



AN EPISTEMIC CARTOGRAPHY OF STATE-CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENTS AND THE TRAJECTORY OF ELECTORAL REFORM IN NIGERIA AND SWEDEN

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Abstract

Electoral reform has increasingly become central to democratic consolidation, yet its effectiveness depends not only on legal and administrative changes but also on the quality of interactions between state institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs). This study comparatively examines how state–civil society engagements have shaped the trajectory of electoral reforms in Nigeria and Sweden, with the objective of identifying institutional dynamics that account for their divergent democratic outcomes. Anchored on Historical Institutionalism and guided by the conceptual metaphor of Epistemic Cartography, the study conceptualises electoral reform as a cumulative process of institutional learning, collaborative governance, and knowledge exchange rather than a sequence of isolated legislative interventions. A comparative qualitative research design was adopted, relying exclusively on secondary data obtained through a systematic documentary review of electoral laws, constitutional amendments, official reports of electoral management bodies, parliamentary records, publications of international organisations, civil society reports, peer-reviewed literature, and election observation reports covering the period 1999–2026. Data were analysed using Qualitative Content Analysis and comparative thematic analysis. The findings reveal that while Nigeria's electoral reform trajectory has been largely reactive, characterised by crisis-induced reforms and intermittent state–civil society engagement, Sweden's experience reflects institutional continuity, structured stakeholder collaboration, and sustained democratic learning. The study concludes that the sustainability of electoral reform is fundamentally determined by the institutionalisation of collaborative governance and the effective integration of civic knowledge into public decision-making processes. It recommends the establishment of permanent state–civil society consultative mechanisms, the systematic implementation of evidence-based electoral reform recommendations, and the strengthening of institutional trust through transparent and participatory electoral governance.

Keywords: Electoral Reform, State–Civil Society Relations, Electoral Governance, Historical Institutionalism, Democratic Institutional Learning.

Introduction

The legitimacy and resilience of democratic governance are increasingly judged not merely by the conduct of periodic elections but by the quality of institutional interactions that shape electoral rules, processes, and outcomes. Across both emerging and consolidated democracies, electoral reform has evolved beyond a technocratic exercise of amending legal frameworks or improving election administration to become a dynamic process of institutional bargaining involving governments, electoral management bodies, civil society organisations (CSOs), political parties, the judiciary, the media, and international development partners. Contemporary scholarship argues that sustainable electoral reform is more likely to emerge where democratic institutions are embedded within collaborative governance arrangements that facilitate dialogue, public accountability, policy learning, and civic participation rather than unilateral state action (Norris, 2023; International IDEA, 2024; UNDP, 2024; Olatidoye, Adepoju and Ilawole, 2026). Consequently, the trajectory of electoral reform has become an important indicator of democratic adaptability, institutional legitimacy, and state responsiveness to evolving political realities.

Broadly speaking, civil society has assumed an increasingly strategic role in shaping electoral governance through advocacy, policy engagement, election observation, voter education, strategic litigation, and evidence-based reform campaigns. Rather than functioning merely as external watchdogs, CSOs have become significant policy actors capable of influencing legislative amendments, electoral innovation, institutional transparency, and democratic accountability (Olatidoye et al, 2026). However, the extent to which civil society contributes to electoral reform is conditioned by the character of its relationship with the state. While cooperative and institutionalised engagement often produces incremental but durable reforms, adversarial or exclusionary relationships frequently generate fragmented reforms, implementation deficits, and declining public confidence in electoral institutions (Ansell & Torfing, 2023; OECD, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Nigeria exemplifies the complexities of this relational dynamic. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, the country has undertaken successive waves of electoral reforms through constitutional amendments, revisions of electoral legislation, judicial pronouncements and technological innovations such as biometric voter accreditation and electronic transmission of results. Notwithstanding these efforts, electoral credibility continues to be challenged by institutional distrust, implementation inconsistencies, political interference, electoral violence, litigation, and recurrent public contestation of election outcomes. Although Nigerian civil society organizations have consistently championed electoral accountability and institutional reform, existing scholarship has largely interpreted electoral reform through legal, administrative, or political lenses, with relatively limited attention devoted to understanding how sustained patterns of state–civil society engagement influence the direction, pace, and durability of reform processes. This has left an important conceptual gap in explaining why repeated reform initiatives have yielded only modest improvements in electoral legitimacy despite extensive civic advocacy and institutional restructuring.

By contrast, Sweden represents a mature democratic system where electoral governance has evolved through long-standing traditions of institutional trust, consensus-oriented policymaking, administrative impartiality, and structured engagement between public institutions and organised civil society. The Swedish

experience demonstrates that enduring electoral reforms are often products of cumulative democratic learning, collaborative policy development, and institutional continuity rather than episodic legislative interventions. Yet comparative scholarship has seldom juxtaposed Nigeria's evolving electoral governance with the Nordic model to interrogate how differing configurations of state–civil society relations shape distinct reform trajectories. Addressing this gap, the present study adopts the metaphor of epistemic cartography to conceptually map the evolving knowledge systems, institutional interactions, and reform pathways that underpin electoral governance in Nigeria and Sweden.

Literature Review

The quality of elections is not determined solely by constitutional provisions or electoral administration but by the broader ecosystem of institutions, actors, and relationships that shape the production of electoral rules and democratic legitimacy. Contemporary scholarship has therefore shifted from examining electoral governance as a predominantly legal or administrative enterprise to understanding it as an interactive process involving the state, civil society organisations (CSOs), political parties, electoral management bodies (EMBs), the judiciary, the media, and international democratic partners (Norris, 2023; International IDEA, 2024; Ansell & Torfing, 2023). This relational perspective has generated renewed scholarly interest in the dynamics of state–civil society relations as an explanatory variable for democratic resilience and institutional performance. While classical scholars such as Tocqueville and Gramsci viewed civil society respectively as a sphere of democratic participation and ideological contestation, contemporary literature extends these insights by conceptualising civil society as an institutional partner capable of co-producing governance outcomes through sustained engagement, policy advocacy, knowledge exchange, and collaborative accountability mechanisms (Edwards, 2024; OECD, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2025; Olatidoye, 2026). The emerging consensus suggests that democratic governance is increasingly negotiated through networks of interaction rather than hierarchical state authority, although significant disagreements remain regarding the conditions under which such interactions produce transformative institutional outcomes.

This debate becomes particularly salient within the literature on state–civil society relations. One influential school argues that institutionalised cooperation between governments and civil society generates policy innovation, public trust, and democratic legitimacy by facilitating continuous dialogue and inclusive decision-making (Ansell & Torfing, 2023; Emerson & Nabatchi, 2024). From this perspective, collaborative governance creates institutional arrangements through which civic actors contribute not merely to policy implementation but to agenda setting, monitoring, and reform design. Conversely, a competing strand of scholarship contends that excessive institutional incorporation of civil society may weaken its autonomy, transforming advocacy organisations into extensions of state bureaucracies and reducing their capacity to perform critical oversight functions (Heller, 2023; Bua & Bussu, 2024). A third perspective, emerging largely from comparative political economy and democratic resilience studies, argues that the effectiveness of state–civil society engagement depends less on the existence of collaboration than on the quality of institutional trust, policy responsiveness, and the historical evolution of democratic norms (Rothstein, 2023; Fukuyama, 2024; OECD, 2024).

Earlier studies conceptualised electoral governance primarily in terms of election management, legal regulation, and electoral

administration (Mozaffar & Schedler, 2002). More recent scholarship, however, reconceptualises electoral governance as a multidimensional institutional process encompassing rule-making, rule application, rule adjudication, technological innovation, stakeholder participation, and democratic accountability throughout the electoral cycle (Norris, 2023; International IDEA, 2024; IFES, 2025). This broader understanding recognises electoral governance as a continuous process extending beyond Election Day to include constitutional reforms, electoral dispute resolution, civic education, campaign finance regulation, electoral technology, and post-election institutional learning. Within this framework, CSOs occupy increasingly influential positions as election observers, policy advocates, civic educators, litigation actors, and producers of empirical evidence that informs reform agendas. Nevertheless, scholars remain divided on the actual influence of civil society on electoral reforms. While optimistic accounts emphasise successful advocacy campaigns that have expanded transparency and accountability, more sceptical analyses argue that reform outcomes remain overwhelmingly conditioned by elite political interests, institutional incentives, and power asymmetries that frequently constrain civic influence despite extensive advocacy efforts (Birch, 2024; Electoral Integrity Project, 2025; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

These foregoing reveals significant opportunities for conceptual integration. Existing scholarship has examined state–civil society relations, electoral governance, electoral reform, and institutional learning largely as parallel rather than mutually constitutive phenomena. Studies of civil society frequently overlook how advocacy networks reshape electoral governance over extended periods; electoral governance literature often privileges legal and administrative variables while underestimating relational dynamics; research on institutional learning tends to focus on bureaucratic adaptation with limited attention to civic knowledge production; and comparative studies rarely analyse how these concepts interact simultaneously to influence reform trajectories across contrasting democratic systems. Consequently, much of the literature remains compartmentalised, providing fragmented explanations of democratic reform processes. The metaphor of Epistemic Cartography offers an integrative conceptual lens by treating electoral reform as the cumulative product of interconnected knowledge systems, institutional relationships, policy exchanges, advocacy networks, and democratic learning processes.

Despite the growing sophistication of contemporary scholarship, several important gaps remain. First, comparative studies continue to concentrate predominantly on electoral integrity, election observation, democratic consolidation, or institutional performance, leaving the dynamics of state–civil society engagement in electoral reform comparatively underexplored. Second, the overwhelming majority of Nigerian studies remain descriptive, focusing on electoral outcomes or legislative reforms without systematically interrogating the relational processes through which reforms are negotiated, contested, and institutionalised. Third, relatively few comparative investigations juxtapose Nigeria with Nordic democracies such as Sweden to explore how differing governance traditions produce contrasting reform trajectories. Finally, no identifiable study has employed Epistemic Cartography as a conceptual framework for systematically mapping the interconnections among institutional knowledge, collaborative governance, civil society engagement, and democratic institutional learning in explaining electoral reform. This is however the interest of this study.

Theoretical Framework: Historical Institutionalism

Institutionalism constitutes one of the most influential traditions in political science for explaining the stability, transformation, and performance of political systems. Broadly, institutionalism posits that political outcomes are fundamentally shaped by formal and informal institutions, which establish the rules, norms, incentives, and constraints governing political behaviour. Rather than viewing political actors as operating in a vacuum, institutionalists argue that their preferences, choices, and strategies are conditioned by enduring institutional arrangements that evolve over time (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Thelen, 1999). Contemporary institutional scholarship identifies three principal variants of the institutionalist tradition: Rational Choice Institutionalism, which emphasises strategic decision-making under institutional constraints; Sociological Institutionalism, which highlights the role of norms, culture, and legitimacy in shaping institutional behaviour; and Historical Institutionalism, which focuses on how historical sequences, path dependence, and critical junctures influence institutional development and policy outcomes (Hall & Taylor, 1996; Thelen, 1999; Mahoney & Thelen, 2015; Fioretos, Falleti & Sheingate, 2016). While each variant offers valuable analytical insights, this study adopts Historical Institutionalism (HI) because it provides the most compelling framework for understanding the evolution of state–civil society engagements and their cumulative influence on the trajectory of electoral reforms in Nigeria and Sweden. Electoral reform is not an isolated policy event but a historically contingent process shaped by institutional legacies, successive reform episodes, and evolving patterns of interaction among state and non-state actors.

Historical Institutionalism emerged during the late 1970s and early 1980s as a response to behaviouralism and rational choice explanations that inadequately accounted for institutional continuity and long-term political change. It gained prominence through the pioneering works of scholars such as Theda Skocpol, Peter A. Hall, Paul Pierson, Kathleen Thelen, James Mahoney, and Sven Steinmo, whose works demonstrated that institutions possess enduring effects on political development because earlier policy choices constrain or enable subsequent reforms (Skocpol, 1985; Pierson, 2004; Mahoney & Thelen, 2015). The central assumptions of the theory are that institutions develop incrementally through historical processes; early institutional decisions generate path dependence, making certain reform trajectories more likely than others; significant transformations often occur during critical junctures created by political crises or major constitutional changes; and institutional change is typically gradual, cumulative, and mediated by existing governance structures rather than occurring through abrupt replacement (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Fioretos et al., 2016; Capoccia, 2024).

The explanatory value of Historical Institutionalism is particularly evident in studies of electoral governance and democratic reform. Electoral institutions evolve through successive cycles of constitutional amendments, legislative reforms, judicial interpretations, technological innovations, and civic advocacy, all of which are embedded within historical experiences that shape subsequent reform possibilities. In Nigeria, the evolution of electoral governance since 1999 reflects repeated attempts to address institutional weaknesses through reforms such as the establishment and strengthening of the electoral management body, amendments to electoral legislation, technological innovations, and recommendations from successive electoral reform committees. Yet these reforms have unfolded within institutional environments characterised by persistent distrust, elite contestation, and uneven

implementation. Conversely, Sweden's electoral governance reflects a long trajectory of institutional continuity, administrative neutrality, collaborative policymaking, and sustained engagement between public institutions and civil society, resulting in incremental but durable democratic reforms. Historical Institutionalism therefore provides a robust analytical framework for explaining why similar reform initiatives produce divergent outcomes across both countries by directing attention to institutional legacies, reform sequencing, and cumulative democratic learning. It also complements the study's organising metaphor of Epistemic Cartography, which seeks to map how institutional knowledge, historical experiences, and patterns of state–civil society engagement collectively shape electoral reform trajectories over time.

Notwithstanding its analytical strengths, Historical Institutionalism has attracted several criticisms. Critics argue that its emphasis on path dependence may overstate institutional continuity while underestimating the capacity of political actors to exercise agency, innovate, or deliberately transform institutions (Peters, 2019; Bell, 2023). Others contend that the theory sometimes explains institutional persistence more effectively than rapid institutional change and may insufficiently account for the influence of globalisation, transnational advocacy networks, and emerging technologies on contemporary governance reforms (Béland & Cox, 2024). Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish its suitability for the present study. On the contrary, the theory's central concern with institutional evolution, historical sequencing, and incremental change aligns directly with the study's objective of explaining how state–civil society engagements have shaped the trajectory of electoral reforms in Nigeria and Sweden. By illuminating the historical processes through which institutions learn, adapt, and negotiate reform over time, Historical Institutionalism offers a compelling theoretical foundation for understanding electoral reform not as a succession of isolated legislative events but as a cumulative product of evolving institutional relationships, democratic learning, and historically embedded governance practices. It therefore provides the most appropriate lens for interpreting the comparative pathways of electoral reform examined in this study.

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design anchored in historical-comparative analysis to examine the evolving dynamics of state–civil society engagements and their influence on the trajectory of electoral reforms in Nigeria and Sweden. The design is particularly appropriate because it facilitates a systematic interrogation of institutional evolution, policy continuity, and democratic learning across two contrasting governance contexts, while enabling the identification of similarities, divergences, and transferable institutional practices. The study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from authoritative, verifiable documentary sources etc. Data are collected through a systematic documentary review, with documentary evidence purposively selected using clearly defined inclusion criteria based on relevance to the research objectives, institutional credibility, publication authority, temporal coverage spanning 1999–2026, and consistency with the conceptual focus of the study. To enhance methodological rigour, transparency, and reliability, a document selection matrix guides the screening, inclusion, and exclusion of documentary materials. The analytical procedure employs Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) to generate contextually grounded and theoretically informed interpretations of electoral reform processes.

Comparative Analysis of State–Civil Society Engagements and the Trajectory of Electoral Reform in Nigeria and Sweden

Electoral reform in both Nigeria and Sweden has evolved as a cumulative institutional process shaped by the quality of interactions between the state and civil society rather than by episodic legislative interventions alone. A historical mapping of constitutional reforms, electoral legislation, parliamentary deliberations, election observation reports, and civil society advocacy demonstrates that while both countries have pursued electoral reforms to enhance democratic legitimacy, the institutional pathways through which these reforms have emerged differ significantly. In Nigeria, the trajectory of electoral reform has largely been reactive, often triggered by electoral crises, judicial pronouncements, public dissatisfaction, and recommendations of post-election review committees. Major reforms followed the controversial elections of 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019, culminating in the enactment of the Electoral Act 2022, which introduced technological innovations such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and legal recognition of electronic transmission of results. These reforms were significantly influenced by sustained advocacy from civil society organisations including Yiaga Africa, the Transition Monitoring Group (TMG), CLEEN Foundation, Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC), the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), and Situation Room, whose policy briefs, election observation reports, legislative engagements and strategic litigation consistently shaped public discourse on electoral accountability (Olatidoye et al 2026; Enweremadu and Olatidoye, 2026). Nevertheless, these reforms frequently emerged after institutional failures had already occurred, reflecting a pattern of crisis-driven institutional adaptation rather than continuous collaborative governance (INEC, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023; European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023; International IDEA, 2024). By contrast, Sweden's electoral reforms have largely evolved through institutional continuity, consensus-oriented policymaking, and structured consultations involving government agencies, parliamentary committees, political parties, municipalities, and organised civil society. Electoral legislation has undergone periodic adjustments without undermining public confidence, reflecting a governance culture characterised by institutional trust, transparency, and policy learning rather than reactive institutional restructuring (Swedish Election Authority, 2024; OECD, 2024; International IDEA, 2025).

The effectiveness of civil society engagement is less dependent on the volume of advocacy than on the institutional environment within which such advocacy operates. In Nigeria, civil society has become an indispensable actor in electoral governance through voter education, election observation, legislative advocacy, litigation, digital accountability campaigns, and policy monitoring. Reports from Yiaga Africa's Watching the Vote (WTV) initiative documented systematic deployment of Parallel Vote Tabulation (PVT), which significantly enhanced the credibility of election observation and strengthened public scrutiny of electoral outcomes during the 2019 and 2023 general elections (see Olatidoye et al, 2026). Similarly, the Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre (PLAC) and the Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room made substantial contributions to the passage of the Electoral Act 2022 through sustained legislative engagement and evidence-based policy recommendations. However, the interactions between civil society and state institutions remain predominantly episodic and occasionally adversarial, often intensifying only during election cycles or periods of constitutional amendment. Afrobarometer findings consistently indicate that public trust in electoral

institutions in Nigeria fluctuates considerably across election cycles, reflecting broader concerns regarding electoral transparency, institutional independence, and implementation deficits (Afrobarometer, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2025). In Sweden, by contrast, civil society engagement is institutionalised within broader governance processes. Organisations involved in democratic participation, voter inclusion, disability rights, youth engagement, and electoral transparency interact continuously with state institutions through consultative mechanisms rather than crisis-induced advocacy. Consequently, electoral reforms are embedded within long-term institutional dialogue, producing high levels of public confidence in electoral administration and relatively limited post-election litigation or political contestation (Swedish Election Authority, 2024; OECD, 2024; V-Dem Institute, 2025).

Historical coding of reform episodes suggests that Nigeria has experienced multiple critical junctures, including the Justice Mohammed Uwais Electoral Reform Committee (2008), the constitutional amendments preceding the 2011 elections, the technological reforms introduced before the 2015 elections, and the comprehensive Electoral Act 2022, which collectively demonstrate institutional willingness to reform. Yet recurring implementation challenges, political resistance, inconsistent enforcement, and limited institutional memory, resulting in repeated reform cycles addressing similar governance deficiencies. The controversy surrounding the uploading of election results during the 2023 general elections, despite the legal introduction of BVAS and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV), illustrates the persistence of implementation gaps even after significant legislative innovation (INEC, 2023; European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2023). Sweden presents a contrasting trajectory characterised by incremental institutional adaptation. Electoral reforms are generally preceded by expert commissions, parliamentary investigations, stakeholder consultations, and evidence-based policy reviews, allowing institutions to internalise lessons from previous electoral experiences before introducing legislative modifications. The result is a pattern of cumulative democratic learning in which institutional trust, administrative neutrality, and civic participation reinforce one another over time rather than being periodically reconstructed after electoral crises (International IDEA, 2025; OECD, 2024; Swedish Government Official Reports, 2024).

Sweden consistently demonstrates a high degree of institutionalised collaboration in which civil society contributes to policy formulation without compromising governmental authority or democratic accountability. Conversely, Nigeria exhibits comparatively stronger advocacy intensity but weaker institutional responsiveness, suggesting that the existence of active civil society alone does not guarantee successful electoral reform. Instead, reform effectiveness depends upon the extent to which state institutions possess the political will, administrative capacity, and institutional openness to absorb civic knowledge into formal policymaking processes. This observation is reinforced by comparative democratic indicators. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) 2025 Report, Sweden remains among the world's highest-performing liberal democracies, recording consistently strong performance in electoral democracy, government transparency, judicial independence, and participatory governance. Nigeria, while demonstrating gradual improvements in certain dimensions of electoral administration following technological innovations and legislative reforms, continues to experience comparatively lower performance in electoral integrity, political equality, institutional trust, and participatory governance due to persistent structural and political

constraints (V-Dem Institute, 2025; Electoral Integrity Project, 2024; International IDEA, 2024).

Synthesising these findings through the analytical lens of Epistemic Cartography demonstrates that electoral reform is fundamentally a process of institutional knowledge production, circulation, adaptation, and democratic learning. Successful electoral reforms emerge where knowledge generated by election observation missions, civil society advocacy, parliamentary deliberations, judicial interpretations, policy research, and administrative experience is systematically incorporated into subsequent institutional reforms. Sweden exemplifies a dense epistemic network characterised by continuous interaction among government institutions, research communities, parliamentary bodies, electoral administrators, and civil society organisations, enabling cumulative policy learning and institutional resilience. Nigeria, although increasingly benefiting from vibrant civil society advocacy and expanding documentary evidence generated by domestic and international election observers, continues to exhibit fragmented knowledge integration in which valuable policy recommendations are only partially institutionalised. Consequently, the study infers that the principal distinction between both countries does not lie in the presence or absence of electoral reforms but in the architecture of institutional relationships through which democratic knowledge is generated, negotiated, and translated into sustainable governance outcomes.

Concluding remarks

The comparative analysis demonstrates that the trajectory of electoral reform is fundamentally shaped by the quality of state–civil society engagements rather than the frequency of legislative amendments or administrative innovations. Drawing on documentary evidence from Nigeria and Sweden, the study established that while both countries have pursued electoral reforms to strengthen democratic governance, their reform trajectories have been conditioned by contrasting institutional relationships and patterns of democratic learning. Nigeria's experience reflects a predominantly reactive reform model, characterised by periodic institutional adjustments in response to electoral crises, judicial interventions, and sustained civil society advocacy. Sweden, in contrast, exhibits a proactive and institutionalised reform trajectory underpinned by collaborative governance, policy continuity, administrative neutrality, and high levels of institutional trust. The study further demonstrates that enduring electoral reforms emerge where civic knowledge, evidence generated through election observation, parliamentary deliberations, and policy researches are systematically integrated into public decision-making.

In light of these findings, the study recommends that Nigeria institutionalise structured and continuous state–civil society dialogue on electoral governance beyond election periods through permanent consultative mechanisms involving the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), civil society organisations, political parties, academia, and other democratic stakeholders. It further recommends the establishment of a formal institutional framework for systematically reviewing and implementing evidence-based recommendations emerging from election observation missions, judicial pronouncements, parliamentary inquiries, and electoral reform committees to strengthen policy continuity and institutional learning. Finally, there is a need to deepen public trust in electoral governance by enhancing transparency in electoral administration, safeguarding the operational independence of electoral institutions, and promoting sustained civic participation throughout the electoral cycle. These

measures would foster a more collaborative, learning-oriented, and resilient electoral governance architecture capable of producing credible, inclusive, and sustainable democratic reforms in Nigeria while drawing contextually relevant lessons from the Swedish experience.

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