



2026



# EKITI

## Ekiti State 2026 Pre-Election Environment Analysis



Centre for Democracy & Development

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**CDD-West Africa Background Paper**

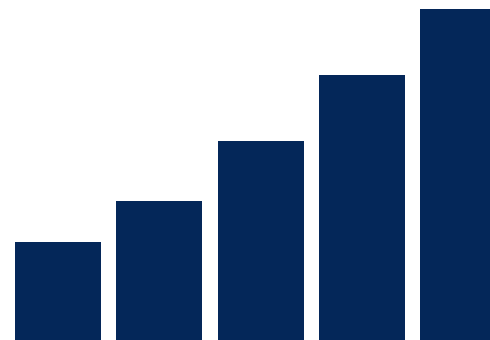
**EKITI 2026**

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**JUNE 2026**



**Map of Ekiti State**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ekiti State Governorship Election 2026 is one of the most significant off-cycle elections in Nigeria and the first gubernatorial election to be held under the new Electoral Act 2026. The election, in essence, is a crucial indicator by which the 2027 election will be viewed. Further to this, the election also occupies a unique position in the electoral experience of Ekiti state, being the first time that the state electoral mood appears to want to break the decades-long “one term” tradition and the need for the All-Progressive Congress to deliver a resounding victory to strengthen its grip on the Southwest region of Nigeria. This paper examines the political, electoral, socioeconomic and security dynamics that shape elections and its implication on the 2027 general election in the country.

The analysis reveals that the election of 2026 is taking place in a context of unprecedented elite consensus in favour of the incumbent governor, whereas Ekiti had been known for competitive elections and frequent political alternation. The election comes with a major organisational edge for the ruling APC, and opposition parties are split and disorganised. Economic hardship, insecurity, youth unemployment and labour relations are likely to influence voters' behaviour. Meanwhile, worries persist over vote-buying, declining electoral competitiveness, misinformation, and voter apathy despite efforts by INEC and security agencies. In addition to choosing political leadership in Ekiti State, the election will also send crucial signals on the effectiveness of recent electoral reforms, the use of election technology, and the organisational strength of political parties ahead of the 2027 general elections. The manner in which the elections are conducted will affect public trust in democratic institutions, and will feed into national narratives about the credibility of the elections, the viability of the opposition and the electoral strength of the ruling APC.

The paper calls for better electoral logistics and enforcement of campaign finance laws, better security coordination to deal with evolving threats, combating vote buying and misinformation, greater women and youth participation in elections, and issue-based campaigns. It also calls for the systematic integration of the lessons learned during the Ekiti elections in the preparation for the 2027 general elections to enhance electoral integrity and democratic governance of the country.

# INTRODUCTION



In the democratic era, since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, one of the most important ways in which political authority is contested, transferred, and legitimised is through elections. Elections are also an important indicator of democratic consolidation as they allow citizens to participate, hold the government accountable, and peacefully manage political competition. While Nigeria has conducted successive electoral cycles over the past two decades, concerns persist regarding electoral integrity, political violence, vote buying, weak opposition parties, declining voter turnout, and the influence of incumbency on electoral outcomes (Ebegbulem, 2017; Ojukwu et al., 2019; S. Omotola, 2011; S. Omotola & Oyewole, 2023). Thus, every election cycle is a chance to evaluate how resilient and inclusive democratic institutions are and how well they can maintain public confidence in the democratic process.

In this larger scheme, off-cycle governorship elections have become more important in the electoral tapestry of Nigeria. These elections have evolved from judicial decisions impacting electoral timelines in certain states and are now viewed as crucial test cases in electoral administration, political party formation, voter participation and electoral security (PLAC, 2023). Off-cycle elections may receive more national attention, greater resources and intensive political, civil society, electoral observation and media scrutiny, which may result in greater attention to and resources for the elections compared to on-cycle elections. They also offer important clues to growing political trends and public opinion ahead of the forthcoming national elections (Omotola & Oyewole, 2023). Consequently, events and performance of off-cycle elections often have consequences that go beyond the host state.

The 2026 governorship election in Ekiti State is an important factor in this context. The poll is one of the last major elections before Nigeria's 2027 general elections, providing an opportunity to assess electoral reforms that have been introduced recently, the readiness of electoral institutions, political competition, and the overall development of the democratic process in the country. The election also comes at a time when party relations are shifting, economic issues are a big concern, security is an ongoing worry, and the demand for accountability and citizen participation in elections is rising. The Ekiti governorship election, therefore, cannot be treated as a local political battle but as a very important democratic event that could be an indicator of how elections are run, how people are mobilised and how democracy is consolidated in Nigeria. This paper focuses on the political, institutional, and socio-economic dynamics that had an influence on the election and reviews its implications for Nigeria's democratic development and the 2027 general elections.




## METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts qualitative policy analysis drawing on secondary sources to assess the political, electoral and institutional dynamics shaping the 2026 Ekiti governorship election. Relevant data are sourced from existing literature, credible newspaper publications, official reports and government policy documents. Through a synthesis of these materials, the study identifies key political trends, electoral risks, and policy concerns associated with the conduct of the election and its broader significance for the country's future democratic trajectory. It adopted a thematic analysis to examine the socio-political environment, patterns of electoral competition, and security considerations that influence electoral outcomes in the State, as well as their implications for the evolving national political landscape ahead of the 2027 general elections.

## BACKGROUND AND STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF EKITI STATE

### Socioeconomic and Demographic Profile of Ekiti

Ekiti State in Nigeria's South-West geopolitical area was carved out of Ondo State in 1996. The State is bounded by Kwara State to the North, Kogi State to the North, Osun State to the West and Ondo State to the East and South, with a land area of about 6,353 square kilometres, mostly undulating terrain with hills and valleys and numerous streams (Asenguah, 2017). According to population projections by the National Population Commission (NPC), Ekiti has an estimated population of about three million people, comprising roughly 1.53 million females and 1.45 million males. The population is predominantly Yoruba, with the local dialect (Ekiti) being the major language (Adebayo, 2014; Asenguah, 2017; EKSG, 2025). Agriculture continues to be the main livelihood activity in the state, with the majority of the workforce engaged in agricultural activities, including cassava, yam, maize, rice, cocoa, and oil palm farming. Besides agriculture, the state has mineral resources like granite, kaolin, limestone, among others, and has tourism potentials like Ikogosi Warm Springs, Arinta Waterfalls, among others, for economic diversification and development of the local people (EKSG, 2025).



Yet, despite being the “Fountain of Knowledge” and more recently the “Land of Honour” with its long history of educational merit, Ekiti has lots of structural development issues that influence the governance agenda and public expectations. The economy remains considerably reliant on agriculture and employment in the public sector, and industrialisation and private sector investment are still relatively small. This has, therefore, continued to be a major concern due to high youth unemployment and underemployment rates, which have led to high emigration rates to major cities like Lagos, Ibadan and Abuja. The country's infrastructure gaps, especially in transport, power supply, healthcare delivery services and rural connectivity, remain a hindrance to economic growth and the investment climate. These difficulties have been exacerbated by national economic pressures, such as the rise in inflation and living costs since the end of fuel subsidies in 2023. This loss of purchasing power has made the lives of households more difficult and raised public expectations for good governance, service delivery, and economic management (Madukpe et al., 2025). Accordingly, the socioeconomic conditions in Ekiti provide an important background to the voters' perceptions, political expectations and electoral behaviour in the forthcoming 2026 governorship election.

### **Strategic Importance of the 2026 Governorship Election**

In addition to its demographic and economic traits, Ekiti state occupies a strategically important position within Nigeria's electoral landscape as one of the country's off-cycle election states. Off-cycle elections emerged largely as a result of judicial decisions that altered gubernatorial tenures and election timetables, thereby necessitating elections outside the regular general election cycle. Scholars and election observers have noted that such elections often serve as critical testing grounds for electoral administration, political party mobilisation, voter behaviour and security management in advance of national elections (Omotola & Oyewole, 2023; PLAC, 2023). Scheduled for 20 June 2026, the Ekiti governorship election is particularly significant because it will be held only a few months before Nigeria's 2027 general elections. Thus, the election provides an opportunity to review the implementation of recent electoral reforms, to evaluate the preparedness of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) in discharging its mandate, as well as examining the organisational capacity of political parties. It also offers an early indication of emerging political trends, voter sentiments and coalition-building efforts that may shape the national political environment. This significance has been underscored by INEC officials, who have described the election as an important rehearsal for the 2027 general elections, not only for Ekiti State, but for Nigeria's democratic consolidation process generally (PLAC, 2023; Sodeinde, 2026b).

# POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL CONTEXT

## Historical Evolution of Electoral Politics in Ekiti


Ekiti State is one of the most competitive and unpredictable electoral landscapes in Nigeria since the return to democratic rule in 1999. In contrast to other states that have experienced almost a tradition of re-electing their leaders, Ekiti has had multiple changes of leadership, judicial interventions, impeachment crises, and heavy party competition.

**Table 1: Electoral Timeline of Ekiti Governors (1999–2026)**

Period	Governor	Political Party
1999–2003	Niyi Adebayo	AD
2003–2006	Ayodele Fayose	PDP
2007–2010	Olusegun Oni	PDP
2010–2014	Kayode Fayemi	ACN
2014–2018	Ayodele Fayose	PDP
2018–2022	Kayode Fayemi	APC
2022–2026	Biodun Oyebanji	APC
2026	Election	—

**Source:** (Adeleye & Akomolafe, 2020; Amzat, 2018; Aziken et al., 2014; Ekundayo & Adebunsi, 2014; Okeke & Muoneke, 2022)


Ayodele Fayose of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) defeated the state's first democratically elected governor, Niyi Adebayo of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), in 2003, thereby establishing an early precedent that incumbency does not necessarily guarantee electoral victory (Adebayo & Akomolafe, 2020). Fayose's tenure was, however, short-lived, as he was impeached and removed from office in 2006, creating a political vacuum that led to the declaration of a state of emergency and the appointment of an administrator (Adeleye & Akomolafe, 2020).



The subsequent election in 2007 generated another protracted political crisis when the PDP's Olusegun Oni defeated the Action Congress (AC)'s Kayode Fayemi. However, a Court of Appeal ruling in 2010 nullified the election results and declared Fayemi the rightful winner (Oni, 2010). These developments reinforced a political culture in which electoral outcomes have often been disputed and political transitions shaped, not only by electoral processes, but also by judicial interventions (Okeke & Muoneke, 2022; Omilusi, 2016).

In fact, Ekiti's status as a fiercely contested electoral battleground was further entrenched between 2010 and 2022. Although Fayemi's administration implemented several social intervention and infrastructure development programmes, he lost the 2014 election to Fayose, whose popular appeal and ability to mobilise grassroots support resonated strongly with voters (Aziken et al., 2014; Ekundayo & Adebunsi, 2014). The election underscored the importance of voter perceptions, political communication, and candidates' responsiveness to local socio-economic realities- factors that have remained central to electoral politics in the state. The pendulum swung again in 2018 when Fayemi, contesting under the All-Progressives Congress (APC), reclaimed power by defeating the PDP candidate and returning the state to alignment with the ruling party at the federal level (Amzat, 2018). The alternation of power between the two major political parties across successive election cycles demonstrated both the competitiveness of the state's political landscape and the high level of political consciousness among its electorate, often regarded as one of the most politically aware populations in Nigeria.

A major legacy of this political history is the emergence of an informal "one-term tradition," whereby governors have generally secured only a single uninterrupted term in office since the state's creation. Although this pattern was never formally institutionalised, it evolved through a combination of electoral outcomes, impeachments, judicial interventions, and shifts in voter preferences. Court rulings and electoral controversies have significantly influenced the democratic trajectory of the state, and the protracted legal dispute arising from the 2007 governorship election ultimately resulted in Ekiti becoming an off-cycle election state (Oni, 2010). These recurring political realignments created a widespread public perception that political office remained largely contestable irrespective of the party in power, thereby strengthening expectations of electoral competitiveness and democratic accountability (Ezeajughu, 2023; Omilusi, 2019).



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The 2022 governorship race represented another milestone in this evolving political trajectory. As Elusoji (2022) observed, Biodun Oyebanji of the APC secured victory by a comfortable margin, benefitting from the advantages of a ruling and an opposition fragmented among multiple contenders. The election also marked broader challenges within Nigeria's electoral system, such as the introduction of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), persistent concerns about vote buying, and relatively low voter turnout despite increased political mobilisation (Elusoji, 2022; Omilusi, 2024; Omotola & Oyewole, 2023). More importantly, Oyebanji's victory created a unique historical moment. For the first time since the creation of Ekiti State, an incumbent approached a governorship election with a realistic prospect of breaking the state's long-standing cycle of political alternation and securing re-election (Osubu, 2026b). Consequently, the 2026 governorship election will represent not only a contest for political power but also a critical test of whether Ekiti's history of electoral volatility and alternation is giving way to a new era characterised by incumbency consolidation, elite consensus, and greater political stability.

## **Strategic Importance of the 2026 Governorship Election**

Although Ekiti State does not operate a formal zoning arrangement requiring the alternation of the governorship among its three senatorial zones, the issue of regional equity and political inclusion has become a dominant feature of the state's electoral discourse in recent years. Since the return to democratic rule in 1999, political leadership in Ekiti State has been dominated by candidates from Ekiti Central and Ekiti North, while Ekiti South has yet to produce an elected governor (Osubu, 2026b), the acting governor in 2009 was from Ekiti South.




This situation has not only aggravated historical grievances among political actors and community leaders in the southern district but has also heightened demands for equitable representation as a means of enhancing political inclusion, promoting a sense of belonging, and ensuring balanced development across the state. Proponents of rotational leadership argue that zoning can enhance political stability by ensuring that no district feels permanently excluded from access to executive power.

Opponents, however, contend that access to the governorship should be determined by competence, performance and the preferences of voters rather than by geographical considerations (Daily Post, 2025; Ogunje, 2022).

The debate extends beyond the governorship to encompass the distribution of political appointments, public facilities and development projects across the state's various localities. Despite its relative ethnic homogeneity, Ekiti possesses strong local identities and sub-regional interests that often shape political perceptions and voting behaviour. In parts of Ekiti South, as well as in some communities within the northern and central districts, concerns are periodically expressed regarding inadequate representation in government and unequal development outcomes (Ogunje, 2022). Resolving such concerns has been a concern of successive governments, both through political appointments and infrastructural investments, but perceptions of marginalisation remain an enduring feature of political discourse. These sentiments provide opposition parties with an opportunity to frame issues of regional exclusion and political inclusion as central themes in the 2026 governorship election, even as the ruling APC prioritises continuity, performance and governance outcomes rather than zoning considerations (Ediare, 2026). Thus, while zoning may not emerge as a major campaign issue, it remains a significant political factor capable of influencing voter mobilisation in certain constituencies. Having explored the historical evolution of electoral politics and broader questions of representation and regional inclusion, attention now shifts to the contemporary political and electoral environment. Although Ekiti's history of political contestation provides an important backdrop to the 2026 governorship election, other factors including shifting party alignments, campaign financing, and strategic preparations for the 2027 general elections are also likely to shape the electoral outcome.

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## **THE 2026 ELECTORAL LANDSCAPE**

### **APC and the Politics of Continuity**

The All-Progressives Congress (APC) enters the 2026 Ekiti governorship election with great political leverage, owing both to incumbency and to broader efforts at regional political consolidation ahead of Nigeria's 2027 general elections. Although governorship elections are primarily state-level contests, the Ekiti election has acquired national significance because it represents one of the final major electoral tests before the 2027 presidential election (Sodeinde, 2026b). The APC, therefore, views the election not merely as an opportunity to secure another term in office but also as a strategic platform for building support for President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's anticipated re-election bid in the South-West and consolidating the party's dominance in the region. A key factor underpinning part of this reason is the party's emphasis on unity and continuity during the candidate selection process. During APC governorship primary election held in October 2025, potential challengers either withdrew from the race or rallied behind the incumbent governor, Biodun Oyebanji.



Prominent political figures, including former governors and opposition leaders such as Kayode Fayemi, Niyi Adebayo, Segun Oni and Ayodele Fayose endorsed Oyebanji's candidacy as a continuation of ongoing developmental initiatives, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, labour relations and administrative stability (Akinselure & Nejo, 2026; Edremoda, 2026; Kalu, 2025; Nejo, 2025, 2026a). Beyond these performance-related considerations, however, party cohesion has also been driven by a shared recognition that internal differences could undermine the party's overall electoral prospects ahead of the 2027 general elections (Ezeajughu, 2023; Yiaga Africa, 2026b).

One of the most striking features of the current political environment is the unprecedented level of elite consensus in support of the incumbent governor, which is basically attributed to the fact that he has been around the corridors of power for a while - when he served on the committee that carved out Ekiti state out of Ondo. Historically, many of the state's leading political actors have occupied opposing political camps; yet, several of these influential figures have publicly endorsed Oyebanji's re-election bid. The support extended by former governors Kayode

Fayemi, Ayodele Fayose, Adeniyi Adebayo and Segun Oni illustrates the extent to which national political considerations have, in some instances, transcended traditional partisan sentiments (Akinselure & Nejo, 2026; Edremoda, 2026; Kalu, 2025; Nejo, 2025, 2026a). These cross-party alignments indicate that political elites increasingly perceive the election as an opportunity to consolidate support for both the APC and President Tinubu ahead of the 2027 general elections. This development is particularly noteworthy given Ekiti state's long-standing history of electoral volatility and its informal "one-term tradition" whereby no governor has secured two consecutive elections since the state's creation (Abiola, 2026). Unlike his predecessors, Oyebanji enters the contest with a realistic prospect of breaking this pattern, supported by the 'benefits of incumbency', cross-party political elite backing, organised labour support, and the wider strength of the ruling party.

While incumbency confers significant electoral advantages, it also generates heightened expectations regarding governance performance and accountability. Voters are, therefore, likely to evaluate the administration's performance in the areas of infrastructure, economic management and security. However, as the political climate towards the incumbent grows ever more cohesive, it appears that the political context for the upcoming general elections in 2027 is being influenced by more than just the assessment of government performance.

Although these developments boost the governor's re-election chances and help preserve the sense of political stability, they also raise significant questions regarding the quality of electoral competition. The literature on democratic consolidation emphasises the importance of competitive elections characterised by viable alternatives and credible opposition parties capable of holding incumbents accountable (Okeke & Muoneke, 2022; Omilusi, 2016). From this perspective, the growing elite consensus around Oyebanji may contribute positively to short-term political stability while simultaneously weakening the competitive dynamics that have historically characterised Ekiti's electoral politics.


### Opposition Parties and the Challenge of Electoral Competition

While the APC has entered the 2026 election with a relatively unified political structure, opposition parties have struggled to overcome internal divisions, leadership disputes, and organisational weaknesses. The People's Democratic Party (PDP), traditionally the main opposition party in Ekiti, had a turbulent nomination process with several aspirants vying for the position, as well as factional disputes that reflected the broader internal crises affecting the party at the national level.

The controversies surrounding the emergence of Wole Oluyede as the PDP's governorship candidate highlighted the challenges confronting the party as it sought to rebuild following its disappointing performance in the 2022 governorship election (Adewole, 2026; Osubu, 2026a; Sodeinde, 2025). Although the nomination process eventually produced a candidate, it also exposed underlying fractures within the party. Limited financial resources, the weakening of grassroots structures, and the defection or loss of key political figures have further constrained the party's ability to mount a credible electoral challenge.


**Table 1: Political Strength Matrix**

Factor	APC	PDP	ADC	Other Parties
Incumbency	High	None	None	None
Funding	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Elite Support	High	Low	Low	Low
Grassroots Network	High	Moderate	Moderate	Weak
Electoral Prospects	High	Moderate	Moderate	Low



Consequently, opposition efforts have largely focused on criticizing the current administration over issues such as insecurity, economic challenges, and concerns about regional inclusion, rather than presenting a coherent and coordinated policy alternative capable of attracting broad electoral support (Afolabi, 2025, 2026a). The lack of coordination among opposition parties is not only a reflection of local political dynamics but also a consequence of broader national divisions that have weakened opposition politics across the country. Scholars (See Okeke & Muoneke, 2022; Omilusi, 2016) have long contended that the mere existence of multiple parties is insufficient to guarantee effective democratic competition; rather, viable alternatives must exist to challenge the incumbent, hold governments accountable, and provide meaningful choices for voters. In Ekiti state, however, political fragmentation has entrenched the perception that the electoral contest is tilted in favour of the ruling party even before polling takes place.

This perception is especially crucial given Ekiti's reputation as one of Nigeria's most competitive electoral zones. The electorate has repeatedly shown a willingness to vote against incumbent governors, as evidenced by the 2014 governorship election in which Ayodele Fayose of the PDP defeated the incumbent governor, Kayode Fayemi of the All Progressives Congress by 203,090 votes to 120,433 votes (Premium Times, 2014). In the same manner, the 2018 elections were highly competitive, with Fayemi reclaiming power by securing 197,459 votes against Kolapo Olusola's 178,121 votes, a margin of fewer than 20,000 votes (Amzat, 2018). In contrast, the 2022 election witnessed a more decisive victory for Biodun Oyebanji of the APC, who secured 187,057 votes amid a fragmented opposition and the institutional advantages enjoyed by the ruling party (Ufuoma, 2022). Data from Kimpact Development Initiative (KDI) indicates a steady decline in voter turnout in Ekiti State governorship elections, decreasing from 50.32% in 2014 to 44.36% in 2018 and further to 36.74% in the 2022 governorship election. Current political developments suggest that electoral competitiveness may continue to decline ahead of the 2026 governorship election. The alignment of influential political actors behind the incumbent president, the erosion of opposition platforms, and the inability of opposition parties to forge a united front have all contributed to the perception that the contest is increasingly becoming one-sided in favour of the APC, and by extension, the broader political interests associated with the presidency. While such dominance may contribute to political stability, it also raises important concerns regarding democratic consolidation. The quality of democracy depends not only on the conduct of elections, but also on the existence of credible alternatives capable of broadening political participation, strengthening institutional checks and balances, and promoting government responsiveness.



Furthermore, the prolonged opposition weakness may generate unintended consequences, including voter apathy, reduced political engagement, and declining confidence in the election process. Such development could have a significant impact for the legitimacy, competitiveness, and overall credibility of the 2026 governorship election.

## **Campaign Finance and the Influence of National Actors**

Another crucial aspect of the 2026 electoral landscape is the rising involvement of national political actors in campaign financing and electoral mobilisation. While Nigeria's electoral system has restrictions on campaign financing and political party donations, enforcement of these provisions has historically been weak, raising persistent concerns about unequal access to financial resources and the influence of money in electoral contests (Omotola, 2011). The Electoral Act 2026 sets the maximum expenditure for governorship campaigns at ₦3 billion and limits individual donations to ₦500 million, but there are concerns about the effectiveness of the regulatory institutions in monitoring and ensuring compliance (Electoral Act, 2026). In Ekiti state, the APC benefits from incumbency, a well-established party structure, and the support of influential political figures at both the state and national levels. Opposition parties, by contrast, continue to face resource constraints that may undermine their ability to compete effectively across the sixteen local government areas of the state, particularly in the case of the PDP and smaller opposition groups.

As earlier alluded to, the involvement of national actors in the campaign has further reinforced the perception that the Ekiti governorship election is not merely a state-level contest but also an integral component of broader preparations for the 2027 general elections. For instance, the Senate Leader and a leading figure in the APC campaign structure, Opeyemi Bamidele, has publicly declared that the party aims to mobilise up to ten million votes across the South-West and has described the Ekiti governorship election as both a "referendum on the governor's performance" and an indicator of the party's strength ahead of the 2027 elections (Omotere, 2026; Umoru, 2026). Such statements underscore the strategic importance that the APC leadership attaches to the election and illustrate the extent to which national political calculations are shaping local electoral dynamics. The use of national political networks for mobilisation can also help in campaign organisation and outreach to voters, but it also introduces long-standing concerns about the misappropriation of state resources for partisan purposes, the benefits that incumbents receive, and the larger issue of maintaining a level playing field in the election.



# KEY DRIVERS OF VOTER BEHAVIOUR

Economic, political and security considerations are likely to shape voter preferences in the 2026 Ekiti governorship election. Although party loyalty and elite endorsements remain important determinants of electoral behaviour, voters are increasingly expected to assess candidates based on their responses to pressing socio-economic challenges and governance issues.

## **Economic Hardship and Subsidy Reforms**


Economy conditions are expected to be among the most important factors influencing voter choices in the 2026 governorship election. In May 2023, Nigeria's federal government removed fuel subsidies, resulting in a significant surge in fuel prices, transportation costs, food prices, and the overall cost of living for many residents, especially those in low and middle-income groups (Mojeed, 2023). In Ekiti state, the high reliance of a significant percentage of the population on public sector employment and agriculture for their livelihoods has further exacerbated the economic constraints and vulnerability of households and small businesses due to rising inflation and declining purchasing power.

The Oyebanji administration has introduced several intervention measures, such as food support programmes, agricultural assistance schemes, and microcredit initiatives for traders and small business owners (Akintunde, 2024; Alo, 2026; Ibrahim, 2026). However, public opinion remains divided regarding the effectiveness of these interventions. Supporters argue that the state government has taken steps to buffer the impact of national economic reforms, whereas critics contend the measures have been inadequate to significantly improve living standards. These economic concerns have been exploited by the opposition parties by promising job creation, increased support for agricultural production, and policies aimed at reducing production costs and improving household welfare (Afolabi, 2025).

Consequently, perceptions of economic performance at both the state and federal levels are likely to remain a critical determinant of voter behaviour in the forthcoming election.

## **Labour Relations and Union Support**

Another factor that may impact voter perceptions in the 2026 election is labour relations. The Oyebanji administration has generally maintained cordial relations with the organised labour with regular payment of salaries, pensions, and other worker entitlements, in contrast to some previous administrations that experienced prolonged disputes with labour unions.



The public recognition of the government's efforts in terms of responsive governance and worker welfare by organisations such as the Nigeria Union of Local Government Employees (NULGE), the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC), and segments of the education sector has bolstered the administration's political narrative (Babalola, 2026). Although critics have argued that such endorsements may reflect elements of patronage politics rather than an objective evaluation of performance, they nonetheless constitute an important source of political legitimacy and mobilisation strength for the APC. This is particularly significant given the substantial proportion of public sector workers within Ekiti's electorate.

### **Kidnapping and Insecurity as Campaign Issues**

Security concerns, particularly the rising incidence of kidnapping and violent attacks, have emerged as a prominent issue in the 2026 governorship campaign. The alarming abduction of worshippers during a church service in Eda Oniyo, Ilejemeje Local Government Area of Ekiti State, which was widely reported in the media, heightened public concern about security in the state (Nejo, 2026b). The attack fueled concerns of residents, particularly farmers and rural communities, regarding the increasing threat posed by armed criminal groups operating in border areas of the state. These developments have been used by opposition candidates to challenge the effectiveness of the government's security policies and to argue for more proactive measures to protect lives and property. The Oyebanji administration has, however, reaffirmed its commitment to addressing insecurity through sustained investments in security infrastructure, continued support for the Amotekun Corps, and enhanced cooperation with federal security agencies (Nejo, 2026b; Ojomoyela, 2026). In view of this, security has been a critical election matter, and the assessment of the government's ability to tackle kidnapping and other forms of criminality may influence voter behaviour in the 2026 governorship election.

### **Youth Unemployment and Migration**

Youth unemployment and out-migration continue to pose serious socio-economic challenges in Ekiti State. Limited economic opportunities and the absence of substantial industrial activity have prompted many young people to migrate to major urban centres, including Lagos and Abuja in search of better economic opportunities. The challenge of access to finance, job creation, and sustainable economic opportunities for youth graduates and skilled youths persists despite the introduction of youth empowerment and entrepreneurship programmes by the Oyebanji administration (Afolabi, 2026b). Given the growing size of the youth population and its importance within the electorate, perceptions of government efforts to address unemployment and create economic opportunities are likely to influence voting behaviour, particularly among young and first-time voters.



## **Social Media, Misinformation and Political Discourse**


Digital technologies have transformed political communication and electoral mobilisation in Ekiti. Candidates, political parties, and their supporters increasingly utilize platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) to disseminate campaign messages and engage voters. These platforms provide greater access to political information, but they have also made it easier to spread misinformation, disinformation, and politically motivated information that can shape public perceptions and influence voter behaviour (Fab-Ukozor & Etumnu, 2023; Sodeinde, 2026b). There has been concern that public confidence in electoral processes could be undermined by false claims, manipulated videos and unverifiable reports from election observers and civil society groups.

## **ELECTION INTEGRITY AND RISK ASSESSMENT**

### **Electoral Administration and Institutional Preparedness**

Digital technologies have transformed political communication and electoral mobilisation in Ekiti. Candidates, political parties, and their supporters increasingly utilize platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) to disseminate campaign messages and engage voters. These platforms provide greater access to political information, but they have also made it easier to spread misinformation, disinformation, and politically motivated information that can shape public perceptions and influence voter behaviour (Fab-Ukozor & Etumnu, 2023; Sodeinde, 2026b). There has been concern that public confidence in electoral processes could be undermined by false claims, manipulated videos and unverifiable reports from election observers and civil society groups.

The integrity of the 2026 governorship election in Ekiti will depend largely on the ability of electoral institutions to effectively implement recent reforms and adequately manage the logistical demands of the electoral process. The election will constitute one of the first major tests of the Electoral Act 2026, which seeks to enhance electoral transparency, improve campaign finance regulation, increase penalties for electoral offences, expand the use of technology in election management and enhance accountability in party nomination processes. In addition to the legal requirements, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) has been making extensive preparations for the election, including holding a polling unit inspection exercise, recruitment and training of ad hoc staff, distribution of the Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs), and testing the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) to enhance voter accreditation and minimize electoral fraud opportunities (Yiaga Africa, 2026a). The commission has also indicated its intention to deploy election materials early, collaborate closely with security agencies, and implement measures to ensure that persons with disabilities and other vulnerable groups can participate in the election (Sodeinde, 2026a).




Notwithstanding these efforts, there remain concerns about the Commission's capacity to ensure a seamless electoral process. The problems of logistical delays, technological failures, disorganised result transmission, and weak enforcement of campaign finance regulations, which were observed during previous off-cycle elections and the recent national polls, have undermined public confidence in electoral administration (Omotola, 2011; Omotola & Oyewole, 2023). Questions also persist regarding the practical implementation of new legal provisions relating to vote buying, campaign financing, and internal party democracy. The Ekiti governorship election, therefore, is a critical institutional test for both INEC and Nigeria's broader electoral reform agenda, as its conduct will have a bearing on the country's preparedness for the 2027 general elections.

## **Security Risks and Election-Day Vulnerabilities**

Ekiti has been noted to have less electoral violence compared to northern Nigeria, but recent security challenges indicate that election administrators and security agencies can not afford to be complacent. In recent years, there have been cases of kidnapping, armed robbery, and transborder criminal activities in some communities located around the state's boundaries with Kogi and Kwara States. The concerns have grown further since several abductions of worshippers during a worship service in Eda Oniyo came to the fore and attracted national media attention (Nejo, 2026b). Although these incidents have not been directly connected to electoral violence, they do point to the overall security environment within which the election will be conducted. In response, the Nigeria Police Force, the Department of State Services (DSS), the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), and the Amotekun Corps have announced the deployment of a multi-layered security strategy around polling units, collation centres and critical infrastructure (Okonkwo, 2026). Nevertheless, potential threats remain. Voter intimidation, disruptions to the movement of election materials, insecurity in rural communities, and the possibility of politically motivated violence could undermine voter confidence and reduce electoral participation.

## **Risks to Electoral Credibility**

One of the most potent threats to the credibility and legitimacy of elections in Nigeria is vote buying, which is likely to pose a major challenge during the 2026 Ekiti governorship election. Vote trading- where candidates and political parties exchange cash, food items, consumer goods, or promises of employment and patronage for votes- has been a pervasive practice in Nigerian elections, as documented in various studies (Lawal et al., 2024; Nwagwu et al., 2022; Omilusi, 2024).




Scholars contend that this practice transforms elections into transactional exchanges, undermines the free choice of the voters, weakens democratic accountability, and skews political competition by favouring financially advantaged candidates over those offering substantive policy alternatives (Lawal et al., 2024). The persistence of vote buying is further reinforced by poverty, unemployment, economic insecurity, and the growing prevalence of the “see-and-buy” phenomenon in Nigerian elections, which increases voter susceptibility to inducements (Jensen & Justesen, 2014; Lawal et al., 2024).

These risks may be particularly pronounced in Ekiti State in 2026 given prevailing economic hardships, rising living costs, and the broader political significance of the election as a precursor to the 2027 general elections. The Electoral Act 2026 reinforces measures to combat electoral bribery in the light of these risks. Section 131(a-b) of the Act provides that:

*“Any person who (a) corruptly by himself or by any other person at any time after the date of an election has been announced, directly or indirectly gives or provides or pays money to or for any person for the purpose of corruptly influencing that person or any other person to vote or refrain from voting at such election, or on account of such person or any other person having voted or refrained from voting at such election, or (b) being a voter, corruptly accepts or takes money or any other inducement during any of the period stated in paragraph (a), commits an offence and is liable on conviction to a fine of ₦500,000 or imprisonment for a term of 12 months or bot” (Electoral Act, 2026).*

Enforcement remains a major challenge despite these legal reforms. Historically, anti-vote-buying laws in Nigeria have suffered from weak implementation, limited investigative capacity, and a low rate of successful prosecutions, thereby diminishing their deterrent effect (Lawal et al., 2024). However, recent developments indicate a greater willingness among law enforcement agencies to address electoral offences. For instance, during the February 2026 Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Area Council elections, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) arrested twenty persons for alleged vote buying and related offences involving over ₦17 million, including one suspect allegedly found in possession of ₦13.5 million near a polling unit (Ede, 2026).

Although these arrests were widely interpreted as evidence of increased enforcement efforts, election observer organisations such as Yiaga Africa reported isolated incidents of voter inducement and cautioned that arrests alone do not necessarily translate into successful prosecutions or long-term deterrence (Ede, 2026).



Beyond vote buying, electoral credibility is also threatened by voter apathy, misinformation, and declining public trust in electoral institutions. If citizens perceive that electoral outcomes are predetermined by incumbency advantages, elite influence, or widespread inducement, voter turnout may decline, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the electoral process. Consequently, the credibility of the 2026 Ekiti governorship election will depend not only on the technical administration of voting but also on the capacity of INEC, security agencies, political parties, civil society organisations, and election observers to ensure compliance with electoral laws, combat electoral corruption, and uphold the integrity of the democratic process (Lawal et al., 2024; Nejo, 2026c).

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## **Participation and Inclusion Risks**

Low voter turnout and continued marginalisation of women and other underrepresented groups constitute key threats to the integrity of the 2026 governorship election. Previous off-cycle elections in Nigeria have generally recorded lower voter turnout than general elections, and the 2022 Ekiti governorship election followed this pattern, with voter turnout estimated at approximately 36.5 per cent despite substantial political mobilisation across the state (Ishola, 2026). Voter apathy in the 2026 election may stem from a variety of factors, including economic hardship, declining trust in political institutions, perceptions that electoral outcomes are predetermined, and concerns about insecurity in certain communities. At the same time, challenges relating to political inclusion persist, particularly regarding the participation of women, youth, persons with disabilities, and other historically underrepresented groups.

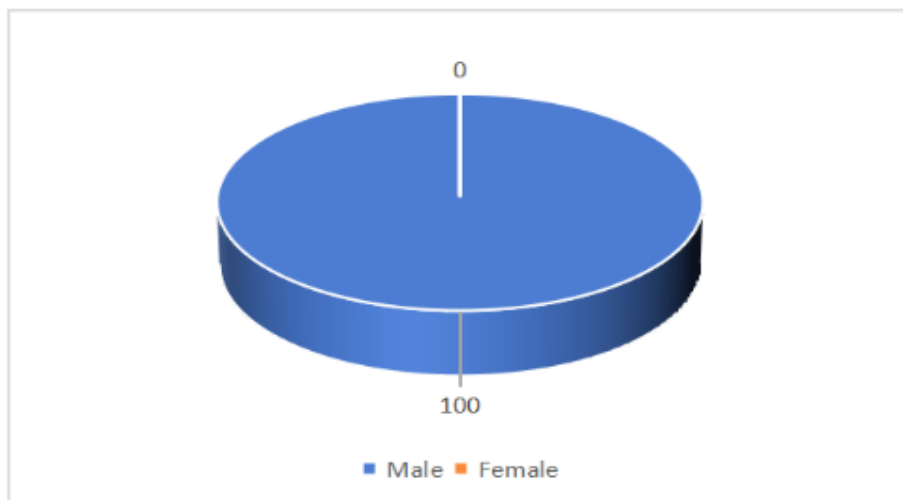
Addressing these concerns will be essential not only for enhancing electoral participation but also for strengthening the legitimacy, representativeness, and democratic credibility of the electoral process.

**Table 1: Electoral Timeline of Ekiti Governors (1999–2026)**

Position	Male	Female	Total
Governorship Candidates	14	0	14
Deputy Governorship Candidates	10	4	14
<b>Total Candidates</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>28</b>

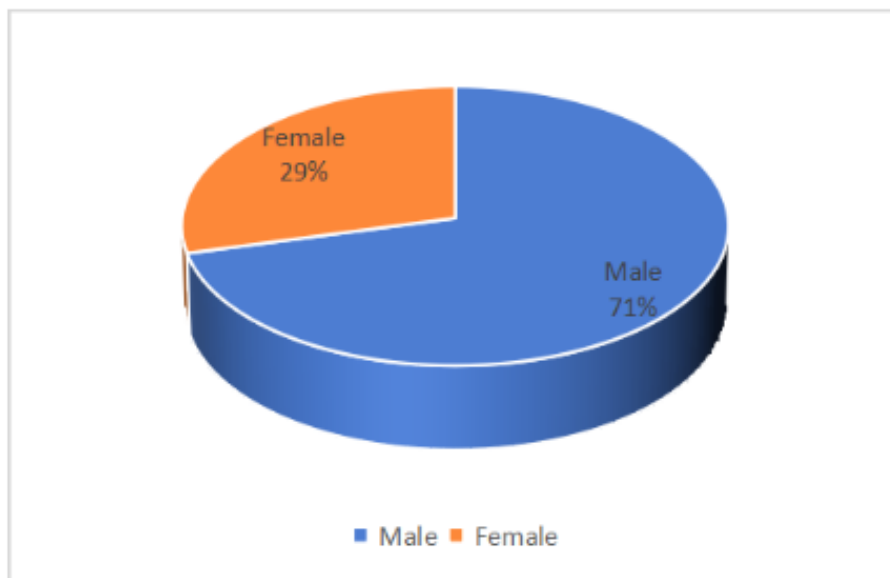
*Source:* (INEC Nigeria, 2026).

**Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Governorship Candidates in the 2026 Ekiti Governorship Election**





**Figure 2: Gender Distribution of Deputy Governorship Candidates in the 2026 Ekiti Governorship Election**



As shown in Table 2, gender representation in the 2026 Ekiti governorship election remains highly unequal. All 14 governorship candidates are male, while women constitute only 4 of the 14 deputy governorship candidates, representing just 14.3 per cent of the total 28 candidates on the ballot. This pattern reflects the persistent structural barriers confronting women in Nigerian politics, including limited access to campaign finance, patriarchal socio-cultural norms, weak party support mechanisms, and concerns about political violence.

**Table 3: Election Risk Matrix**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Probability</b>	<b>Impact</b>
Vote buying	High	High
Voter apathy	High	Medium
Misinformation	Medium	Medium
Violence/Insecurity	Medium	High
BVAS failure	Low-Medium	High




Table 3 summarises the principal risks associated with the 2026 Ekiti governorship election. The matrix indicates that vote buying and voter apathy constitute the most immediate threats to electoral integrity, reflecting prevailing economic hardship, declining public trust, and the dominance of the ruling party. Although the probability of election-related violence and technological failures such as BVAS malfunction is comparatively lower, their potential impact on the credibility and acceptance of the election remains significant. Similarly, the growing influence of misinformation and disinformation poses a moderate risk to voter confidence and public perception of the electoral process. Collectively, these risks underscore the importance of effective electoral administration, robust security coordination, voter education, and strict enforcement of electoral laws to ensure a credible and inclusive election.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 2027 GENERAL ELECTIONS**

The Ekiti governorship election has larger implications that extend beyond the state and into Nigeria's broader electoral and political landscape. The election represents an important milestone in the implementation of the Electoral Act 2026 and electoral technologies, including the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS), as well as a test of recent electoral reforms. The election will test INEC's ability to conduct the process with technology, ensure compliance with the campaign finance regulations, prevent vote buying, and ensure transparency and public trust. Success in these areas would strengthen trust in electoral institutions and generate valuable lessons for the administration of the 2027 general elections. Conversely, the emergence of logistical challenges, technological glitches, irregularities in the application of electoral laws, or disputes over election results could jeopardise the reform agenda and raise doubts about the preparedness of institutions for a nation-wide electoral exercise (Omotola, 2011; Yiaga Africa, 2026a).

Historically, off-cycle elections in Ekiti have often been interpreted as indicators of general political trends. For instance, Fayose's victory in 2014 was widely viewed as a resurgence of the PDP ahead of the 2015 general elections, while Fayemi's re-election in 2018 was seen as a reflection of the APC's strength ahead of the 2019 general elections (Aziken, 2014). Similarly, the 2026 Ekiti governorship election is expected to provide important insights into party mobilisation, opposition capacity, voter sentiment, and the political standing of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration. A strong APC performance would give credence to the perception of its continued dominance in the South-West and help boost its fortunes in 2027. Conversely, a stronger-than-expected showing by opposition parties, signs of voter dissatisfaction, or major electoral controversies could alter prevailing political

In this context, the Ekiti election is seen as a precursor to the political atmosphere that will shape the general elections in Nigeria.

**Table 4: Summary of Key Electoral Risks and Mitigation Measures**

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Consequence</b>	<b>Recommended Response</b>
Vote buying	Reduced credibility	Strong EFCC/INEC enforcement
Insecurity	Low turnout	Security deployment
Voter apathy	Reduced legitimacy	Civic education
Misinformation	Distrust	Fact-checking mechanisms
Gender exclusion	Low inclusiveness	Inclusion measures


*Source: The Author 2026*

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

The 2026 Ekiti governorship election offers an opportunity to strengthen Nigeria’s democratic institutions and electoral processes ahead of the 2027 general elections. The following recommendations are directed at key stakeholders:

i. INEC should ensure the timely deployment of both sensitive and nonsensitive materials, strictly adhere to the opening times of polling units, and maintain contingency plans for potential failures of the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS). Training programmes for adhoc staff must emphasise the effective use of electoral technologies, conflict management and compliance with the provisions of the Electoral Act. INEC should publish detailed logistical plans and facilitate robust engagement with independent election observers to enhance transparency and public confidence in the electoral process.

ii. The campaign finance limits in the Electoral Act 2026 should be enforced consistently and impartially. INEC, the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other



Related Offences Commission (ICPC) and the EFCC should audit political parties' spending and sanction violators. Disclosure of funding sources and realtime reporting of expenditures will deter vote buying and level the playing field.

iii. Security agencies should operationalise a comprehensive multi-layered security strategy across all local government areas, prioritise intelligence gathering and respond swiftly to incidents. State and federal authorities must address crossborder incursions by collaborating with neighbouring states and vigilante groups. Mechanisms should be established to compensate victims of kidnapping and to support communities affected by violence.


iv. Sustainable security and political stability require addressing poverty, unemployment and youth restiveness. State programmes should focus on vocational training, microfinance for women and youth, and support for farmers and agribusinesses. These measures will reduce the pool of potential recruits for criminal networks and political thugs.

v. INEC's rapid response mechanisms, in collaboration with civil society factchecking organisations, should intensify campaigns against fake news. Community radio stations, local media outlets, and influential community leaders should be mobilised to disseminate verified electoral information in local languages. Political parties and candidates should also commit to refraining from inflammatory rhetoric, hate speech, and the manipulation of digital platforms for political gain.

vi. Political parties should adopt internal quotas and affirmative measures to increase the representation of women and young people in party structures, campaign councils, and elective positions. Measures such as priority voting for pregnant women, nursing mothers and persons with disabilities should be fully enforced on Election Day. Civil society organisations should complement these efforts through targeted voter education and mobilisation campaigns aimed at historically marginalised populations.

vii. Candidates and political parties should prioritise policy-based engagement rather than personal attacks and character assassination. Town hall meetings, policy dialogues and debates hosted by neutral bodies can help voters make informed choices. Media organisations should give equal airtime to all candidates and avoid amplifying unverified allegations.

viii. Given the compressed timeline between the election and the 2027 general elections, election petitions should be adjudicated promptly. The judiciary should allocate specialised panels for offcycle elections and ensure transparency in proceedings.



ix. Researchers, civil society and international partners should monitor how the Ekiti election influences party strategies, voter behaviour and policy discourse ahead of 2027. Lessons derived from logistic innovations, security measures and campaign strategies should inform preparations for the general elections.

## CONCLUSION

The 2026 Ekiti State governorship election is a pivotal moment that will hold significant implications for Nigeria's democratic resilience, electoral reforms and political competitiveness in the run-up to the 2027 general election. The analysis demonstrates that the election is taking place within a unique and evolving political environment characterised by the possible erosion of Ekiti's informal "one-term tradition," an unprecedented level of elite consensus in support of the incumbent governor, a fragmented opposition, and mounting socio-economic pressures arising from economic hardship, insecurity, youth unemployment, and declining public confidence in political institutions.

While recent electoral reforms, improved technological deployment, and enhanced institutional preparations by INEC provide opportunities to strengthen electoral integrity, persistent risks relating to vote buying, voter apathy, misinformation, insecurity, and political exclusion continue to threaten the quality of democratic participation. Thus, the election will serve as an important indicator of the effectiveness of Nigeria's evolving electoral framework and the capacity of democratic institutions to deliver credible, inclusive, and transparent elections. The level of commitment among the electoral stakeholders to democratic rules and principles, a level playing field and meaningful citizen participation, will ultimately dictate not just the legitimacy of the Ekiti governorship election, but will also influence perceptions of the confidence Nigeria's preparedness for the 2027 general elections and the broader project of democratic consolidation.

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The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) was established in 1997 as an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit organisation working to promote democratic governance, human security, and sustainable development across the West African sub-region.

With a core mandate to serve as a catalyst for change, CDD-West Africa brings together policymakers, civil society actors, academics, and development partners to advance evidence-based solutions to the region's most pressing challenges. The organisation's work spans rigorous research, strategic policy analysis, advocacy, capacity building, and civic engagement.

Through its programming, CDD-West Africa has led pioneering initiatives in election monitoring, anti-corruption, peacebuilding, countering disinformation, and strengthening democratic institutions. Its thematic focus areas include governance and transparency, peace and security, digital democracy, political inclusion, and the rule of law.

Headquartered in Abuja, Nigeria, with a strong regional network, CDD-West Africa plays a critical convening role in shaping democratic discourse and policy in West Africa. The Centre remains committed to amplifying citizen voices, defending civic space, and building a resilient, just, and democratic future for the region.



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Please direct inquiries to:  
Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa)  
Research Department  
16-20, A7 Street Mount Pleasant Estate (CITEC)  
Federal Capital Territory (F.C.T) Abuja  
cddabv@cddwestafrica.org  
@CDDwestafrica.org

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