond with either "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Strongly Disagree," or "Disagree" to the question. A total of 280 copies of questionnaires were distributed to the selected individuals.

Statistical Instruments: Tables, mean, and sample percentages (%) will be used to interpret data drawn from the 280 respondents in the sample population.

Procedure for Data Analysis: In this study, data collected through questionnaires are analysed using frequency tables and simple percentages (%) for personal biographical data (i.e., Section A). Section B is analyzed with the Chi-square χ^2 statistical tool which is symbolized by:

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$$

Where:

χ^2 = Chi-square

Σ = Summation

O = observed frequency

E = expected frequency

Level of Significance: The hypotheses formulated for this study were tested at a 0.05 (5%) level of significance, and with this, we are about 95% confident that we have made the right decision.

Decision Rule: The decision rule is to reject the null hypothesis (i.e., H_0) at a 0.05 level of significance if the calculated value of χ^2 is greater than or equal to the tabulated value. The less the hypothesis is supported, the less it will be accepted.

Data Presentation and Analysis

For our primary data, a questionnaire was designed and distributed on different days and to some specific locations in the area of study, which captures the population of the study. At the end of the exercise, 264 responses were collected from our sample population of 280.

Table 1: THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN CALABAR MUNICIPAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA IS NOT ACCESSIBLE OR INCLUSIVE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES.

Statement	Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Are persons with disabilities able to independently access and use voting facilities in Calabar Municipality?	Yes	120	46%
	No	80	30%
	Undecided	64	24%
	Total	264	100%
Information about the electoral process is provided in accessible formats (e.g. Braille, large print, audio) for persons with disabilities in Calabar Municipality.	Yes	84	32%
	No	140	53%
	Undecided	40	15%
	Total	264	100%
Polling staff in Calabar Municipality are trained to assist and accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities during elections.	Yes	90	34%
	No	44	17%
	Undecided	130	49%
	Total	264	100%
The electoral process is designed to be inclusive and enable full participation by persons with diverse disabilities in Calabar municipality during the 2023 presidential election.	Yes	50	19%
	No	134	51%
	Undecided	80	30%
	Total	264	100%

Source: Field survey, 2024

The questionnaire in Table 4.6, which 120 respondents completed, translates to 46% of the total valid respondents, as stated. Yes, 80 of the respondents (30%) said No, while 60 of the respondents (24%) were undecided. This indicates that the majority of the respondents believe that Persons with disabilities can independently access and use voting facilities in Calabar Municipal.

In Table 4.7, a question was posed to the participants to ascertain whether information about the electoral process was provided in accessible formats (e.g., Braille, large print, audio) for persons with

disabilities in Calabar Municipal. Eighty-four respondents (32%) said yes, 140 respondents (53%) said No, while 40 respondents (15%) were undecided. This implies that the majority of respondents (140) believe that information about the electoral processes was not provided to them in an accessible format. Similarly, in Table 4.8, the question posed to the participants was to ascertain whether Polling staff (INEC ad-hoc staff) in Calabar Municipal are trained to assist and accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities during elections. Ninety of the respondents (34%) said Yes, 44 of the respondents (17%) said No, while 130 of the respondents (49%) were undecided. This indicates that the majority of respondents were either neutral or undecided on whether the polling staff (INEC ad-hoc staff) were adequately trained to assist and accommodate the needs of persons with disabilities during the 2023 general election.

Furthermore, in Table 4.9, of the 264 valid respondents retrieved, 50 respondents (19%) responded "Yes" to the question of whether the electoral process is designed to be inclusive and enable full participation by persons with diverse disabilities in Calabar Municipal during the 2023 presidential election. Fifty of the respondents (19%) said "Yes", 134 of the respondents (51%) said "No", - while 80 of the respondents (30%) were undecided. This indicates that the majority of the respondents to this question believe that the electoral process was not inclusive enough to enable their full participation in the 2023 presidential election in the Calabar municipal local government area.

Testing of Hypotheses: The hypothesis is tested using the most suitable question from the 264 questionnaires retrieved out of the 280 sampled population. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test formula is explored to test the hypothesis. The formula for the computation of Chi-square statistics

$$X^2 = \sum \frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$$

Where:

X^2 = Chi-square

Σ = Summation

O = observed frequency

e = expected frequency in each cell. It is calculated by dividing the total number of respondents by the number of cells in the categories.

Df is the "degree of freedom" (NL)

Hi Alternate hypothesis

Ho Null hypothesis

Hypothesis: The electoral process in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area is not highly accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities.

The response in Table 4.19: Is the electoral process designed to be inclusive and enable full participation by persons with diverse backgrounds to register to vote successfully during the 2023 presidential election?

CHI-SQUARE ANALYSIS OF HYPOTHESIS

Categories	O	E	O-E	(O-E) ²	$\frac{(O-E)^2}{E}$
Yes	50	88	-38	1444	16.40
No	134	88	46	2116	20.04
Undecided	80	88	-8	64	0.72
Total	264				X² = 37.16

Calculated X² value = 37.16

Degree of freedom (d.f) = number of column-1 i.e (n-1)=3-1=2

Level of significance = 0.05

Critical value = 5.99

Decision rule: Reject the null hypothesis (Ho) if the calculated value (X²) is greater than the critical value at 0.05 level of significance; otherwise, do not reject the Null hypothesis (Ho). Our findings have shown that the calculated X² value of 37.16 is greater than the critical value of 5.99 at a 0.05 level of significance. We, therefore, reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis. "It is

indicative that the electoral process in Calabar Municipality Local Government Area is highly accessible and inclusive for persons with disabilities”.

Discussion of Findings

From the foregoing, the findings in Hypothesis One (1) show that the 2023 electoral process was not sufficiently inclusive and accessible to people with disabilities (PWDs) to enhance their participation in the 2023 presidential election in Calabar Municipal Local Government Area. The majority of respondents lamented that they experience difficulties, such as inaccessible polling units that lack ramps and handrails, as well as a lack of assistive voting aids like Braille ballot guides, tactile ballot papers, and sign language interpretation for those with visual or hearing impairments. For them, this lack of inclusivity and accessibility led to their disenfranchisement and possible violation of their constitutional rights to vote, and he voted for them in an election.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The 2023 general elections in Nigeria present a critical juncture for the country's democratic development. As the largest economy and most populous country in Africa, Nigeria's ability to conduct free, fair, and inclusive elections will have significant implications not only for the country but also for the entire West African region. The inclusion of persons with disabilities (PWDs) in the electoral process is a crucial component of this, as Nigeria strives to uphold the democratic principles of universal suffrage and equal political participation for all citizens. The research findings from the Calabar municipal local government area highlight both the progress made and the significant challenges that remain in ensuring the full political inclusion of PWDs. On the positive side, the new Electoral Act 2022 has introduced essential provisions to enhance accessibility and accommodate the needs of PWDs, such as the use of Braille ballot papers, sign language interpretation, and the ability to receive assistance at polling units. The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has also developed a policy framework for the inclusion of PWDs and has taken steps to raise awareness and procure assistive devices.

However, the implementation of these measures remains uneven, with many polling units still lacking the necessary infrastructure and resources to cater to the needs of PWDs fully. The research found that in Calabar Municipal, only a tiny fraction of people with disabilities (PWDs) were able to successfully register to vote, citing accessibility barriers at registration centers as well as a lack of awareness about available accommodations. During the elections themselves, PWDs reported facing difficulties in navigating polling environments, accessing information in suitable formats, and receiving the required assistance to cast their ballots. Furthermore, the research revealed deeper societal attitudes and biases that continue to marginalize people with disabilities (PWDs) in the political sphere. Candidates with disabilities faced significant challenges in mounting viable campaigns, with limited access to campaign resources and venues, as well as perceptions among the electorate that their disability made them less capable of holding political office. This underscores the need for a more holistic approach to inclusion that addresses not only the technical aspects of the electoral process but also the broader social and attitudinal barriers that people with disabilities (PWDs) face.

In Calabar Municipal, the research found that the participation of people with disabilities (PWDs) in the 2023 elections was further hindered by the prevailing security challenges in the region. The threat of violence and disruption from armed non-state actors, as well as the heavy-handed response of security forces, created an environment of fear and uncertainty that disproportionately affected vulnerable groups like PWDs. This highlights the critical importance of ensuring the safety and security of all citizens, particularly during the electoral period, to safeguard their fundamental political rights. Looking ahead, the 2023 general elections present an opportunity for Nigeria to demonstrate its commitment to inclusive democracy and to set a positive example for the rest of the West African region. Achieving this will require a concerted and sustained effort from INEC, political parties, civil society organizations, and the government as a whole.

Recommendations; (a) Ensuring the full and effective implementation of the accessibility provisions in the Electoral Act 2022, with a focus on making polling units and other electoral infrastructure truly accessible to PWDs. (b) Providing adequate resources and training to INEC staff and security personnel to ensure they are equipped to support the participation of PWDs in the electoral process. (c) Addressing the broader security challenges in the country to create an environment conducive to the free and safe exercise of political rights by all citizens, including PWDs. Finally, enhancing voter education and awareness campaigns to inform people with disabilities (PWDs) about

their rights and the accommodations available to them, as well as addressing negative societal attitudes and biases and encouraging political parties to recruit and support candidates with disabilities actively, and to ensure that their campaign messaging and activities are inclusive and accessible. Strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations and disabled people's organisations to monitor the electoral process, advocate for the rights of PWDs, and hold duty-bearers accountable.

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