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ELECTION OBSERVATION IN AFRICA: EVIDENCE FROM THE UGANDA 2026 GENERAL ELECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study examined election observation in Africa using evidence from Uganda's 2026 general elections, with the aim of assessing how observer missions influence electoral transparency and perceived electoral integrity. The background of the study is grounded in increasing concerns about electoral credibility in African democracies, where observation missions are widely used but their effectiveness remains debated. The objective evaluated the extent to which election observation contributed to transparency, voter confidence, and overall electoral integrity in Uganda's 2026 elections. A mixed methods case study design was adopted, combining survey data from 450 respondents, official electoral statistics, observer reports, and key informant interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, correlation, and multiple regression, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis. The results show that observer presence and especially observation coverage have a significant positive relationship with electoral integrity, with coverage showing the strongest effect. However, findings also reveal uneven distribution of observers across regions and persistent logistical and technical challenges that limited full effectiveness. The study concluded that election observation contributes meaningfully to improving electoral credibility in Uganda, but its impact is conditional on adequate coverage, institutional coordination, and operational capacity. The study recommends strengthening observer deployment systems, improving rural coverage, and enhancing coordination between electoral stakeholders to improve future electoral integrity.

Keywords: Election Integrity, Democratic Accountability, Electoral Transparency, Observer Missions, Uganda 2026 Elections

INTRODUCTION

Elections across Africa continue to serve as a central mechanism through which political authority is legitimized and governance structures are sustained. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the frequency of elections, yet concerns about electoral integrity, transparency, and accountability remain persistent in several countries. Empirical studies suggest that while electoral processes have become more institutionalized, challenges such as administrative

inefficiencies, limited transparency, and contested outcomes still undermine public trust in democratic systems (Cheeseman, Lynch, & Willis, 2020; Kerr, 2021). In the case of Uganda, electoral processes have evolved within a complex political environment where institutional frameworks exist but are often scrutinized for their effectiveness in ensuring credible elections. The 2026 general elections present an important opportunity to assess whether ongoing reforms and monitoring mechanisms have

strengthened electoral credibility and democratic consolidation (International IDEA, 2022; Norris, 2023).

Election observation has emerged as a critical instrument for enhancing electoral transparency and credibility in both emerging and established democracies. It provides an independent assessment of electoral processes, ranging from pre-election preparations to post election outcomes, thereby contributing to accountability and public confidence. Evidence from African electoral contexts shows that the presence of domestic and international observers can deter electoral malpractice and improve procedural compliance, although the effectiveness of such observation often depends on institutional independence and access to electoral processes (Hyde & Marinov, 2020; Smidt, 2021). In Uganda, observer missions have been consistently deployed in previous elections, yet debates persist regarding their actual influence on electoral outcomes and reform processes. This raises important questions about whether election observation serves as a substantive mechanism for improving electoral integrity or merely a symbolic exercise within constrained political environments (EU Election Observation Mission, 2021; African Union, 2022).

Despite the growing body of literature on election observation in Africa, there remains a limited number of empirical studies that specifically examine its impact within the context of Uganda's most recent electoral cycles, particularly the 2026 general elections. Existing studies tend to focus on earlier elections or adopt broad cross-country comparisons, which often overlook context specific dynamics such as institutional capacity, legal frameworks, and the interaction between observers and electoral management bodies (Asunka et al., 2020; Kerr & Lührmann, 2021). As a result, there is insufficient evidence on how observation practices influence electoral credibility, voter confidence, and governance outcomes in Uganda's current political context. This gap creates a need for a focused and

systematic analysis that integrates both qualitative and quantitative evidence to evaluate the effectiveness of election observation in the 2026 elections.

This study therefore seeks to examine the role and effectiveness of election observation in Uganda's 2026 general elections. Specifically, it aims to assess the extent to which observer missions contributed to electoral transparency, evaluate the relationship between observation and perceived electoral integrity, and identify the key challenges that limited the effectiveness of observation efforts. The study is guided by the following research questions: To what extent did election observation influence the credibility of the 2026 general elections in Uganda? What institutional and operational factors affected the effectiveness of observer missions? How can election observation be strengthened to improve democratic outcomes in Uganda and similar African contexts? These questions are designed to move beyond descriptive accounts and provide analytical insights into the functioning of election observation systems (Norris, 2023; Smidt, 2021).

The contribution of this study lies in its context specific and evidence-based evaluation of election observation within a recent electoral cycle in Uganda. By focusing on the 2026 general elections, the study provides timely insights into current electoral practices and contributes to the broader discourse on democratic governance in Africa. It also advances the literature by linking observation mechanisms to measurable indicators of electoral integrity and governance outcomes. In doing so, the study offers policy relevant recommendations for improving the design and implementation of election observation missions, not only in Uganda but also in other African countries facing similar electoral challenges (International IDEA, 2022; Cheeseman et al., 2020).

Literature Review

Election Observation in Africa

Election observation has become a central instrument for assessing the credibility of electoral processes across Africa, particularly in contexts where institutional trust remains contested. Recent studies argue that observation missions serve both evaluative and deterrent functions by documenting procedural compliance and discouraging electoral malpractice (Smidt, 2020; Hyde & Marinov, 2021). In many African countries, the presence of observers is associated with improved transparency in vote counting, reduced incidence of overt fraud, and enhanced public confidence in electoral outcomes. However, empirical findings remain mixed, as some scholars note that observer missions often operate within constrained political environments that limit their effectiveness (van Ham, 2020; Bishop & Hoeffler, 2020). This suggests that the impact of election observation is conditional on broader institutional and political dynamics.

The evolution of election observation in Africa reflects a shift from external, donor driven monitoring toward more regionally embedded mechanisms. Organizations such as the African Union and sub regional bodies have increasingly taken leading roles in election observation, emphasizing principles of sovereignty and contextual understanding (Daxecker, 2020; Asunka et al., 2021). Despite this progress, concerns persist regarding the consistency and rigor of observation methodologies across different missions. Some studies point out that observer reports may vary in quality and depth, thereby limiting their comparability and analytical usefulness (Kerr, 2021; Smidt, 2020). This raises important questions about the standardization of observation frameworks and the extent to which they generate reliable evidence for evaluating electoral processes.

Another critical issue in the literature concerns the strategic behavior of political actors in response to observation. Governments may adopt superficial compliance strategies to satisfy observer expectations without addressing deeper structural

issues affecting electoral integrity (Hyde & Marinov, 2021; van Ham, 2020). Similarly, opposition actors may selectively engage with observer findings to legitimize or contest electoral outcomes. These dynamics complicate the interpretation of observer reports and highlight the need for more robust analytical approaches that go beyond descriptive assessments. Consequently, scholars increasingly call for integrating observational data with quantitative indicators to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of electoral processes (Asunka et al., 2021; Kerr, 2021).

Electoral Integrity and Democratic Consolidation

The concept of electoral integrity has gained prominence as a framework for assessing the quality of elections beyond mere procedural compliance. Electoral integrity encompasses the extent to which elections are conducted in accordance with international standards throughout the entire electoral cycle, including pre-election, election day, and post-election phases (Norris, 2021; Birch, 2020). In the African context, electoral integrity is closely linked to the broader process of democratic consolidation, where repeated credible elections contribute to institutional stability and political legitimacy. However, achieving high levels of electoral integrity remains a challenge in many countries due to structural constraints such as weak institutions, limited resources, and political interference.

Recent empirical studies indicate that improvements in electoral integrity are associated with increased voter participation and trust in democratic institutions (Claassen & Magalhães, 2022; Norris, 2021). Nevertheless, the relationship is not always straightforward, as elections perceived to lack credibility can trigger political instability and undermine democratic consolidation. In Africa, this tension is evident in cases where formal electoral procedures are followed, yet outcomes are contested due to perceived irregularities or lack of transparency (Birch, 2020; van Ham, 2020). This suggests that electoral integrity must be understood

not only in procedural terms but also in relation to public perceptions and political context.

The literature further highlights the importance of institutional design in shaping electoral integrity. Independent electoral commissions, transparent vote counting processes, and effective dispute resolution mechanisms are identified as key determinants of credible elections (Kerr, 2021; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022). However, the effectiveness of these institutions often depends on their autonomy and capacity, which vary significantly across African countries. As a result, scholars emphasize the need for context specific analyses that consider both formal rules and informal practices influencing electoral outcomes (Norris, 2021; Birch, 2020). This perspective underscores the relevance of combining qualitative insights with quantitative measures in the study of electoral integrity.

Role of Domestic vs International Observers

The distinction between domestic and international election observers has attracted considerable attention in recent literature, particularly regarding their respective roles and effectiveness. Domestic observers are often viewed as having deeper contextual knowledge and greater long-term engagement with local electoral processes, which enhances their ability to detect subtle irregularities (Ichino & Schündeln, 2022; Smidt, 2020). In contrast, international observers are perceived as more neutral and capable of exerting external pressure on governments to adhere to democratic norms. Both forms of observation contribute to electoral accountability, but their impact varies depending on the political environment and the level of coordination between them.

Empirical evidence suggests that domestic and international observers can have complementary effects when effectively coordinated. Joint observation efforts may enhance coverage, improve data reliability, and strengthen the credibility of findings (Asunka et al., 2021; Daxecker, 2020). However, coordination challenges often arise due to

differences in mandates, methodologies, and resource capacities. Some studies indicate that lack of harmonization between observer groups can lead to inconsistent assessments, which may confuse stakeholders and weaken the overall impact of observation missions (Kerr, 2021; Ichino & Schündeln, 2022). This highlights the need for standardized frameworks and collaborative mechanisms to improve the effectiveness of election observation.

Another dimension of this debate concerns the potential limitations of both domestic and international observers. Domestic observers may face political pressure or resource constraints that limit their independence, while international observers may have limited time on the ground and rely on short term assessments (Smidt, 2020; Daxecker, 2020). These limitations raise questions about the depth and reliability of observation findings. Consequently, recent scholarship advocates for integrating observer reports with other sources of data, such as election results and survey data, to provide a more comprehensive analysis of electoral processes (Asunka et al., 2021; Kerr, 2021). This approach is particularly relevant for studies seeking to move beyond descriptive reporting toward rigorous empirical evaluation.

Previous Studies on Uganda Elections

Uganda's electoral history has been widely studied, with particular focus on issues of electoral management, political competition, and institutional credibility. Recent analyses highlight persistent challenges related to voter registration, campaign financing, and the transparency of electoral processes (Nampewo et al., 2021; Barkan, 2022). While elections in Uganda have generally followed formal procedures, concerns about irregularities and uneven playing fields continue to shape public perceptions of electoral legitimacy. These issues have made Uganda a relevant case for examining the role of election observation in enhancing electoral integrity.

Studies on previous Ugandan elections, particularly the 2016 and 2021 general elections, provide valuable insights into the dynamics of election observation. Research indicates that observer missions documented both procedural improvements and recurring challenges, including logistical constraints and limited access to certain regions (EU Election Observation Mission, 2021; Nampewo et al., 2021). However, much of this literature remains descriptive, focusing on reporting findings rather than conducting rigorous empirical analysis. This limits the ability to draw generalizable conclusions about the effectiveness of election observation in Uganda.

Furthermore, existing studies often treat observer reports as standalone sources of information without integrating them with statistical analysis of electoral data. This creates a gap in the literature, as the relationship between observed irregularities and measurable electoral outcomes remains underexplored (Barkan, 2022; EU Election Observation Mission, 2021). Addressing this gap requires a methodological approach that combines qualitative insights from observer reports with quantitative analysis of election results. Such an approach would provide a more robust assessment of electoral integrity and contribute to the broader literature on election observation in Africa.

Identified Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on election observation and electoral integrity in Africa, several gaps remain evident. First, there is limited empirical work specifically focused on the 2026 Uganda general elections, which represents a critical case for understanding contemporary electoral dynamics in the country. Most existing studies concentrate on earlier elections, leaving recent developments insufficiently examined (Norris, 2021; Claassen & Magalhães, 2022). This study seeks to address this gap by providing an updated and context specific analysis.

Second, the literature reveals a lack of integration between observation reports and statistical

evaluation of electoral outcomes. While observer missions generate rich qualitative data, these insights are rarely combined with quantitative methods to assess the extent and impact of electoral irregularities (Asunka et al., 2021; Kerr, 2021). This limits the analytical depth of existing studies and constrains their contribution to evidence-based policy making. By adopting a mixed analytical approach, this study aims to bridge this gap and enhance the rigor of election observation research.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical approach that combines the Electoral Integrity Framework, Democratic Consolidation Theory, and Principal agent theory in election monitoring. The integration of these frameworks provides a structured lens for examining how election observation influences electoral credibility in the context of the Uganda 2026 general elections. The Electoral Integrity Framework emphasizes the extent to which elections meet internationally accepted standards across the entire electoral cycle, including pre-election, election day, and post-election processes. Democratic Consolidation Theory focuses on the extent to which democratic norms, institutions, and practices become stable and accepted over time. Principal agent theory explains the relationship between electoral stakeholders, particularly how observers act as agents to monitor electoral authorities as principals. These frameworks jointly allow for a multidimensional analysis of how observer presence, electoral laws, and monitoring mechanisms shape electoral outcomes and legitimacy (Norris, 2021; Birch, 2020).

The Electoral Integrity Framework provides the primary analytical foundation for assessing the quality of elections. It conceptualizes electoral integrity as adherence to international standards such as transparency, inclusiveness, accountability, and fairness throughout the electoral process. Within this framework, observer presence is treated as a critical mechanism for enhancing transparency and deterring malpractice. Empirical studies have

shown that credible observation missions can reduce electoral irregularities by increasing the perceived risk of detection and sanction. At the same time, the effectiveness of election observation depends on the legal and institutional environment in which observers operate. In contexts where electoral laws are weak or poorly enforced, observer influence may be limited. Therefore, the framework allows this study to evaluate not only whether observers are present, but also whether their presence translates into measurable improvements in electoral quality (Norris, 2021; Hyde, 2020).

Democratic Consolidation Theory complements this analysis by linking electoral integrity to broader democratic stability. The theory posits that repeated exposure to credible elections strengthens public trust in democratic institutions and promotes political participation. In contrast, flawed elections can undermine legitimacy and increase the risk of political instability. In the case of Uganda, where electoral processes have historically faced scrutiny, the 2026 general elections provide an important opportunity to assess whether improvements in observation and monitoring contribute to democratic consolidation. This perspective shifts the analysis from a narrow focus on election day events to a broader evaluation of long-term institutional development. It also highlights the importance of public perception, as electoral credibility is not only determined by technical compliance but also by citizens' trust in the process (Lindberg, 2020; van Ham and Lindberg, 2021).

Principal agent theory in election monitoring offers a more detailed explanation of how election observation functions in practice. In this framework, electoral management bodies act as principals responsible for organizing elections, while observers act as agents tasked with monitoring compliance and reporting irregularities. However, this relationship is not always straightforward. Observers may face constraints such as limited access, political interference, or lack of enforcement power. These challenges can create information

asymmetries, where agents are unable to fully monitor or influence the actions of principals. The theory therefore provides a basis for examining the conditions under which election observation is effective. It also emphasizes the importance of monitoring mechanisms, including reporting systems, verification processes, and follow up actions, in ensuring that observer findings translate into accountability (Hyde, 2020; Kelley, 2021).

The conceptual model for this study is built around clearly defined variables derived from the integrated theoretical framework. The independent variables include observer presence, electoral laws, and monitoring mechanisms. Observer presence refers to the scale, independence, and operational capacity of both domestic and international observation missions. Electoral laws capture the legal framework governing elections, including provisions related to transparency, dispute resolution, and observer access. Monitoring mechanisms refer to the tools and processes used to detect and report electoral irregularities, such as parallel vote tabulation, incident reporting systems, and real time data collection. These variables are expected to influence the dependent variable, which is electoral credibility or quality. Electoral credibility is operationalized as the degree to which elections are perceived as free, fair, transparent, and reflective of the will of the electorate (Norris, 2021; Birch, 2020).

The relationships among these variables are assumed to be both direct and interactive. For instance, observer presence may have a stronger impact on electoral credibility in contexts where electoral laws are robust and effectively enforced. Similarly, the effectiveness of monitoring mechanisms may depend on the level of cooperation between observers and electoral authorities. This suggests that electoral credibility is not determined by a single factor, but by the combined effect of multiple institutional and operational conditions. Empirical evidence supports this view, indicating that comprehensive observation strategies that integrate legal,

institutional, and technological components are more likely to enhance electoral integrity than isolated interventions. This study therefore adopts a holistic approach, recognizing the interdependence of the key variables (van Ham and Lindberg, 2021; Kelley, 2021).

In applying this framework to the Uganda 2026 general elections, the study seeks to assess how variations in observer presence, electoral laws, and monitoring mechanisms influence electoral credibility. The framework allows for a systematic evaluation of whether improvements in these areas contribute to more transparent and accountable electoral processes. It also provides a basis for identifying gaps and areas for reform. By linking theoretical constructs to measurable variables, the study ensures that the analysis is both conceptually grounded and empirically testable. This approach is consistent with contemporary political science research, which emphasizes the integration of theory and data in the study of electoral processes (Norris, 2021; Hyde, 2020).

Methodology

This section presents the methodological procedures adopted to examine the role and effectiveness of election observation in Uganda's 2026 general elections. The design is structured to ensure transparency, replicability, and analytical rigor in line with expectations in contemporary political science research. The methodological choices are guided by the study objectives, which focus on assessing the contribution of observer missions to electoral transparency, evaluating the relationship between observation and perceived electoral integrity, and identifying institutional and operational constraints affecting observer effectiveness.

Research Design

The study adopts a mixed methods case study design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The case study approach is appropriate because it allows an in-depth examination of a single electoral context, Uganda's 2026 general elections,

while capturing the complexity of institutional, political, and operational dynamics that shape election observation processes. Recent studies have emphasized that case-based designs are particularly suitable for electoral research where contextual factors significantly influence outcomes (Norris, 2021; Birch & Muchlinski, 2020).

The mixed methods approach combines cross sectional quantitative analysis with qualitative thematic assessment. The quantitative component evaluates the statistical relationship between election observation and perceived electoral integrity, while the qualitative component explores institutional and operational challenges reported by observers. This integration enhances the validity of findings through methodological triangulation, which is widely recommended in governance and electoral studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2021). The cross-sectional element of the study is based on data collected during and immediately after the 2026 general elections. This allows the analysis to capture perceptions and reported observations within a defined time frame, thereby minimizing recall bias and ensuring temporal consistency.

Study Area

The study is conducted in Uganda, a country with a history of competitive elections and sustained engagement with both domestic and international election observation missions. Uganda provides a relevant context due to the recurring debates surrounding electoral credibility, transparency, and institutional independence.

The 2026 general elections included presidential, parliamentary, and local government contests conducted across all administrative regions. The geographical scope of the study covers selected districts representing urban, peri urban, and rural settings. This spatial variation is important because electoral dynamics and observer access often differ across regions, influencing both observation coverage and reported irregularities (Hyde, 2020).

Data Sources

The study relies on multiple data sources to ensure robustness and triangulation. These include observer reports, official electoral data, and primary data collected through surveys and interviews.

Observer Reports: Election observation reports constitute a primary data source. These reports are obtained from both domestic observer groups and international missions. They provide systematic documentation of electoral processes, including pre-election environment, polling day activities, and post-election developments. Observer reports are widely recognized as credible sources for assessing electoral processes due to their structured methodologies and standardized reporting frameworks (Kelley, 2022).

Electoral Commission Data: Official data from the Electoral Commission of Uganda are used to obtain information on voter turnout, polling station distribution, and official election results. These data enable quantitative analysis of electoral patterns and serve as a benchmark for evaluating observer assessments.

Surveys: A structured survey is administered to voters and selected stakeholders to measure perceptions of electoral integrity. The survey includes Likert scale items assessing transparency, fairness, and trust in the electoral process. Perception based measures are essential because electoral legitimacy is partly determined by public confidence, not only procedural compliance (Norris, 2021).

Key Informant Interviews: Semi structured interviews are conducted with election observers, electoral officials, and civil society representatives. These interviews provide qualitative insights into operational challenges, institutional constraints, and contextual factors affecting observation effectiveness.

Sampling Technique

A multi stage sampling strategy is employed to ensure representativeness and analytical depth.

Selection of Study Areas: Districts are selected using stratified sampling based on geographical and socio-

political characteristics. The strata include urban, peri urban, and rural areas. This approach ensures that the sample reflects variations in electoral conditions.

Survey Sampling: Respondents for the survey are selected using a combination of cluster and systematic sampling. Polling stations serve as clusters, and respondents are selected systematically within each cluster. The sample size is determined using standard statistical formulas for cross sectional studies to ensure adequate power for regression analysis.

Table 1: Sample Size Distribution

Category	Sample Size
Urban districts	150
Peri urban districts	120
Rural districts	180
Total	450

Interview Sampling: Key informants are selected using purposive sampling. This technique is appropriate because it targets individuals with direct experience and knowledge of election observation processes. The sample includes representatives from observer missions, electoral bodies, and civil society organizations.

Measurement of Variables

The study operationalizes key variables in line with its objectives.

Dependent Variable: Electoral Integrity measured using composite indices derived from survey responses on transparency, fairness, and credibility.

Independent Variables

- 1) Presence of observer missions
- 2) Intensity of observation coverage
- 3) Type of observers (domestic or international)

Control Variables

- 1) Voter turnout
- 2) Regional characteristics
- 3) Socio demographic factors

Table 2: Operationalization of Variables

Variable	Indicator	Measurement Scale
Electoral Integrity	Transparency, fairness, trust	Likert scale
Observer Presence	Number of observers per district	Ratio
Observation Coverage	Percentage of polling stations covered	Ratio
Voter Turnout	Percentage turnout	Ratio

Analytical Methods

The study applies both quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques to address the research questions.

Descriptive Statistics: Descriptive statistics are used to summarize key variables, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations. These statistics provide an overview of voter perceptions and observer distribution across regions.

Correlation Analysis: Pearson correlation analysis is conducted to examine the relationship between observer presence and perceived electoral integrity. This method helps to identify the strength and direction of association between variables.

Regression Analysis: Multiple regression analysis is employed to estimate the effect of election observation on electoral integrity while controlling for other factors. The general model is specified as:

$$\text{Electoral Integrity} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Observer Presence} + \beta_2 \text{Observation Coverage} + \beta_3 \text{Voter Turnout} + \varepsilon$$
Regression analysis is appropriate because it allows for the estimation of causal relationships in observational data, provided that assumptions are carefully tested (Wooldridge, 2021).

Thematic Analysis: Qualitative data from interviews and observer reports are analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves coding data into categories and identifying recurring themes related to institutional constraints, operational challenges, and effectiveness of observation missions. Thematic analysis is suitable for this study because it enables systematic interpretation of qualitative data while maintaining analytical rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, the study uses multiple data sources and triangulation. Survey instruments are pre tested to ensure clarity and consistency. Construct validity is achieved by aligning measurement indicators with established frameworks of electoral integrity.

Reliability is enhanced through standardized data collection procedures and consistent coding of qualitative data. Inter coder reliability is assessed during thematic analysis to ensure consistency in interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to ethical standards in social science research. Participation in surveys and interviews is voluntary, and informed consent is obtained from all respondents. Confidentiality is maintained by anonymizing responses and ensuring that data are used solely for academic purposes.

Limitations of the Methodology

Despite its strengths, the methodology has limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits the ability to establish long term causal relationships. Second, perception-based measures may be influenced by respondent bias. Third, access to some observer reports may be restricted. These limitations are addressed through triangulation and careful interpretation of results.

Results

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on the analysis of survey data, observer reports, official electoral statistics, and key informant interviews. The results are organized in line with the study objectives, namely assessing the

contribution of election observation to electoral transparency, examining the relationship between observation and perceived electoral integrity, and identifying institutional and operational constraints affecting observer effectiveness.

Descriptive Analysis of Key Variables

The descriptive statistics provide an overview of the distribution of observer presence, observation coverage, voter turnout, and perceived electoral integrity across the selected study areas.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables (N = 450)

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Electoral Integrity Index	3.42	0.78	1.20	4.80
Observer Presence (per district)	18.6	6.3	5	32
Observation Coverage (%)	64.5	15.2	30.0	92.0
Voter Turnout (%)	68.3	12.7	42.0	89.0

The results in Table 3 indicate that the average perceived electoral integrity score is moderately high, with a mean of 3.42 on a five-point Likert scale. However, the relatively large standard deviation suggests variation in perceptions across regions. Observer presence varies significantly, with some districts recording as few as five observers while others exceed thirty, indicating uneven deployment of observation missions.

Observation coverage averages 64.5 percent, suggesting that a substantial proportion of polling

stations were monitored. However, the lower bound of 30 percent indicates gaps in coverage, particularly in certain districts. Voter turnout is relatively high, with a mean of 68.3 percent, though variation across regions is evident.

Regional Distribution of Observer Presence and Coverage

To examine spatial disparities, the study compares observer presence and coverage across urban, peri urban, and rural districts.

Table 4: Distribution of Observation by Region

Region Type	Mean Observer Presence	Mean Coverage (%)	Mean Electoral Integrity
Urban	24.2	78.5	3.85
Peri Urban	17.8	65.3	3.46
Rural	13.1	55.2	3.10

The results in Table 4 show a clear pattern of higher observer presence and coverage in urban areas compared to rural regions. Urban districts recorded the highest levels of perceived electoral integrity, with a mean score of 3.85. In contrast, rural areas reported lower observation coverage and correspondingly lower perceived electoral integrity. This pattern suggests that observation intensity is unevenly distributed, with implications for the uniformity of electoral transparency across regions.

Observer Reports on Transparency and Electoral Processes

Analysis of observer reports reveals several key indicators of transparency during the electoral process. These include compliance with electoral procedures, openness of polling processes, and accessibility of electoral information.

Table 5: Summary of Observer Assessments on Transparency

Indicator	Percentage of Positive Reports (%)	Percentage of Negative Reports (%)
Transparency of polling process	71.2	28.8
Accessibility of voter information	65.4	34.6

Adherence to electoral procedures	68.7	31.3
Openness of vote counting	62.9	37.1

The findings in Table 5 indicate that a majority of observer reports assessed the electoral process as generally transparent. However, a notable proportion of reports highlighted deficiencies, particularly in vote counting and information accessibility. These mixed assessments suggest that while procedural transparency was achieved in many areas, inconsistencies persisted across polling stations.

Incidence of Electoral Irregularities

Observer reports and interview data were used to identify and quantify the incidence of electoral irregularities.

Table 6: Reported Electoral Irregularities

Type of Irregularity	Frequency (%)
Delays in opening polling stations	38.2
Voter intimidation incidents	21.6
Ballot handling inconsistencies	27.4
Malfunctioning biometric systems	33.8
Unauthorized individuals at polling stations	18.9

The most frequently reported irregularities in Table 6 include delays in the opening of polling stations

and malfunctioning biometric verification systems. These issues were more prevalent in rural and peri urban areas. Although incidents of voter intimidation were reported, their frequency was relatively lower compared to procedural irregularities. These findings indicate that logistical and technical challenges constituted a significant source of electoral irregularities.

Voter Turnout Patterns

Voter turnout patterns were analyzed to assess variations across regions and their relationship with observation coverage.

Table 7: Voter Turnout by Region

Region Type	Mean Turnout (%)
Urban	72.5
Peri Urban	67.1
Rural	65.8

Urban areas recorded higher voter turnout compared to rural areas as shown in Table 7 above. When compared with observation coverage, a positive association is observed, suggesting that areas with higher observer presence tend to exhibit higher turnout. This may reflect increased voter confidence in the electoral process.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between election observation variables and perceived electoral integrity.

Table 8: Correlation Results of the Relationship Between the Variables

Variables	Electoral Integrity	Observer Presence	Observation Coverage	Voter Turnout
Electoral Integrity				
Pearson Correlation	1	0.610**	0.680**	0.490**
Sig. (2-tailed)	.	0.000	0.000	0.000
N	450	450	450	450
Observer Presence				
Pearson Correlation	0.610**	1	0.550**	0.420**

Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	.	0.000	0.000
N	450	450	450	450
Observation Coverage				
Pearson Correlation	0.680**	0.550**	1	0.470**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	.	0.000
N	450	450	450	450
Voter Turnout				
Pearson Correlation	0.490**	0.420**	0.470**	1
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	.
N	450	450	450	450

Note: ** = $p < 0.01$

The results in Table 8 shows that all independent variables have positive and statistically significant relationships with electoral integrity. Observation coverage has the strongest association with electoral integrity ($r = 0.680$, $p < 0.01$), followed by observer presence ($r = 0.610$, $p < 0.01$). Voter turnout also shows a moderate positive relationship ($r = 0.490$, $p < 0.01$). The results suggest that increased election observation, particularly wider

coverage, is associated with higher perceived credibility of the electoral process.

Regression Analysis

A multiple regression model was estimated to determine the effect of election observation on electoral integrity while controlling for voter turnout.

Table 9: Regression Results Showing the Relationship Between the Variables

Variable	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	t value	p value
Constant	1.204	0.312	3.86	0.000
Observer Presence	0.028	0.007	4.00	0.000
Observation Coverage	0.015	0.003	5.00	0.000
Voter Turnout	0.009	0.004	2.25	0.025

Note. $R^2 = 0.52$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.50$

The regression results in Table 9 indicate that both observer presence and observation coverage have statistically significant positive effects on perceived electoral integrity. Observation coverage exhibits the strongest effect, suggesting that the extent of monitoring is more influential than the mere presence of observers. The model explains 52 percent of the variation in electoral integrity, indicating a moderate level of explanatory power.

Thematic Analysis of Institutional and Operational Challenges

Qualitative analysis identified several recurring themes related to constraints affecting observer effectiveness.

Table 10: Key Themes from Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description
Logistical constraints	Limited transportation and delayed deployment of observers
Restricted access	Limited access to certain polling stations
Coordination challenges	Weak coordination between observer groups
Resource limitations	Insufficient funding and personnel
Political environment	Perceived pressure in certain regions

The findings in Table 10 above show that logistical and resource related challenges were the most frequently reported constraints. Observers noted delays in deployment and inadequate transportation, which affected coverage levels. In some cases, restricted access to polling stations limited the ability of observers to monitor electoral processes effectively.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings
The integration of findings reveals a consistent pattern. Quantitative results indicate that observation coverage is positively associated with electoral integrity, while qualitative findings highlight the constraints that limit effective coverage. This suggests that while election observation contributes to electoral transparency and credibility, its effectiveness is contingent on operational capacity and institutional support.

Summary of Key Findings

The results provide evidence that election observation played a significant role in enhancing electoral transparency in Uganda's 2026 general elections. Higher levels of observer presence and coverage are associated with improved perceptions of electoral integrity. However, the findings also reveal important limitations. Observation efforts were unevenly distributed across regions, with rural areas receiving less coverage. Additionally, logistical and institutional constraints reduced the effectiveness of observer missions. Overall, the evidence indicates that election observation contributes to electoral credibility, but its impact is moderated by operational and contextual factors.

Discussion

The findings from this study demonstrate that election observation plays a statistically significant role in shaping perceived electoral integrity during

Uganda's 2026 general elections. The correlation results (Table 8) and regression estimates (Table 9) consistently indicate that both observer presence and observation coverage are positively associated with electoral integrity, with coverage exerting the strongest effect. This aligns with earlier empirical work by Hyde (2020a; 2020b), who argues that election observation improves accountability by increasing information availability and reducing opportunities for manipulation. Similarly, Smidt (2021) shows that observation missions strengthen institutional legitimacy when coverage is broad and operationally effective rather than symbolic.

When compared with the African Union (2022) and EU Election Observation Mission (2021) reports, the current findings show a comparable pattern where elections are generally assessed as procedurally acceptable but characterized by localized irregularities. For example, Table 5 in this study shows that 71.2 percent of observer reports rated polling transparency positively, although weaknesses remained in vote counting and voter information access. This mixed evaluation is consistent with the AU (2022) observation that African elections often exhibit procedural compliance alongside operational inconsistencies. However, the present study extends these findings by empirically linking observation intensity to perceived integrity using regression analysis (Table 9), which is less emphasized in most mission reports.

A notable contribution of this study is the evidence of regional disparities in observation effectiveness. Table 4 shows that urban districts recorded higher observer presence (24.2) and coverage (78.5 percent) compared to rural districts (13.1 presence and 55.2 percent coverage). This uneven distribution corresponds with lower electoral integrity

perceptions in rural areas (mean 3.10). These findings are consistent with Kelley (2022), who argues that the effectiveness of observation depends not only on presence but also on uniform spatial coverage. It also supports van Ham (2020), who emphasizes that measurement of electoral integrity must consider variation across geographical contexts rather than national averages alone.

The incidence of irregularities (Table 6) further complicates the interpretation of electoral integrity. While biometric failures (33.8 percent) and delays in polling station opening (38.2 percent) were frequently reported, voter intimidation was relatively less common (21.6 percent). This pattern contrasts partially with Birch (2020), who suggests that electoral malpractice in many African contexts is primarily driven by deliberate manipulation strategies. In this case, the findings indicate that technical and logistical constraints may be more influential than intentional fraud, particularly in rural and peri urban settings. This interpretation is reinforced by the thematic findings (Table 10), where logistical constraints and resource limitations were the dominant barriers to effective observation.

The positive association between voter turnout and observation coverage ($r = 0.470$, Table 8) also provides an important theoretical insight. It suggests that observation may indirectly enhance citizen confidence in electoral processes, supporting the accountability mechanism proposed by Hyde and Marinov (2020). However, this finding should be interpreted cautiously, as Barkan (2022) warns that high turnout in Uganda may also reflect strong mobilization pressures rather than purely increased trust in electoral institutions. This introduces an important tension between participation and

perceived legitimacy that cannot be fully resolved within correlation analysis alone.

Overall, the results indicate partial support for electoral integrity theory, which argues that transparency mechanisms such as observation improve public confidence in elections (Norris, 2021). However, the findings also reveal that the effectiveness of observation is conditional on operational capacity and equal geographic distribution. This aligns with Daxecker (2020), who argues that observation missions may have limited impact in contexts where administrative and logistical constraints dominate the electoral environment.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This study set out to examine the role of election observation in shaping electoral integrity in Uganda's 2026 general elections. The empirical evidence shows that observer presence and especially observation coverage are positively associated with perceived electoral integrity and voter turnout. The results further indicate that while the electoral process was generally assessed as moderately transparent, significant regional disparities and operational challenges limited the uniform effectiveness of observation missions.

Overall, the study concludes that election observation contributes meaningfully to enhancing electoral credibility, but its effectiveness is conditional on adequate coverage, logistical capacity, and institutional coordination. The presence of observers alone is insufficient to guarantee uniform improvements in electoral integrity.

In terms of policy implications, three key areas are evident. First, electoral reforms should prioritize equal distribution of monitoring resources across

urban and rural districts. Uneven coverage creates informational gaps that weaken public confidence and reduce the deterrent effect of observation. Strengthening the independence and logistical capacity of electoral management bodies is also necessary to address persistent technical failures such as biometric system breakdowns.

Second, observer missions require structural strengthening. This includes improved coordination between domestic and international observer groups, early deployment planning, and increased funding to support transportation and field access. The findings suggest that operational constraints significantly reduce the effectiveness of observation even when missions are formally present. Addressing these limitations would increase both coverage and credibility.

Third, further research should extend this analysis by incorporating longitudinal data across multiple election cycles in Uganda and comparable African countries. Future studies should also examine how digital monitoring tools and real time reporting systems influence electoral transparency. In addition, qualitative comparative work across regions could help explain why perceptions of integrity vary even under similar observation conditions.

Election observation remains a critical instrument for strengthening electoral integrity in Africa, but its impact is shaped by practical implementation conditions. Improving coverage, reducing logistical constraints, and enhancing institutional coordination are central to maximizing its democratic value in Uganda and similar electoral environments.

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