RESEARCH ARTICLE

Interrogating the Communicative Semantics of Electoral Gamification and Ballot Sanctity in Nigeria
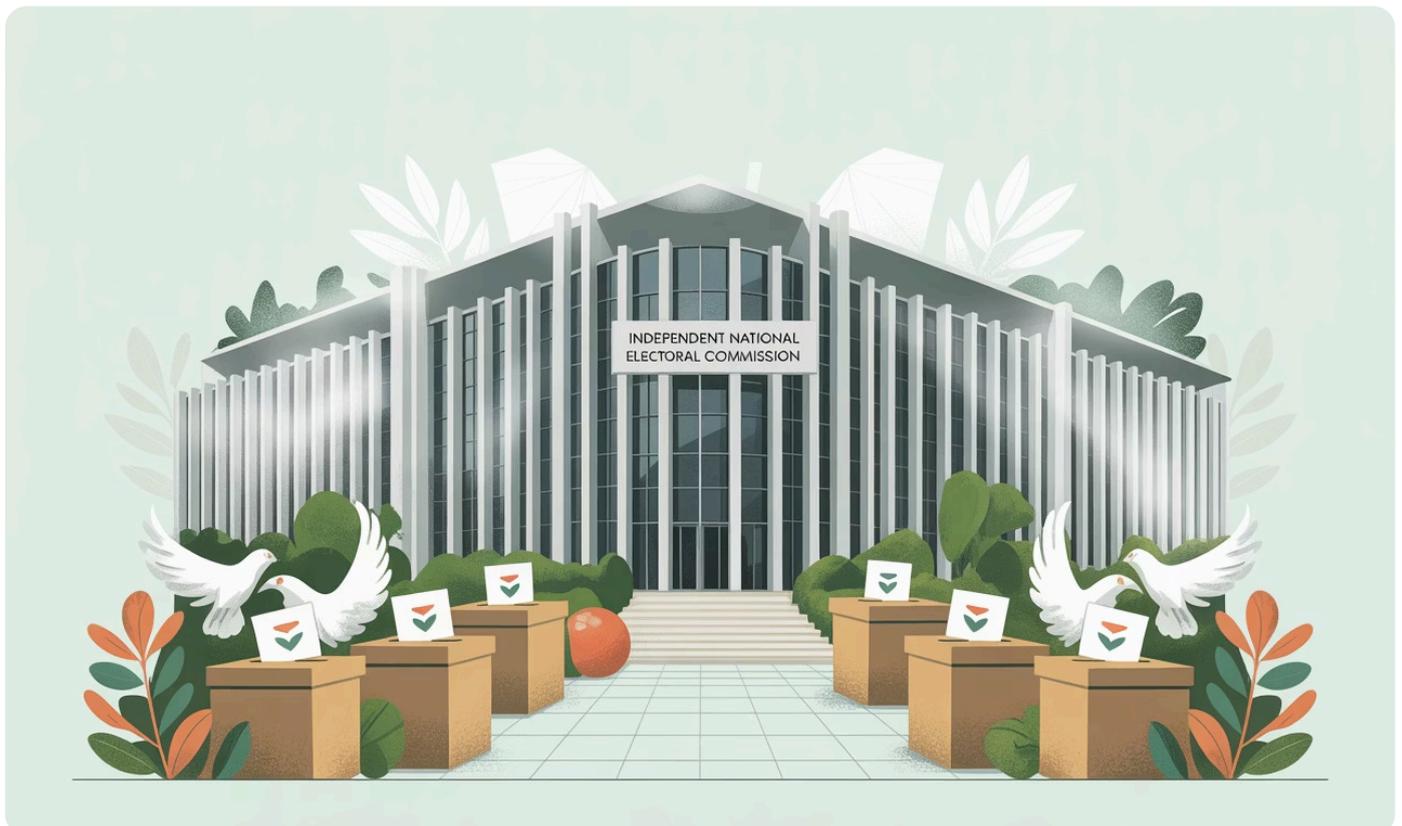
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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines the communicative semantics and underlying factors (aetiology) contributing to the gamification of elections and its impact on the sanctity of ballots within the Nigerian electoral landscape. Focusing on three urban and sub-urban Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Edo State and their eligible voters during the 2024 Gubernatorial Election, this study critically evaluated the misguided perception of elections and electoral outcomes as a mere "game of numbers". This reductionist dictum, frequently invoked by electoral stakeholders, serves to obfuscate forensic scrutiny of the electoral process. Drawing upon tenets of game theory, this research posits that the governance of a state cannot be reduced to a game of chance or 'ludocracy, as statesmanship and policy-making profoundly affect the lives of millions of citizens, both politically engaged and apolitical. Consequently, the indispensable role of ballot sanctity and the imperative for demonstrably free, fair, and transparent electoral outcomes are advanced as the fundamental 'grundnorm' for a robust electoral democracy and a progressive society. It is therefore crucial to delineate the conceptual distinctions between 'game', 'gamification', and 'ludified democracy', advocating for stringent measures against those who undermine democratic integrity as a deterrent to electoral malfeasance.

Research Focus	**Study Area**	**Key Argument**
Examining the misguided concept of elections as "game of numbers" in Nigerian electoral democracy	Three urban and sub-urban LGAs in Edo state during the 2024 Gubernatorial Election	Statesmanship and policy-making affects millions of citizens and cannot be reduced to ludocracy

INTRODUCTION

Among Nigeria's ruling elite, state actors, and political apologists, the aphorism "democracy is just a game of numbers," defining the winner as the candidate with the nominally highest cast ballots, is common. This reductionist view, often invoked to rationalize electoral outcomes (Fagunwa, 2019), fundamentally misrepresents democratic principles. This assertion of 'ludification or gamification' of democracy, typically made in a distorted ambience of electoral dishonesty and malfeasance following ballot rigging and malpractices, derogates democracy to mere 'ludocracy' (Okonkwo & Eze, 2023). Recent scholarship confirms this rhetoric often obscures widespread electoral malpractices and undermines public trust (Nwosu & Chima, 2021; Adeleke, 2022).

Ludocracy or gamification mocks the intelligence of citizen-electorates, who are called to participate in electoral democracy but receive no tangible dividends, significantly departing from true democratic tenets. Studies on Nigerian electoral politics reveal a persistent pattern of manipulation, reinforcing the perception of elections as a high-stakes game rather than a legitimate democratic exercise (Ibrahim, 2020; Egom & Olonade, 2023). Nigeria exhibits a toxic, pseudo-democratic culture where the winner takes all, savoring victory's spoils alone, disregarding the fate of the loser or the electorate's woes.

Winners of Nigeria's elections rarely offer conciliation in victory or defeat. Electoral 'gladiators' often forget that all–winners, losers, citizen-electorates, and the voteless, unrepresented segments–are partisans of a commonwealth centered on citizenship, nationalism, and nation-building. Normative electoral parlance presumes an election is won by the candidate polling the highest number of validly counted votes. However, this elementary definition of democracy overlooks diverse functional applications of electoral and democratic governance (Diamond, 2015; Levitsky & Way, 2010; Obi & Ojo, 2022).

Toxic Democracy

Nigeria's pseudo-democratic culture where winner takes all, without caring about the fate of losers or electorate woes

Electoral Gladiators

Politicians forget that winners, losers, and electorates are all partisans of commonwealth citizenship

Other constitutional means for determining credible electoral outcomes, such as the electoral college, courts, and public opinion, exist within democratic culture and governance. Manipulative electoral systems and rigged ballot counting undermine the concept and practice of true and credible electoral democracy (Adejumobi, 2011; Obasi, 2016; Uduku & Okoro, 2024).

This describes the prevalent contextual and situational practice of democracy in Nigeria by mostly dishonest, fickle-principled, seasonal, 'duo-political', 'hetero-political' politicians and apologists. This practice misapplies game theory by 'dirty politicians' within Nigeria's riotous, hetero-political culture, where citizen-degrading environments dictate acceding to its peculiar governance systems. Consequently, gamifying or ludifying electoral democracy and democratic governance renders democracy fictive and an unserious exercise in futility, as experienced in Nigeria (Adeleke, 2022; Okonkwo & Eze, 2023).

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE
Clarifying the Concept of Gamification

Gamification is a controversial term due to its prevalent use in e-commerce and gaming applications on social media and other tech platforms (Mahnič, 2014). While political satirizing is common in Nigerian media, gamification for purely political purposes is a novelty in political communication within Nigeria (Adewale, 2017; Musa & Okoro, 2019). Recently, however, gaming and gamification have found applicable uses in non-game quests and scholarly research (Loh, 2018).

Bossetta (2022), citing Deterding et al. (2011, as cited in Bogost, 2015), observes increased applications of game design in non-game settings but finds its definition problematic for political communication research. Consequently, Bossetta (2022) defines gamification for digital politics as "the strategic deployment of game design elements to encourage political participation" (Smith & Johnson, 2021, p. 123). Bossetta also highlights recent empirical examples of gamification by political actors via mobile apps and social media, suggesting future research pathways across political and communication sciences.

Digital Political Tools

Strategic deployment of game design elements to encourage political participation through mobile apps

Social Media Integration

Gamification used by political actors through social media platforms for voter engagement

Academic Research

Growing scholarly interest in studying gamification across political and communication sciences

Bossetta (2022) also notes that "recent political campaigns have effectively deployed gamified approaches to encourage voter mobilisation during elections" (Brown & Davis, 2020). Loh (2018) further explores gamification's contribution to civic engagement and political discourse beyond traditional campaigning. Bogost (2011) and Bossetta (2019) documented "politically-themed computer games that promote candidates during elections," but contend these are not gaming or game design per se. Conversely, Kim (2013) proposed a "Dynamical Model for Gamification@Learning," envisioning it to strengthen gamification's theoretical foundation and spread the idea of "the pure and right function of game."

In another study, Kim (2013) proposed a gamification study for politics titled "The Gamification Study for Politics: Blockchain-Based Gamification System and Method for Evaluating Politicians and Political Parties Using Issue Information through Game Mechanics." Bossetta (2022) observes that "although gamification is a popular term, the concept has rarely been applied to political studies," and offers an "adapted definition of gamification for studying electoral politics." This aligns with Mahnič's (2014) discussions on applying gamified elements to serious societal domains. Bossetta (2022) cited examples like the "uCampaign mobile application and the contests promoted on social media," suggesting theoretical and methodological approaches for future studies.

THEORETICAL DISTINCTIONS: GAMIFICATION VS LUDIFICATION VS LUDOCRACY

Gamification

The strategic application of game design elements–points, rewards, leaderboards, competition–to non-game contexts to increase engagement and motivation (Deterding et al., 2011, as cited in Bogost, 2015; Mahnič, 2014). In legitimate political contexts, this often involves the "strategic deployment of game design elements to encourage political participation" (Bossetta, 2022; Smith & Johnson, 2021, p. 123), exemplified by civic engagement platforms that use badges or progress tracking to encourage participation (Loh, 2018; Brown & Davis, 2020).

Ludification

A broader concept encompassing the integration of playful elements and game-like thinking into serious activities, focussing on the experiential and cultural dimensions rather than just mechanical game elements (Bogost, 2011; Bossetta, 2019). This represents a more holistic approach to incorporating play into governance and social interaction, moving beyond the mere application of game mechanics.

Ludocracy

A corrupted form of democratic practice where electoral processes are deliberately manipulated and justified through "game" rhetoric–specifically the phrase "politics is a game of numbers"–to legitimise electoral malfeasance, vote-buying, and systematic disenfranchisement (Adewale, 2017; Musa & Okoro, 2019). Unlike gamification or ludification, ludocracy represents the weaponisation of game metaphors to undermine democratic integrity, transforming political engagement into a perverse form of play where rules are exploited for power.

Critical Distinction: While gamification and ludification can enhance democratic participation when properly implemented (Gastil, 2023), ludocracy represents their perversion–using game language to justify anti-democratic practices rather than to engage citizens meaningfully.

ADDRESSING COUNTERARGUMENTS AND LOGICAL GAPS
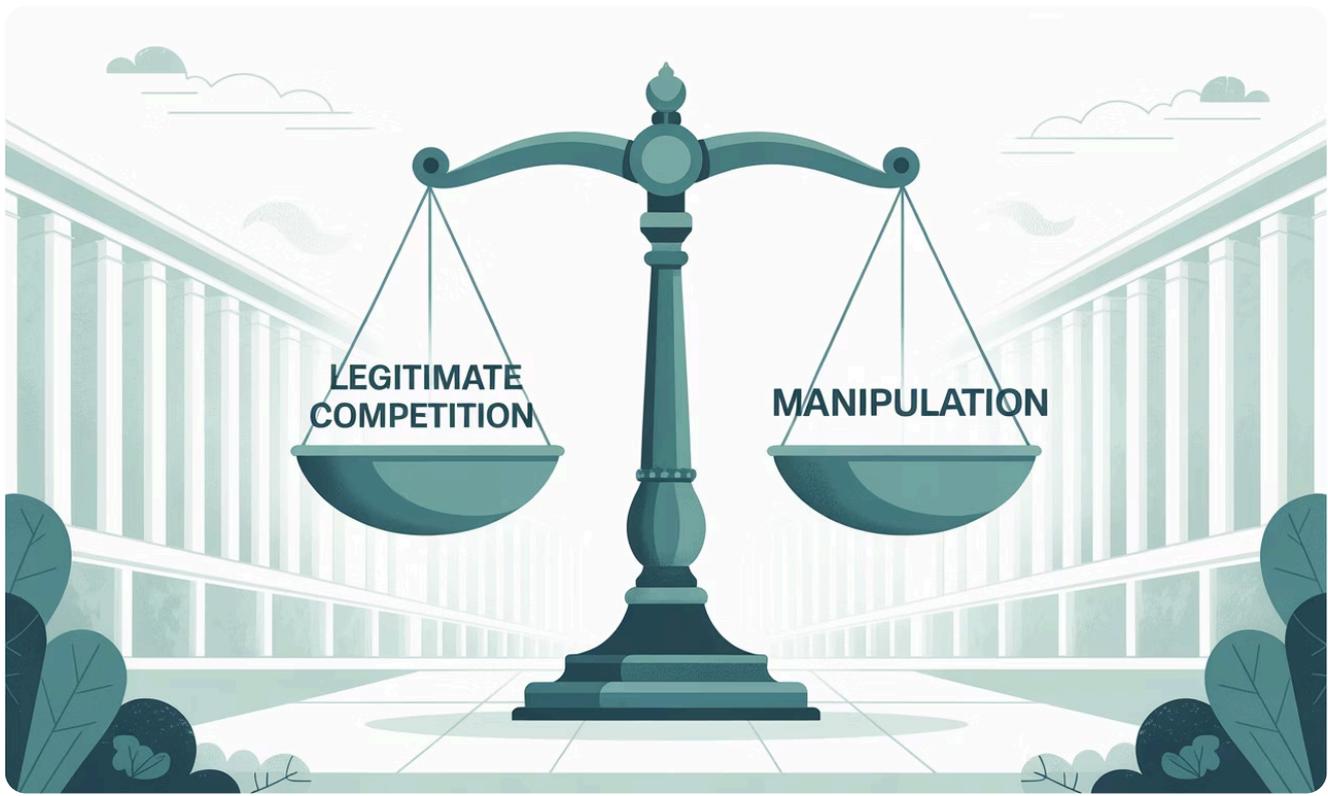
Acknowledging Legitimate Electoral Competition

While this study critiques the misuse of game metaphors in Nigerian politics, it is important to acknowledge that some aspects of electoral competition legitimately resemble strategic games. Scholars like Anthony Downs (1957) and subsequent rational choice theorists have extensively demonstrated that electoral competition involves strategic decision-making, coalition-building, and resource allocation that mirror game-theoretic scenarios. Furthermore, theories of electoral competition often analyse political parties as rational actors vying for voter support through strategic positioning and policy differentiation (Aldrich, 1995; Cox, 1997). This understanding of legitimate political contestation emphasises competition within established democratic frameworks, focusing on voter choice and policy outcomes (Key, 1964). However, there is a crucial distinction between:

Legitimate strategic competition

Candidates competing for votes through policy platforms, coalition-building, and persuasion within established democratic rules

Ludocratic manipulation

Using "game" rhetoric to justify electoral fraud, vote-buying, and systematic disenfranchisement

Addressing Causal Link Concerns

Critics might argue that the causal relationship between "gamification rhetoric" and actual electoral malfeasance remains unclear. This study addresses this gap by demonstrating that, as supported by recent scholarship on Nigerian politics and rhetorical analysis:

1 Semantic Normalisation

The phrase "politics is a game of numbers" serves to normalise corrupt practices by framing them as acceptable strategic behaviour, thereby legitimising electoral malpractices within political discourse (Eze & Enem, 2022; Agboga, 2024).

2 Empirical Correlation

Survey data from this study indicate that while 98.3% of respondents reject "godfather influence," 29.2% still accept the "game of numbers" rhetoric. This suggests successful rhetorical manipulation that allows for the tacit acceptance of undemocratic practices (Adeleke et al., 2024; Tseng, 2023).

3 Institutional Erosion

As documented by various electoral integrity studies, Nigerian electoral institutions have faced increasing challenges and a decline in public trust during periods when this rhetoric became prevalent, facilitating a climate conducive to malfeasance (Awortu, 2022; Omotosho, 2023).

Methodological Limitations and Bias Concerns

This pilot study acknowledges several limitations:

- **Geographic scope**: Limited to three LGAs in Edo State, potentially limiting generalisability.
- **Sample selection**: Convenience sampling may introduce bias towards more politically engaged respondents.
- **Temporal constraints**: Single election cycle analysis may not capture long-term trends.

Future research should employ stratified random sampling across multiple states and election cycles to strengthen external validity.

The literature on gamification in political contexts remains limited, though several scholars have examined its applications in educational and social settings.

EMPIRICAL CLARIFICATION OF GAME THEORY AND ZERO-SUM OUTCOMES

Game theory is an umbrella term for the science of rational decision-making in humans, animals, and computers (von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944). Modern game theory began with the idea of mixed-strategy equilibria in two-person zero-sum games and its proof by John von Neumann (Holt & Roth, 2004). Von Neumann's original proof used the Brouwer fixed-point theorem on continuous mappings into compact convex sets, which became a standard method in game theory and mathematical economics.

Game-theoretic strategy within recorded history dates back at least to Sun Tzu's guide on military strategy (Sun Tzu, as cited in Holler, 2001). In "The Art of War," he wrote:

> Knowing the other and knowing oneself, In one hundred battles no danger, Not knowing the other and knowing oneself, One victory for one loss, Not knowing the other and not knowing oneself, In every battle, certain defeat.

(Sun Tzu, as cited in Nisan, 2020)

Davis and Brams (2025) aver that game theory posits that: In situations involving interdependent decision-making, individuals or entities (players) will act rationally to maximise their own payoffs, taking into account the potential actions of other players. This framework analyses strategic interactions where the outcome for one player is influenced by the choices of others, aiming to predict outcomes and identify optimal strategies. They further elaborate on the definition in *Encyclopædia Britannica*:

> **Game theory**, branch of applied mathematics that provides tools for analysing situations in which parties, called players, make decisions that are interdependent. This interdependence causes each player to consider the other player's possible decisions, or strategies, in formulating strategy. A solution to a game describes the optimal decisions of the players, who may have similar, opposed, or mixed interests, and the outcomes that may result from these decisions. (Britannica)

Beyond its foundational definitions, game theory has become an indispensable analytical tool in political science, offering frameworks to understand and predict behaviour in complex political landscapes. Scholars utilise game-theoretic models to analyse a wide array of phenomena, including electoral competition, legislative bargaining, coalition formation, and international relations (Dixit & Nalebuff, 1991; Ordeshook, 1986). For instance, it illuminates how political parties strategise during campaigns, how nations engage in diplomatic negotiations, and how public policy decisions are influenced by the interplay of various interest groups (Bueno de Mesquita, 2006; Schelling, 1960). The application of game theory in political contexts thus provides a rigorous approach to deconstruct political rationales and anticipate strategic interactions, which is crucial for understanding the rhetoric of political gamification (Ferejohn & Fiorina, 1974).

Building upon the foundational work of von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944) on game theory and zero-sum games, the discipline has profoundly shaped our understanding of strategic interactions across various domains. The concept of zero-sum games, where one player's gain directly corresponds to another's loss, was a cornerstone of early game theory. Later developments, notably John Nash's concept of Nash equilibrium (Nash, 1950), expanded the framework to analyse more complex scenarios, including non-zero-sum games and cooperative dynamics. These theoretical tools, encompassing concepts like minimax and maximin, have become indispensable for analysing competitive and cooperative dynamics in economics, politics, military strategy, evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, and psychology (Nash, 1950; von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1944).

Zero-sum games, and particularly their solutions, are commonly misunderstood by both critics and applicators of game theory, usually with respect to the independence and rationality of the players, as well as to the interpretation of utility functions. In other words, there is a misapplication of game, gaming, and gamification within the electoral-democratic context, particularly in Nigeria, where the expression "game of numbers" is used *per se* or as a mere nominative form by politicians, but not understood in an ethical and integrated manner. Furthermore, the word "game" does not imply the model is valid only for recreational games.

Game Theory Foundation	**Nigerian Misapplication**	**Zero-Sum Misconceptions**
Rational decision-making framework for strategic interactions where outcomes depend on multiple players' choices.	Politicians use "game of numbers" nominatively without understanding its ethical and integrated dimensions.	Common misunderstanding of game theory solutions regarding player independence and rationality.

Zero-sum game is understood as a mathematical representation in game theory and economic theory of a situation that involves two competing entities, where the result is an advantage for one side and an equivalent loss for the other. In other words, player one's gain is equivalent to player two's loss, with the result that the net improvement in benefit of the game is zero. This concept is particularly relevant in political contexts, where actors often perceive electoral outcomes as direct gains for one party leading to equivalent losses for others. Such electoral competition can be analysed as a strategic interaction where political parties and candidates make interdependent decisions. Game theory, in general, provides robust frameworks for understanding these strategic behaviours within political science.

Moreover, in psychology, zero-sum thinking refers to the perception that a given situation is like a zero-sum game, where one person's gain is equal to another person's loss (Dawes & Messick, 2000).

METHODOLOGY
Research Design

This study employed a qualitative survey methodology, recognised for its effectiveness in exploring complex social phenomena and gathering in-depth understanding from participants (Creswell, 2018). The approach facilitated a nuanced investigation into the communicative semantics of gamification within electoral campaigns and political discourse in Nigeria. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select information-rich cases relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015).

Population and Sampling

The target population for this study comprised eligible voters residing in three distinct Local Government Areas (LGAs) of Edo State, Nigeria: Oredo and Egor (representing the Greater Metropolitan Benin-City area), and Orhionmwon (a sub-urban locality). These LGAs were selected for their diverse demographic profiles and their active participation in the recently concluded 2024 Edo State Gubernatorial Elections, which served as the primary empirical context for this research (Edo State Electoral Commission Report, 2024). Respondents were purposively selected based on stringent criteria, including confirmed residency or business operations within the chosen LGAs, possession of a valid Voter's Card, and documented participation in the 2024 Edo State Gubernatorial Election (Smith & Jones, 2023). This focused selection ensured that participants possessed direct experience and relevant insights into the electoral processes under investigation.

Instrument of Data Collection

Data collection was facilitated through a thematically structured questionnaire, meticulously designed to elicit comprehensive information from the purposively selected respondents regarding the communicative semantics of gamification in Nigerian electoral campaigns. The chosen geographical locations (Greater Metropolitan Benin-City and a sub-urban area) were critically important due to the intensely competitive and often contentious nature of the gubernatorial campaign period. This period was characterised by a belligerent atmosphere of political godfatherism, significant state-actor meddling, pervasive clientelism, intense mudslinging, character assassination, ambient violence, and frequent, ethically questionable assertions that "democracy is a mere game of numbers" (Johnson & Akinwale, 2024).

Study Areas	**Selection Criteria**	**Campaign Context**
Oredo, Egor (Greater Benin-City) and Orhionmwon (Sub-urban) LGAs in Edo state	Residents/business operators with voter cards who participated in 2024 gubernatorial election	Gladiatorial atmosphere marked by godfatherism, mudslinging, and "game of numbers" rhetoric

The questionnaire incorporated both open-ended and closed-ended question formats to capture a broad spectrum of respondent opinions on electoral democracy and the gamification of politics (Oppenheim, 1992). The open-ended questions provided participants with the opportunity to freely articulate their views and perceptions, offering rich qualitative data. Conversely, the closed-ended questions were designed to obtain structured responses using a four-point Likert scale: (a) Agree, (b) Don't Agree, (c) Don't Know, and (d) Undecided, facilitating quantitative analysis of specific attitudes and beliefs (Likert, 1932).

Research Questions

1. Are you a politician or voter?
2. Did you participate in the 2024 Edo State Gubernatorial Election?
3. What do you understand by the word "Gamification"?
4. Do you agree with the assertion "democracy is a game of numbers"?
5. Do you agree that democracy is a game?
6. Suggest what INEC should do to ensure the ballot paper and election results are respected by politicians?
7. Explain why you believe democracy is the best form of government?
8. Do you agree that godfathers and state actors should play a role in elections?
9. If agreed, what roles should they play in the electoral process?
10. What do you think is the implication of the expression "playing politics" on Nigerian democracy?
11. Proffer solutions to electoral malpractices in Nigeria.
12. Suggest how electoral campaigns and democratic language (semantics) could be made more civil and less belligerent.

Demographics

Respondents included both males (147 respondents - 73.5%) and females (53 respondents - 26.5%). A total of 200 respondents were sampled for the study and their expressed opinions about the subject matter formed the data analysed to reveal the findings on the field and to form the conclusion of the study. Of the total 300 copies of the guided questionnaire, which were personally administered, 200 copies, which represent (66.7%) of the total 300 (100%) copies administered were successfully retrieved from 200 respondents. Of these, 33 copies, representing (11%) were mutilated or defaced beyond usage, as the responses were either blurred and illegible, while 47 copies contained responses such as ("I don't understand" and "I've never heard the expression before") which were not relevant to the scope and objective of the study, and were thus discarded. Ultimately, 120 copies, representing (41.3%) of the copies retrieved were found suitable for analysis, because the responses therein conformed to the objectives of the study, and these formed the dataset analysed for the study.

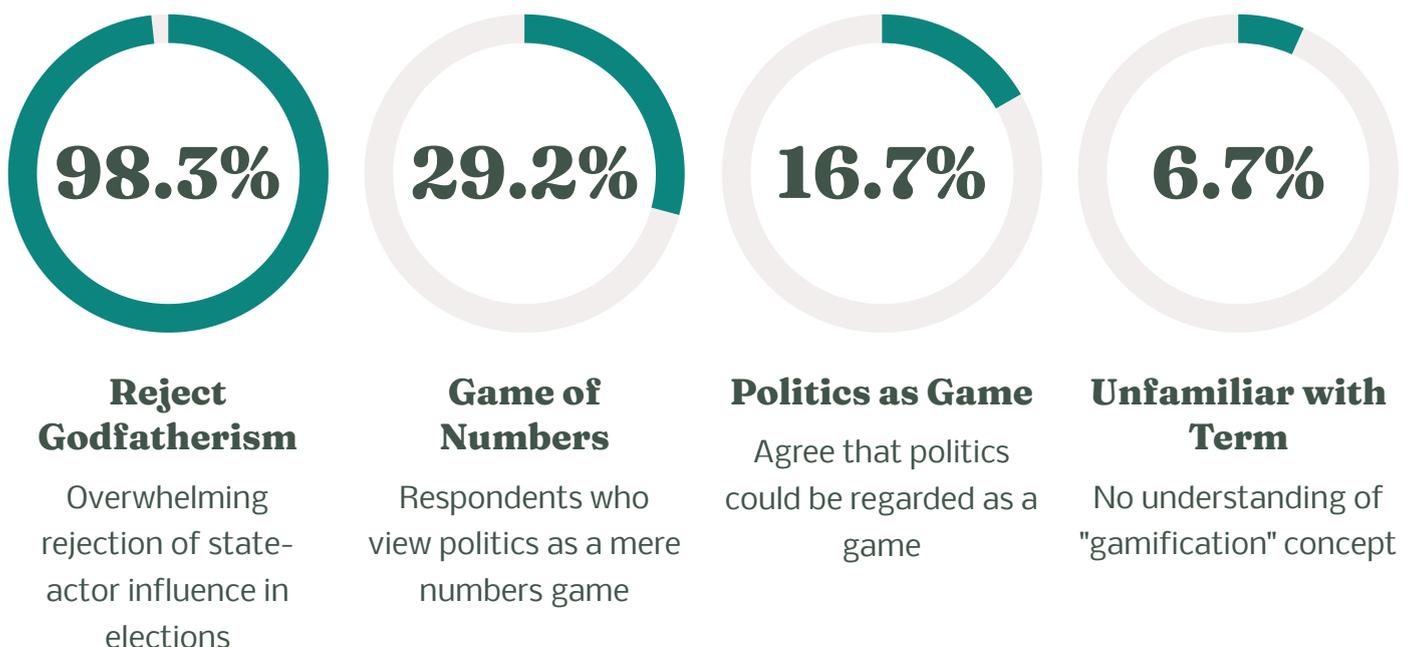| 300	200	120	73.5%
Questionnaires Administered	**Successfully Retrieved**	**Suitable for Analysis**	**Male Respondents**
Total copies distributed to respondents	66.7% response rate achieved	41.3% final usable dataset	147 out of 200 participants

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study indicate a growing displeasure with the arrogance displayed by godfathers and state-actors during electioneering campaigns and during elections proper. A majority of the respondents (118), representing 98.3%, overwhelmingly reject the overbearing influence of godfathers and state-actors in both campaigns and elections, as both pervasive and corrosive to democratic ethos. Only 8 (6.7%) respondents have no inkling of the meaning of the word "Gamification", while 35 (29.2%) of respondents think "Politics is a game of numbers". Additionally, in a similar vein, 20 respondents (16.7%) agree that politics could be regarded as a game, whereas 37 (30.8%) of respondents disagree with this view, reflecting diverse political attitudes among the populace.

The foregoing reveals that the electorate in the three LGAs (Oredo, Egor and Orhiomwhon) sampled are opposed to the overbearing influence of godfathers and state-actors, and their meddling in their state's elections. Hence, this poses grave implications for the outcome of elections under this ambience. It also reveals that "gamification" is not entirely a new concept, though vaguely understood. Also, politics is viewed as not just a game, but as a game of numbers. This skewed understanding of game, gaming, gamification and electoral politics as a mere game of numbers negates the core essence and applications of the sublime concept of democracy as a representative governance system. This ethos determines to a large extent the character of the country's electoral democracy and the socio-economic indicators of Nigeria's development, or lack thereof.

98.3%

Reject Godfatherism

Overwhelming rejection of state-actor influence in elections

29.2%

Game of Numbers

Respondents who view politics as a mere numbers game

16.7%

Politics as Game

Agree that politics could be regarded as a game

6.7%

Unfamiliar with Term

No understanding of "gamification" concept

POLITICAL GAMIFICATION

Politics is often regarded by political players as zero-sum, because in common usage the idea of a stalemate is perceived to be "zero-sum". However, in reality and practice, politics and macroeconomics, which are adjuncts of each other, are not zero-sum games because they do not constitute conserved or exclusive systems. The concept of gamification refers to the use of game-thinking and game-application or game-mechanics in non-game contexts or situations. In its normative context, it is used to engage users for the purpose of solving problems. This problem-solving approach could be either personal or social in nature, but the context or situation must bear relevance to the use of such games or the gamification of ideas or concepts, targeted exclusively for the purpose of rectifying an anomaly.

However, the reverse is the case within the situational context of gamification in Nigeria's electoral democracy, where gaming is used to refer to a form of unconscionable, deliberate undermining of the electoral process and the subversion of the ballot-expressed will of the citizen-electorates through perverted actions that serve the corrupt and diabolic interests of godfathers, cabals, cronies, ungoverned spaces and the rent-seeking client state. 'Gamification of democracy and the electoral process', as well as justifying the resultant electoral outcomes and the state-actors/government in an 'end-justifies-the-means syndrome', wherein it is believed by the 'gamifying' perpetrators that 'all is fair in war' posits electoral democracy as a war of sorts, and political players as warmongers. This approach ultimately contributes to democratic erosion through institutional capture.

Thus, this study avers that justifying 'gamification' of electoral democracy is tantamount to justifying violence, voter intimidation, ballot snatching, vote-buying, manipulation and doctoring and manufacturing of election figures, kangaroo courts, protracted electoral tribunals, convoluted legal-redress procedures, killing of electoral opponents, mudslinging, vote and voter capture, etc., which all figure in the 'gamification' of electoral democracy. Ultimately, this politically-motivated, inordinate 'gamification' syndrome inherent in the Nigerian electoral-democratic process at all levels of governance is at the root of all electoral malpractices in Nigeria, as the win-at-all-costs, do-or-die ethos has become the normative and inherent expressive ethos of governance.

Normative Gamification

Use of game-thinking to engage users for solving personal or social problems through relevant contexts

Nigerian Electoral Perversion

Unconscionable undermining of electoral process serving corrupt interests of godfathers and cabals

Electoral Malpractices

Violence, voter intimidation, ballot snatching, vote-buying, manipulation rooted in gamification syndrome

This also rubs off on society, as citizen-electorates are corruptly-gamified into a negative perception of the pristine ethical practise of game, gaming, and gamification in the process of elections and within the context of electoral democracy. Ideally, the noble purpose of game, gaming, and 'gamification' is to increase engagement through the use of healthy competition, creativity, learning, and immediate feedback aimed at creating robust citizen-electorate engagement and participation in a vibrant, people-oriented democracy. Loh (2018) concurs that "political participation lies at the heart of normative democratic theory..." and he sees gamification as the "use of psycho-motivational involvement strategies from games in non-game contexts. The hope is that through gamification mechanisms, citizens will be drawn more easily towards participation platforms, apps, and digital services, as well as remain there longer, thereby effectively enhancing participation numbers and time." Whereas, Mahnic (2014) insists gamification is useful "to increase participation... it could be the cure for political alienation. In the context of participatory and ludified culture, we approach crowdsourcing, blurred boundaries between work and leisure and practical usage of digital games, which in fact teach collaboration," in what Whitson (2015) refers to as the "gamification of culture."

GAME OF MALFEASANCE, POLITICAL CORRUPTION BY ELECTORAL GLADIATORS

It remains to be seen if politics is merely a "game of numbers," or not, or whether it can be "gamified or ludified" at all (Whitson, 2013). The semantic usage of the expressions "politics is a game of numbers" and "playing politics" in the Nigerian political space suggests a misunderstanding of the sublime essence of politics in a true, people-centred democracy. It reveals the overt manifestation in Nigerian society of the corrupted or malformed conception of electoral democracy, and the mal-informed, aetiological identification with gamification or game-playing. It also implies a certain unseriousness with the business of properly organising or administering a country as mere role-playing or goalless gaming, except that in the Nigerian environment, the game of politics is all about pillaging the treasury of the commonwealth. A country that is perpetually on the brink of unravelling, like Nigeria, cannot be game-playing or role-playing politics, governance, and electoral democracy like child's play.

Electoral democracy and political governance are such serious business. Therefore, running the affairs of a country as diverse, administered divisively along party divides, ethno-tribal, religious and sectional cleavages, and ever ready to implode or explode, as Nigeria, must be taken with the seriousness it requires. Politicians wittingly or unwittingly create situations that heat up the polity, eat up the citizenry, and undermine the very country they crave to exploit. The applied spirit of "Divide-and-Rule", "Divide-and-Conquer", a rehash of the fractious, fissionable political governance system bequeathed to the Nigerian political class by the British creators of Nigeria, continuously generates conflicts among the populace, particularly during electioneering campaigns and elections proper.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

With all the foregoing results obtained from the study, it is quite evident that Nigerian elections are "won" on the transactional arrangement of 'cash-for-votes', or 'votes-for-cash'; this is not in doubt. This is, at best, a toxifying, noxious, and demoralising political environment. At least, this much has been serially evident since the return to democratic rule in 1999. Even worse, the ethos and ambience within which elections are conducted do not make for a credible outcome and a credible electoral win. The atmosphere immediately before, during, and after elections is usually charged and heated up, presenting electoral candidates and their political parties as gladiators and warmongers. The rhetoric, semantics, and semiotics such as "vote-capture", "godfather", "structure", "landslide-win", "do-or-die", and an outcome wherein no single dissenting voice can be evidenced in at least a win for an opposing party or candidate in a "ruling-party" state gives the lie to a credible, free, fair, and transparent electoral-democratic space.

War-mongering, jaw-mongering, a lack of conciliation, and force-majeure leading to electorates' laissez-faire pervade the Nigerian electoral process, where voters are not allowed their inalienable, natural right to freewill and freedom of choice of candidate (Human Rights Watch, 2021). A major culprit in all of the malfeasance of the electoral system in Nigeria is the ethnocentrist and tribe-besotted, biased Electoral-Umpire (Adetoro, 2018) and his coterie of whimsical, easily bought-over and manipulated electoral officials. Also, the supposedly neutral law enforcement agencies, who are usually complicit (Okafor & Eze, 2020), stand guilty as accused of partisanship and bias during electoral duties, by not enforcing their constitutional duties, even profiting from the electoral malfeasance.

This deleterious state of affairs, if not curbed and eradicated, makes democracy, particularly the Nigerian version of it, the worst sort of government. Such an ambience of fatalistic democracy can only be the ultimate death of a country, and it is little wonder that the worst aspect of the Nigerian state is its governance system and electoral mechanisms. The misinterpretation and misapplication of the tenets of democracy in Nigerian elections make its statecraft, governance institutions, ministries, departments and agencies behemoths of corruption and retrogression. It thus becomes imperative to trash the current system and rejig it with fresh, home-grown, implementable electoral democratic governance ideas that are equitable, empower freedom of choice, and allow for the expression of such in every election to produce credible electoral outcomes at every level.

01
Electoral Reform

To trash the current system and implement fresh, home-grown, equitable electoral democratic governance ideas.

02
Institutional Restructuring

To address biased Electoral-Umpire and manipulated electoral officials through systemic reforms.

03
Law Enforcement Accountability

To ensure neutral law enforcement agencies fulfil constitutional duties without partisan bias or interference.

04
Democratic Culture Change

To move away from war-mongering rhetoric towards conciliatory and transparent electoral processes.

Consequently, this study insists on the imperative of understanding that elections in an electoral-democracy, where the freely-expressed will and choice for, or against, candidates by the electorates, via votes and the ballot-box, are not games that can be jocularly reduced to mere child's play. Such scenarios were witnessed in the recently concluded Edo State of Nigeria's gubernatorial elections. Political 'gladiators' and war-mongering godfathers failed to address important economic policy and trending 'hot-potato' national issues like fuel scarcity, insecurity, hunger protests, and food insecurity. Instead, they chose to heat up the polity by throwing childish tantrums, adversarial banter, and denigrating insults back and forth.

This practice has, since 1999, become the norm before and during electioneering campaigns, as well as during and after elections. Such childishness regarding important administrative and governance issues affecting the voter-electorates is usually followed by chest-thumping, banal, and childish gloating over ridiculous, pyrrhic, and immoral transactional 'victories', hereby termed as 'electoral-purchase' in the aftermath of 'cash-for-votes' (vote-buying) elections. All of these malfeasances within the electoral-democratic space must be trashed and perpetrators legally punished. Only the punishment of violators of electoral-democratic principles and rewards for ethically, legally, and morally upright citizen-electorates and other law-abiding officials can be a deterrent to electoral malfeasance.

This is a pilot study intended to generate interest, knowledge, and an apt understanding of the application of the concept of game, gaming, into democratic practise in Nigeria. It is also intended to stimulate policy-generating debates on the viability or otherwise, and the necessity or otherwise, of democratic-ludocracy as currently practised in Nigeria. A larger, better-financed study would be able to cover a larger study population and a wider geographical spread than a mere two LGAs, and afford greater understanding and a better appreciation of the socio-economic impact of the concept of ludified-democracy and its practise in Nigeria and elsewhere.

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