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Electoral Accountability and Governance Challenges in Dysfunctional African States: Lessons for the Democratic Republic of Congo's 2028 National Elections

Eustache T. Kikasu*, and Nirmala Dorasamy
Durban University of Technology, South Africa

*Corresponding author
Email: tanzalakikasu15@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Electoral accountability and good governance are widely recognized as critical institutional foundations for sustainable economic development in Africa, as they shape political incentives, state capacity, and the effectiveness of public policy. In principle, competitive elections enhance leadership accountability, strengthen state legitimacy, and promote rule-based governance. However, in many fragile African states, persistent institutional weaknesses significantly constrain the capacity of elections to function as effective mechanisms of democratic control and economic governance. This study examines the relationship between electoral accountability and governance outcomes in fragile contexts, with a specific focus on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in the period preceding its 2028 national elections. Drawing on comparative insights from African states experiencing recurrent electoral crises, the study analyses how structural governance deficits, including institutional fragility, elite capture, weak rule of law, electoral violence, and administrative incapacity undermine electoral processes and weaken accountability. Using a qualitative, governance-centred analytical framework, the research assesses the conditions under which elections either reinforce or erode democratic accountability. The findings indicate that dysfunctional electoral management institutions, contested electoral outcomes, and declining civic trust diminish citizen participation and dilute the sanctioning power of elections, thereby constraining governance performance and development outcomes. In the DRC, these dynamics are amplified by a legacy of conflict, centralized political power, and chronic governance failures. The study concludes that without substantive governance reforms, elections risk remaining procedural rather than transformative, limiting their contribution to democratic consolidation and sustainable development in fragile African States.

Keywords: Electoral Accountability, Good Governance, Fragile States, Democratic Legitimacy, Economic Development in Africa

INTRODUCTION

Electoral accountability and good governance are central to debates on economic development and democratic consolidation in Africa, particularly in fragile contexts such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Electoral accountability refers to citizens' ability to reward or sanction political leaders through credible, competitive, and regular elections (Papadopoulos, 2023). From a developmental perspective, effective elections are expected to align political authority with policy performance, service delivery, and inclusive economic growth. Good governance provides the institutional channels through which these electoral incentives are translated into sustainable outcomes, encompassing the rule of law, transparency and accountability, corruption control, administrative effectiveness, and regulatory quality (Islam, 2023). In the DRC, however, weak governance arrangements significantly constrain the developmental returns of electoral politics. Limited institutional capacity, pervasive corruption, and fragile legal frameworks distort public resource allocation, undermine service delivery, and erode investor confidence (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). Although electoral accountability and good governance are theoretically mutually reinforcing, their interaction is highly context-dependent. In some countries, competitive elections may generate pressure for reform, while effective governance can enhance democratic legitimacy by delivering socio-economic benefits (Malcolm, 2023). In fragile environments, however, elections often entrench elite capture, clientelism, and short-term political incentives, weakening accountability mechanisms across Africa, including the DRC (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). Despite multiple electoral cycles since the early 2000s, the DRC continues to experience contested outcomes, weak electoral institutions, and recurrent legitimacy crises. As the 2028 elections approach, this paper examines electoral accountability in weak democratic contexts, using the DRC as a focal case and drawing comparative insights from experiences such as Ghana.

Background of Electoral Accountability in Dysfunctional African Countries

Electoral accountability refers to citizens' ability to hold political leaders responsible through periodic, free, and fair elections (Malcolm, 2023). In many African states, however, this mechanism operates within contexts of institutional weakness, political instability, and fragile statehood, limiting its substantive effectiveness. Consequently, elections often function as procedural rituals rather than meaningful instruments of democratic control. Post-independence political development has been shaped by centralised authority, weak checks and balances, and enduring colonial legacies (Wu, 2024). Although the return to multiparty politics in the 1990s raised expectations of democratic consolidation, electoral accountability has remained constrained by structural factors such as weak administrative capacity, politicised electoral bodies, patronage networks, elite capture, and the misuse of state resources. These conditions enable incumbents to manipulate electoral processes, undermining citizens' capacity to reward performance or sanction poor governance (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025b). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) exemplifies these challenges. Despite holding multiple national elections since many decades, electoral cycles have been marked by logistical failures, contested outcomes, and recurring legitimacy crises. Vast geography, limited infrastructure, and persistent insecurity, particularly in the eastern regions, complicate credible electoral administration and inclusive participation. Institutional fragility further weakens accountability, as the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) faces allegations of political interference, limited transparency, and administrative incapacity, eroding public trust (Norris, 2022). Elite dominance, weak opposition, constrained media independence, and recurrent post-election violence have contributed to political apathy, reinforcing the gap between formal democratic institutions and substantive democratic practice as the DRC approaches its 2028 elections.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

This section establishes the conceptual and theoretical foundations guiding the analysis of electoral accountability in weak and dysfunctional democratic contexts in Africa, with particular reference to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It clarifies the core concepts underpinning the study and reviews relevant theoretical perspectives that collectively inform the analytical lens adopted. Figure 1 represents the conceptual

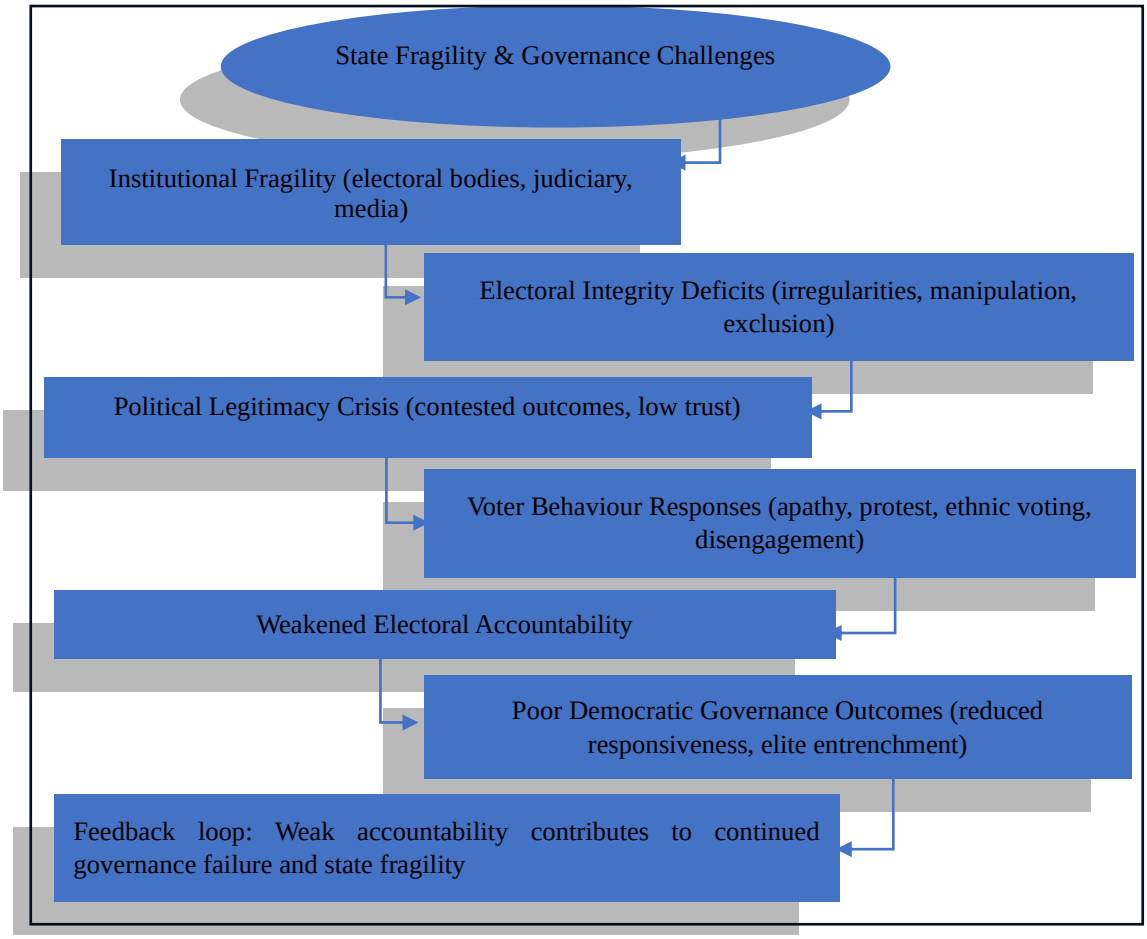


Figure 1: Electoral Accountability in Fragile Democratic **Contexts:** Conceptual Flow Model of Dysfunctional State
Source: Self-generated by the researchers

flow model of electoral accountability in fragile democratic contexts.

The conceptual flow model (Figure 1) positions electoral accountability within a broader political and institutional context shaped by state fragility and governance challenges. Rather than viewing elections as discrete democratic events, the model emphasises the sequential and interdependent links among state capacity, institutional performance, electoral integrity, political legitimacy, and voter behaviour. In weak democratic settings, these interactions systematically undermine elections' capacity to operate as effective accountability mechanisms (Peruzzotti, 2025). At the core of the model are state fragility and governance deficits, which structure the conditions under which political processes occur. Fragile states are marked by limited administrative capacity, weak rule of law, contested authority, insecurity, and uneven territorial control (Onuoha *et al.*, 2025). These constraints reduce the state's ability to deliver public goods, enforce electoral regulations, and protect political rights, increasing vulnerability to manipulation. State fragility thus produces institutional fragility, particularly within electoral management bodies, courts, legislatures, and regulatory agencies. Where such institutions lack independence, resources, or professional capacity, they become prone to political interference and elite capture. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), logistical constraints, politicisation, and weak enforcement have repeatedly undermined electoral institutions, eroding process credibility (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). Institutional weakness generates deficits in electoral integrity, increasing irregularities and contestation, which in turn erode political legitimacy. Furthermore, in the DRC, recurrent post-electoral disputes have weakened public trust and fuelled instability. Declining legitimacy reshapes voter behaviour, weakening electoral sanctioning and enabling poor governance and elite entrenchment to persist (Onuoha *et al.*, 2025), thereby reinforcing a cycle

Table 1: Conceptual and Theoretical Framework for Analysing Electoral Accountability in Weak Democratic Contexts

Concept / Theory	Description / Definition	Key Dimensions / Characteristics	Relevance to Electoral Accountability	Application to the DRC Context
Electoral Accountability	The capacity of citizens to reward or sanction political leaders through periodic, competitive, and credible elections based on performance in office.	Voter choice; information availability; political competition; electoral sanctions; alternation of power.	Serves as the primary mechanism through which citizens influence governance outcomes and enforce political responsibility.	Electoral accountability is weakened by disputed results, limited political competition, and low public trust in electoral processes.
Governance Challenges	Structural and systemic obstacles that undermine the effective exercise of public authority and democratic rule.	Corruption; weak rule of law; lack of transparency; limited state capacity; poor service delivery.	Governance failures distort electoral outcomes and weaken the link between citizen preferences and political authority.	Persistent corruption, administrative failures, and weak oversight institutions limit the effectiveness of elections as accountability tools.
Dysfunctional African States	States characterized by persistent governance failure, weak institutions, and limited political legitimacy.	Institutional weakness; elite dominance; patronage politics; contested authority; informal power structures.	Elections operate within distorted political environments, reducing their capacity to produce meaningful accountability.	The DRC exhibits chronic state dysfunction, where formal elections coexist with informal political practices that dilute accountability.
Institutional Fragility	The limited capacity of public institutions to function independently, effectively, and consistently.	Politicization; capacity deficits; weak enforcement powers; lack of autonomy.	Fragile institutions undermine electoral credibility and weaken horizontal accountability mechanisms.	Electoral bodies and judicial institutions face accusations of political interference and administrative incapacity.
Electoral Integrity	The extent to which elections adhere to legal standards and international norms of fairness, transparency, and inclusiveness.	Free and fair competition; impartial administration; transparency; credible results.	High electoral integrity strengthens accountability and public confidence; compromised integrity erodes legitimacy.	Recurrent allegations of irregularities and logistical failures undermine confidence in election outcomes.
Political Legitimacy	The perception that political authority is rightful, justified, and deserving of public acceptance.	Trust in institutions; acceptance of outcomes; perceived fairness; citizen consent.	Legitimate elections reinforce obedience to authority and strengthen democratic stability.	Contested elections and post-electoral crises weaken the legitimacy of elected leaders.
Democratic Governance	The exercise of political authority in an accountable, transparent, participatory, and rule-based manner.	Accountability; participation; rule of law; checks and balances; responsiveness.	Provides the institutional environment necessary for electoral accountability to function effectively.	Weak democratic governance limits the capacity of elections to improve governance outcomes.
Principal–Agent Theory	A framework in which citizens (principals) delegate authority to elected officials (agents), monitored through elections.	Delegation; monitoring; information asymmetry; sanctions.	Explains how elections are meant to discipline leaders and align their actions with public interests.	Information asymmetries and manipulation prevent citizens from effectively sanctioning poor leadership.
Democratic Accountability Theory	Emphasizes multiple accountability mechanisms beyond elections, including horizontal and societal controls.	Vertical (elections); horizontal (institutions); societal (civil society, media).	Demonstrates that elections alone are insufficient without supporting accountability institutions.	Weak legislatures, politicized courts, and constrained civil society limit accountability beyond elections.
State Fragility Frameworks	Analytical approaches focusing on low state capacity, insecurity, and contested authority.	Conflict; limited territorial control; service delivery gaps; institutional weakness.	Highlights how fragile conditions undermine electoral administration and citizen participation.	Insecurity and uneven state presence reduce participation and weaken the accountability function of elections.

Source: Adapted form Benveniste & Mizrahi (2023) and Papadopoulos (2023)

of fragility ahead of the 2028 elections. Table 1 presents an integrated analytical framework for examining electoral accountability in weak and dysfunctional democratic contexts, particularly in Africa. It emphasises that electoral accountability is embedded within broader political, institutional,

and governance environments that shape electoral processes and outcomes. By synthesising governance concepts with established political theories, the framework explains why elections in fragile states frequently fail to generate democratic responsiveness or political legitimacy. Electoral accountability is defined as the mechanism through which citizens are expected to reward or sanction political leaders based on their performance in office (Papadopoulos, 2023). Although competitive elections theoretically enable voters to discipline unresponsive incumbents, the framework demonstrates that this mechanism is highly conditional on governance quality, institutional strength, and political legitimacy. In dysfunctional African states, persistent governance challenges, such as corruption, weak rule of law, limited transparency, and poor service delivery, distort the electoral environment and undermine public confidence in political participation (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025b). Consequently, elections often reproduce existing power relations rather than correct governance failures. These dynamics reflect the coexistence of formal democratic institutions with informal power networks, patronage systems, and elite dominance that constrain institutional autonomy and political competition. Institutional fragility further mediates electoral outcomes, as politicised and under-resourced electoral management bodies, courts, and legislatures weaken electoral integrity. Electoral integrity, anchored in fairness, transparency, inclusiveness, and legal compliance, is essential for political legitimacy (Norris, 2022). Deficits in integrity erode legitimacy and shape voter behaviour through apathy, abstention, protest voting, or clientelism, weakening electoral sanctioning central to principal–agent theory. Consequently, electoral accountability emerges as a governance outcome shaped by institutional robustness, incentives, and legitimacy rather than electoral procedures alone.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

Table 1 outlines a conceptual and theoretical framework for analysing electoral accountability in weak democratic contexts. It demonstrates how electoral accountability in dysfunctional African states is undermined by the interaction of principal–agent failures, democratic institutional weaknesses, and structural state fragility. Although elections formally connect citizens and political elites, accountability deficits distort delegation, weaken electoral competition, and limit the translation of citizen preferences into responsive governance. Consequently, governance failures persist despite regular elections. The subsequent sections assess the applicability of principal–agent theory, democratic accountability theory, and state fragility frameworks to these challenges.

Meaning and Developmental Relevance of Electoral Accountability

Electoral accountability refers to the capacity of citizens to reward or sanction political leaders through credible, competitive, and regular elections (Papadopoulos, 2023). From a development perspective, it is significant because it aligns the incentives of political elites with the welfare preferences of the broader population. Where electoral accountability is effectively institutionalised, political leaders are more likely to pursue policies that enhance economic performance, strengthen public institutions, and respond to citizen demands (Malcolm, 2023). In many African contexts, however, the effectiveness of electoral accountability remains uneven due to persistent institutional fragility and governance constraints. A central economic implication of electoral accountability lies in its ability to incentivise pro-development policy choices. Leaders who face a genuine risk of electoral removal tend to prioritise economic growth, macroeconomic stability, employment creation, and investment in visible public goods such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure (George, 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that competitive elections in several African countries have been associated with expanded access to social services, particularly in the period preceding elections, reflecting heightened government responsiveness to voter preferences. Electoral accountability also constrains predatory governance by limiting rent-seeking, corruption, and patronage politics, thereby improving fiscal discipline, public investment efficiency, and policy credibility (Papadopoulos, 2023). Furthermore, governments subject to electoral scrutiny are more likely to address poverty, inequality, and socio-economic exclusion, including rural underdevelopment, youth unemployment, and food insecurity. In this sense, electoral

accountability functions as a mechanism for inclusive policy prioritisation. Finally, credible elections enhance political legitimacy and stability, reducing the risks of coups, electoral violence, and authoritarian reversals, and creating conditions more conducive to sustained economic development.

Case Study of Electoral Accountability in Weak Democratic and Dysfunctional African Contexts

This section offers a contextual overview of electoral accountability across selected African states, focusing on structural constraints that undermine the capacity of elections to function as effective accountability mechanisms. Electoral accountability is conventionally understood as the means through which citizens reward or sanction political leaders via competitive elections (Papadopoulos, 2023). However, across many African democracies, weak institutions, pervasive electoral manipulation, elite capture, and recurrent political violence significantly constrain this function. As illustrated in Table 2, these challenges remain prevalent and systematically erode the effectiveness of elections in fragile democratic systems. Collectively, such structural conditions limit citizens' ability to influence political outcomes, reinforcing the gap between formal electoral processes and substantive democratic accountability.

Table 2: Case study of Electoral Accountability Deficits in Selected Weak and Fragile African Democracies

Country	Key Institutional Weaknesses	Forms of Electoral Manipulation	Elite Capture Dynamics	Political Violence and Insecurity
Democratic Republic of Congo	Weak electoral and judicial institutions; limited state capacity	Opaque vote counting; logistical failures; contested results	Patronage networks; elite dominance of state resources	Election-related violence; insecurity in eastern regions
Zimbabwe	Politicised electoral commission and judiciary	Voter intimidation; manipulation of electoral rules	Ruling-party elite control of state apparatus	Recurrent election violence and repression
Nigeria	Weak rule of law; compromised electoral institutions	Vote buying; ballot manipulation; administrative irregularities	Political godfathers dominate candidate selection	Electoral violence, especially at sub-national levels
Ethiopia	Limited institutional independence; centralised authority	Opposition exclusion; restrictive electoral conditions	Party-state fusion; elite control of political space	Conflict-related violence affecting elections
Uganda	Executive dominance over oversight institutions	Intimidation; abuse of state resources	Long-standing elite entrenchment	Militarisation and violence during elections
Cameroon	Weak checks and balances; politicised administration	Electoral fraud; disputed results	Elite monopolisation of political power	Violence in Anglophone regions undermining participation
South Sudan	Extremely weak institutions; transitional governance	Delayed and controlled electoral processes	Elite bargaining over power-sharing	Persistent armed conflict
Sudan	Fragile transitional institutions	Manipulation of transitional electoral arrangements	Military and political elite dominance	Widespread political violence and instability
Burundi	Repressive institutions; limited judicial independence	Opposition exclusion; controlled elections	Narrow ruling elite capture of state	Pre- and post-election violence
Central African Republic	Minimal institutional capacity; limited territorial control	Logistical failures and exclusions	Armed elites influence political outcomes	

Source: Adapted from Fundisi & Atanga (2023), and Izatt (2023)

Table 2 provides a case study's comparative overview of electoral accountability challenges across selected African states characterised by weak democratic institutions and fragile governance structures. These cases illustrate contexts in which elections are formally conducted

but fail to function as effective mechanisms for holding political leaders accountable. A common pattern is institutional weakness, particularly within electoral management bodies, judicial systems, and legislative oversight institutions, which creates opportunities for electoral manipulation such as vote buying, intimidation, exclusion of opposition actors, and non-transparent results management (Izatt, 2023). Where institutions lack independence and enforcement capacity, the credibility of elections is systematically undermined. The table also highlights the pervasive influence of elite capture, whereby political and economic elites dominate electoral processes to maintain access to power and resources, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than enabling performance-based sanctioning. Political violence and insecurity further erode electoral accountability by constraining participation, suppressing competition, and delegitimising outcomes (Onuoha *et al.*, 2025). Collectively, these cases demonstrate how structural governance failures transform elections into contested and destabilising events, underscoring the need to address institutional fragility, elite dominance, and security challenges alongside electoral reforms.

Challenges and Consequences Linked to Electoral Accountability Deficits in Weak and Fragile African Democracies

While the third wave of democratisation introduced multiparty electoral systems across Africa, persistent institutional weakness and dysfunctional governance structures have limited the extent to which elections generate responsive and accountable leadership (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025b). Consequently, many electoral processes exhibit procedural regularity without substantive democratic effectiveness. A central constraint is institutional fragility, as electoral management bodies, courts, legislatures, and oversight institutions often lack autonomy, capacity, and credibility (Nshindano & Mpundu, 2025a). These deficiencies render elections vulnerable to manipulation, including vote rigging, voter suppression, misuse of state resources, and opaque results management, thereby undermining electoral integrity (Onuoha *et al.*, 2025). Incumbents frequently exploit such weaknesses to entrench power and evade popular sanction, eroding public trust and participation (Norris, 2024). Elite capture further distorts accountability, as patronage networks and clientelist relationships marginalise programmatic politics and performance-based evaluation. Political violence and insecurity compound these challenges by restricting participation and freedom of choice in conflict-affected settings. Collectively, institutional weakness, manipulation, elite dominance, and violence sever the link between citizen preferences and political authority.

Application of Principal–agent Theory to Electoral Accountability

Principal–agent theory provides a powerful analytical lens for understanding electoral accountability in weak democratic contexts. In democratic systems, citizens act as principals who delegate governing authority to elected officials, the agents, through elections (Papadopoulos, 2023). This delegation is based on the expectation that agents will act in the public interest. Elections are intended to function as a monitoring and sanctioning mechanism, enabling principals to evaluate agents' performance and either reappoint or remove them from office. In dysfunctional African states such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), this principal–agent relationship is fundamentally distorted. Severe information asymmetries limit citizens' ability to assess government performance accurately, as media independence is constrained and public information systems are weak (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). Moreover, electoral manipulation, clientelism, and limited political alternatives reduce voters' capacity to impose credible sanctions on political agents. As a result, elected officials face weak incentives to govern responsively or transparently. Instead of accountability flowing upward from citizens, authority flows downward from entrenched elites, eroding the foundational democratic logic of delegation and oversight (Gruber, 2023). In this context, elections exist procedurally but fail to fulfil their disciplining function.

Voter Turnout and its Effect on Electoral Accountability

Voter turnout is a critical indicator of electoral accountability, as participation determines whether citizens can credibly sanction political leaders. High turnout enhances accountability by increasing representativeness and constraining elite manipulation (Fossen, 2024). When a broad

segment of society participates, it becomes more difficult for elites to control outcomes through narrow patronage networks or coercion. In contrast, low voter turnout weakens accountability by amplifying elite influence. Where elections are characterized by apathy and abstention, outcomes are often determined by mobilized elite constituencies rather than the general population. Low turnout thus reduces electoral competitiveness and diminishes the sanctioning power of elections, allowing incumbents to retain power despite poor governance (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). Importantly, in weak democratic contexts, low turnout is often a rational response to perceived illegitimacy. When citizens believe elections are fraudulent or meaningless, abstention reflects disengagement rather than indifference. This creates a vicious cycle: declining legitimacy suppresses participation, reduced participation weakens accountability, and weak accountability further entrenches elite capture. Breaking this cycle requires restoring trust through credible reforms that make participation meaningful.

The Political Legitimacy Impacts on Institutional Trust

Political legitimacy plays a critical mediating role between electoral processes and public confidence in democratic institutions. Legitimacy denotes the belief that political authority is rightful, fair, and deserving of compliance (Fossen, 2024). When elections are perceived as credible and procedurally fair, they confer legitimacy on elected leaders as well as on institutions responsible for administering and adjudicating elections. In weak democratic contexts, however, compromised electoral integrity, manifested in disputed outcomes, limited transparency, and exclusionary practices, undermines legitimacy. As legitimacy declines, public trust in electoral commissions, courts, legislatures, and security agencies erodes (Izatt, 2023). In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), recurrent controversies surrounding election administration have weakened confidence in both the electoral management body and the judiciary, even when outcomes are formally validated. Low institutional trust reduces compliance with laws, electoral participation, and constructive political engagement, fostering apathy, protest behaviour, and informal political practices (Kerr, 2024). This erosion weakens electoral accountability and facilitates corruption and rights abuses. Across fragile African states, elections increasingly assume a quasi-mandatory character aimed at validating political authority and securing external support despite limited domestic confidence (Nshindano & Mpundu, 2025a).

Elections, Identity, and State Fragility in the Democratic Republic of Congo

In fragile state contexts such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), elections function not only as instruments of political legitimacy but also as substitutes for core state functions, rendering electoral participation quasi-obligatory and transforming voter cards into primary tools of citizen identification (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). This substitutive role arises because elections compensate for critical administrative and governance deficiencies that weak states are unable to address. Where civil registration systems are inadequate, population data outdated, and national identification infrastructure underdeveloped, elections become the only nationwide administrative mechanism capable of identifying citizens. Consequently, elections no longer operate solely as democratic instruments of political choice but also perform essential state functions related to registration, territorial reach, and legal recognition. In the DRC, this dynamic is particularly pronounced. Following the abolition of the Mobutu-era carte d'identité de citoyen in 1997, successive governments have failed to establish a credible national identification system due to financial constraints, corruption, and institutional weakness (Ntahiraja & Kemp, 2021). As a result, the electoral register has become the sole nationwide database recognising individuals. Supported by international donors, electoral registration collects biographical and biometric data, and voter cards are widely used to access public services, pass security checkpoints, open bank accounts, and demonstrate nationality. This institutional substitution has significant democratic implications. It blurs the boundary between citizenship and electoral participation, undermines the voluntariness of political engagement, distorts electoral incentives, and politicises identity, increasing risks of exclusion and elite manipulation (Johansson, 2026). While providing short-term administrative functionality, this arrangement entrenches long-term fragility and weakens democratic accountability.

The Role of Civil Society in Enhancing Accountability

Civil society plays a critical role in counterbalancing elite capture and reinforcing electoral accountability, particularly where formal institutions are weak. Through advocacy, monitoring, and mobilisation, civil society organisations (CSOs) extend accountability beyond elections and reduce information asymmetries between citizens and political elites (Rusfiana & Kurniasih, 2024). A key contribution lies in societal accountability, as CSOs monitor electoral processes, expose malpractice, and document abuses through election observation, parallel vote tabulation, and public reporting (Haruna, 2025). Civil society also promotes civic education and issue-based participation, enabling voters to assess leaders based on performance rather than patronage. However, effectiveness depends on political space, which is often restricted. In the DRC, CSOs play substitutive and corrective roles across the electoral cycle, compensating for weak institutions and recurring legitimacy deficits (Table 3)

Table 3: Key Electoral Civil Society Organizations in the DRC and Their Electoral Roles

Organization	Type / Nature	Core Electoral Role
CENCO (National Episcopal Conference of Congo)	Catholic Church institution	Nationwide election observation; parallel vote tabulation; public legitimacy assessments
ECC (Church of Christ in Congo)	Protestant umbrella body	Joint election observation with CENCO; civic education; electoral advocacy
CENCO–ECC Joint Electoral Observation Mission	Faith-based coalition	Large-scale citizen observation, audit of voters' roll, result verification
SYMOCEL (Synergy of Citizen Election Observation Missions)	Civil society coalition	Long-term electoral observation; reform advocacy; technical electoral analysis
Nouvelle Société Civile Congolaise (NSCC)	Civil society platform	Mobilization of observers; governance and accountability advocacy
LUCHA (Lutte pour le Changement)	Youth-led civic movement	Electoral mobilization; voter education; protest and accountability advocacy
La Ligue des Électeurs	Electoral governance NGO	Voter rights education; monitoring of voter registration
CAFCO (Women's Platform)	Gender-focused civil society network	Women's political participation; gender-sensitive civic education
Réseau Gouvernance, Élections et Citoyenneté (REGEC)	Governance network	Electoral transparency and civic competence building
Caritas Congo	Faith-based NGO	Civic education, peacebuilding, voter sensitization

Source: Adapted from Haruna (2025) and Fundisi & Atanga (2023)

Table 3 provides the core role civil society organisations play in the DRC. Most of which include the following:

Election Observation and Result Verification

Election observation and result verification constitute the most prominent and institutionalized roles of civil society in the Democratic Republic of Congo's electoral system. In recognition of persistent public mistrust toward state electoral institutions, civil society organizations, particularly faith-based bodies such as the CENCO–ECC Joint Electoral Observation Mission and umbrella platforms like SYMOCEL, have developed extensive citizen observation mechanisms capable of nationwide deployment (Nansikombi, 2025). These organizations monitor all phases of the electoral cycle, including voter registration, election day procedures, vote counting, and results tabulation. Through methodologies such as sample-based observation and independent results verification, civil society actors provide alternative assessments of electoral credibility that often carry significant moral and political weight. In contexts where official results are disputed, civil society findings frequently shape domestic and international discourse on electoral legitimacy, reinforcing their role as de facto guarantors of transparency in a fragile institutional environment.

Civic Education and Voter Mobilization

Civil society also plays a critical role in civic education and voter mobilization, addressing gaps left by limited state capacity and insufficient official voter education programmes. Organizations such as Caritas Congo, women's platforms, youth movements like LUCHA, and church-based networks conduct large-scale sensitization campaigns to inform citizens about voting procedures, electoral rights, peaceful participation, and democratic norms (Cirhigiri,

2022). This function is particularly significant in the DRC, where voter registration is often driven by the practical need to obtain an identity document rather than a commitment to democratic engagement. Civil society initiatives therefore seek to reframe participation as a civic responsibility rather than an administrative necessity. By targeting youth, women, and marginalized communities, these organizations improve inclusivity and mitigate the risk that elections become elite-driven exercises detached from popular participation.

Advocacy, Reform, and Accountability

Beyond observation and mobilization, Congolese civil society organizations engage actively in advocacy and electoral reform, positioning themselves as sustained accountability actors rather than event-based monitors. Platforms such as SYMOCEL and sector-specific networks routinely publish post-electoral evaluations that identify systemic weaknesses in electoral laws, institutional design, campaign finance regulation, and dispute resolution mechanisms (Gorwa, 2021). These assessments are accompanied by structured reform proposals and advocacy campaigns directed at Parliament, the electoral commission, and international partners. Faith-based coalitions and civil society forums also issue public declarations challenging constitutional violations, election delays, and procedural irregularities. Through sustained engagement across electoral cycles, civil society contributes to normative pressure for reform, even when immediate institutional responsiveness remains limited.

Constraints and Risks

Despite their central role, civil society organizations in the DRC operate within a highly constrained and often hostile environment. Electoral periods are frequently associated with restrictions on civic space, including harassment of observers, repression of peaceful protests, arbitrary arrests of activists, and legal or administrative obstacles to observation accreditation (Omoniyi, 2026). Youth-led movements such as LUCHA and independent election observers are particularly vulnerable to surveillance and intimidation, especially when their findings challenge official narratives (Lara, 2025). In conflict-affected regions, insecurity and targeted violence further limit civil society access to registration centres and polling stations, undermining inclusive observation. These constraints not only endanger civil society actors but also weaken the broader accountability ecosystem by narrowing the space for independent scrutiny.

Analytical insight

Analytically, the Congolese case illustrates that civil society does not simply complement the electoral system but often substitutes for weakened state institutions. In a context marked by low institutional trust and recurrent legitimacy crises, civil society organizations serve as alternative sources of credibility, information, and normative authority. Their practices reveal a hybrid accountability model in which non-state actors partially assume functions typically reserved for electoral commissions, courts, and oversight bodies (Gorwa, 2021). While this substitution enhances short-term transparency and citizen confidence, it also underscores structural fragility: democratic accountability remains heavily dependent on societal actors rather than institutionalized state mechanisms. Consequently, the sustainability of electoral accountability in the DRC hinges not only on strengthening civil society, but on translating its oversight capacity into durable institutional reform ahead of future elections, including those scheduled for 2028.

Reducing Elite Capture in Weak Democratic Contexts

Elite capture in most African countries, including the DRC, occurs when political and economic elites dominate state institutions and electoral processes to advance private interests at the expense of the public good (Monga, 2025). In weak democratic contexts, elite capture is sustained by concentrated power, patronage networks, and limited institutional constraints. Reducing elite capture therefore requires reforms that alter both political incentives and institutional structures. One critical strategy is strengthening institutional independence and oversight. Robust and autonomous institutions, such as electoral management bodies, anti-corruption agencies, courts, and legislatures can constrain elite behaviour by enforcing rules and limiting discretionary power (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025a). Transparent recruitment processes, secure tenure for institutional leaders, and adequate resourcing are essential to insulating institutions from elite

influence. Without such safeguards, elites can easily co-opt institutions meant to regulate political competition. A second mechanism involves political and electoral reforms that level the playing field. Campaign finance regulation, disclosure requirements, and enforcement of spending limits reduce elites' ability to dominate elections through financial leverage (Dorasamy & Kikasu, 2023). Similarly, reforms that enhance internal party democracy weaken elite monopolies over candidate selection, enabling broader participation and competition. In the absence of these reforms, elections tend to reinforce elite dominance rather than challenge it.

Reforms to Improve Electoral Integrity, Transparency, and Accountability

Improving electoral integrity in fragile democratic contexts requires reforms that address both institutional weaknesses and legitimacy deficits. Strengthening the independence and capacity of electoral management bodies is essential, including transparent appointment processes, adequate funding, professional staffing, and legal safeguards against political interference (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025a). Equally important is judicial reform. Courts responsible for adjudicating electoral disputes must be independent, impartial, and timely to provide credible remedies and reduce the risk of post-election violence and legitimacy crises. Transparency across the electoral cycle, through open voter registration, transparent results management, and election observation, helps reduce information asymmetries and strengthens citizen oversight. Media freedom and civic education further reinforce electoral integrity by enabling performance-based voting and strengthening principal–agent accountability (Papadopoulos, 2023). These measures must be embedded in broader governance reforms aimed at reducing elite capture, empowering civil society, and restoring the accountability link between voters and leaders, particularly in the DRC ahead of the 2028 national elections (Haruna, 2025).

Governance and Electoral Dynamics in the Democratic Republic of Congo

The electoral dynamics of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) are shaped by a complex governance trajectory characterised by authoritarian legacies, prolonged conflict, and incomplete state reconstruction. Although the reintroduction of multiparty elections in the mid-2000s sought to consolidate democratic rule, electoral processes have unfolded within a context of weak rule of law, centralised executive authority, and limited institutional checks and balances (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025b). As a result, elections have operated less as instruments of democratic accountability and more as mechanisms for renewing constitutional legitimacy without substantially transforming governance practices. A key constraint on electoral accountability is persistent institutional weakness, particularly within electoral governance bodies. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) has faced recurring criticism for administrative incapacity, politicisation, and lack of transparency (Nshindano & Mpundu, 2025a). These challenges are compounded by vast geography, inadequate infrastructure, and ongoing insecurity, contributing to delays, uneven voter registration, and inconsistencies in results management. Judicial institutions responsible for electoral dispute resolution have also struggled to demonstrate independence, reinforcing perceptions that outcomes are shaped by political negotiation rather than legal process. Governance constraints further shape citizen participation. While registration rates are often high, participation is frequently motivated by the administrative utility of voter cards as de facto identity documents rather than confidence in elections as agents of political change. Socio-economic inequality, limited civic education, and low institutional trust weaken performance-based electoral accountability. Recurrent post-election disputes and legitimacy crises have normalised crisis-driven governance, limiting the capacity of elections to generate meaningful democratic accountability as the DRC approaches the 2028 national elections (Kikasu & Dorasamy, 2025c).

Table 4 illustrates that electoral accountability in weak and fragile democratic contexts is deeply shaped by structural governance challenges rather than by electoral procedures alone. In such environments, elections do not operate as independent accountability mechanisms but as outcomes of broader institutional, political, and security conditions. Weak institutions, elite capture, and compromised rule of law collectively limit citizens' ability to sanction leaders through

elections (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, these dynamics are particularly pronounced. While elections are constitutionally mandated and regularly conducted, their accountability function is undermined by persistent institutional fragility, legitimacy deficits, and governance failures. The approaching 2028 national elections therefore sit at the intersection of procedural continuity and substantive uncertainty. Without meaningful reforms aimed at strengthening institutions, safeguarding electoral integrity, and restoring political legitimacy, elections risk reinforcing existing governance deficits rather than correcting them. Ultimately, the relationship between electoral accountability and governance in the DRC is recursive: weak governance undermines electoral accountability, and ineffective elections perpetuate weak governance. Addressing this cycle ahead of the 2028 elections is central to improving democratic responsiveness and political legitimacy in the Congolese context.

Table 4: Electoral Accountability and Governance Challenges in Weak Democratic Contexts – Implications for the DRC (2028)

Governance Dimension	Observed Governance Challenge in Fragile Contexts	Effect on Electoral Accountability	Manifestation in the DRC Context	Implications for the 2028 Elections
Institutional Capacity	Weak, under-resourced, and politicized electoral and oversight institutions	Limits enforcement of electoral rules and weakens sanctioning of incumbents	Persistent concerns over the independence and capacity of CENI and the judiciary	Risk of contested outcomes and limited confidence in accountability mechanisms
Electoral Integrity	Electoral manipulation, logistical failures, opaque results management	Undermines the credibility of elections as tools for accountability	Recurrent allegations of irregularities and non-transparent tabulation	Credibility of the 2028 polls may be questioned if integrity safeguards are not strengthened
Rule of Law	Selective enforcement of electoral and constitutional laws	Weakens vertical and horizontal accountability	Politicisation of judicial institutions and slow dispute resolution	Electoral disputes may escalate into legitimacy crises
Elite Capture	Dominance of political and economic elites over institutions	Elections reinforce elite power rather than citizen oversight	Patronage networks and centralized political control	Elections may reproduce existing power structures rather than enable change
Political Legitimacy	Low public trust in institutions and electoral outcomes	Citizens disengage from performance-based voting	History of contested election results and legitimacy deficits	Low legitimacy may affect voter confidence and acceptance of results
Voter Participation	Political apathy driven by mistrust and fear	Reduced turnout weakens the sanctioning power of elections	Participation often motivated by identity documents rather than democratic choice	Voter turnout may not translate into genuine accountability
Security Environment	Electoral violence, intimidation, and insecurity	Constrains free and fair participation	Insecurity in eastern DRC disrupts registration and voting	Exclusion of voters in insecure zones risks undermining national accountability
Civil Society Space	Restrictive civic space and intimidation of activists	Limits societal accountability and independent oversight	CSOs play a major role but face repression	Civil society engagement will be pivotal but remains vulnerable
Administrative Governance	Weak civil registration and service delivery systems	Elections substitute for state functions rather than accountability processes	Voter cards function as de facto identity documents	Electoral processes risk being overstretched in 2028
International Influence	Donor dependence and external legitimacy incentives	Accountability aligns more with external validation than citizen choice	Elections often prioritized to meet international expectations	

Source: Adapted from Fundisi & Atanga (2023) and Malcolm (2023)

Comparative Lessons from African Electoral Experiences

Comparative electoral experiences across Africa indicate that electoral accountability depends less on the regularity of elections than on the quality of underlying governance conditions. In many African states, elections have failed to generate meaningful accountability due to institutional fragility, executive dominance, politicised electoral management bodies, and weak judicial oversight. Cases such as Zimbabwe, Uganda, and Cameroon demonstrate how these constraints undermine the sanctioning power of elections, enabling incumbents to entrench themselves rather than be rewarded or punished on the basis of performance (Monga, 2025). In such contexts, elections function primarily as instruments of regime legitimation rather than mechanisms of democratic accountability, reinforcing political stagnation. By contrast, comparatively stronger cases such as Ghana and Senegal, and to some degree Kenya, highlight the importance of institutional autonomy and procedural transparency. Independent electoral bodies, clearer adjudication frameworks, and relatively autonomous courts have enhanced electoral credibility and increased prospects for peaceful alternation of power (Gorwa, 2021). Although political competition remains uneven, institutional strength has mitigated manipulation and strengthened legitimacy. Elite conduct further shapes outcomes, as respect for constitutional rules and acceptance of electoral uncertainty enhance accountability (Malcolm, 2023). Conversely, elite capture and zero-sum competition weaken incentives for responsive governance. Societal factors, including civil society capacity, media freedom, and voter engagement, also influence accountability by reducing information asymmetries or, when constrained, undermining public trust. Overall, African experiences underscore that electoral accountability emerges from the interaction of institutional design, elite behaviour, and societal participation. For dysfunctional states such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, electoral reform alone remains insufficient without broader governance transformation and restored political legitimacy.

METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative comparative case study design, supplemented by selective descriptive indicators, to examine electoral accountability and governance performance in dysfunctional African states. The design privileged contextual depth over large-N inference and was suited to fragile democracies where outcomes are shaped by elite incentives and weak enforcement (Raschendorfer & Roder Figueira, 2024). Anchored in principal–agent theory and institutional political economy, elections are conceptualized as vertical accountability mechanisms whose effectiveness is conditioned by institutional capacity, elite dominance, and accountability deficits (Nshindano & Mpundu, 2025a). The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) constitutes the primary case study on theoretical and empirical grounds. It exemplifies a dysfunctional electoral democracy characterized by weak state capacity, contested legitimacy, and limited citizen oversight (Maswanku *et al.*, 2025). Empirically, the 2028 national election represents a critical juncture for assessing whether electoral processes can improve governance under persistent institutional fragility. The DRC is treated as a most-likely hard case. To contextualize its experience, the study employed a small-N theory-driven comparative framework, using illustrative cases of Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Kenya and many other African countries, where formal elections coexist with weak accountability and poor governance outcomes (Gorwa, 2021). The analysis draws on multi-source qualitative data, including electoral legislation and reports from national electoral commissions, governance assessments by regional and international organizations, election observation reports, and elite and expert commentary. Methodologically, the study applied qualitative process tracing, reinforced by structured-focused comparison, to examine how electoral processes translate or fail to translate into effective governance accountability across the electoral cycle in fragile African democracies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study finds that in dysfunctional African states, including the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), elections tend to reproduce rather than correct governance deficiencies where

institutional fragility, low electoral integrity, and persistent legitimacy deficits remain unresolved (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). The findings indicate that weak and politicised electoral management bodies, recurrently contested outcomes, and low levels of civic trust undermine voter participation and erode the capacity of elections to sanction poor leadership, thereby weakening democratic accountability ahead of the 2028 national elections (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023; Haruna, 2025). To address these challenges, the study recommends strengthening the independence and administrative capacity of electoral and judicial institutions to restore confidence in electoral processes and ensure credible dispute resolution. It further emphasises enhancing electoral integrity through transparent voter registration, results management, and collaboration with domestic observers to reduce post-election contestation and legitimacy crises. In addition, sustained investment in civic education and the protection of civic space is essential to rebuild citizen trust, encourage performance-based voting, and restore the accountability link between voters and political leaders. Collectively, these measures are necessary to transform elections in the DRC from procedural exercises in legitimacy into substantive mechanisms of democratic accountability, drawing lessons from Ghana's electoral experience to strengthen institutional reform and governance outcomes.

Lessons from Ghana's Electoral Experience

Comparative analyses highlight Ghana, Senegal, and, to a lesser extent, Kenya as cases where independent and professional electoral management bodies, clear adjudication frameworks, and relatively autonomous judiciaries have enhanced electoral legitimacy and credibility (Kerr, 2024). Within this context, Ghana represents a particularly salient illustrative case. Since the adoption of the 1992 Constitution, Ghana has sustained electoral accountability through institutional continuity, competitive multiparty politics, and rule-bound elite behaviour, holding uninterrupted presidential and parliamentary elections with multiple peaceful alternations of power between the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC) (Haruna, 2025). This experience has entrenched the norm that political authority is acquired and renewed through electoral competition, reinforcing the ballot box as a credible accountability mechanism. Despite intense competition, political elites have largely accepted electoral uncertainty and relied on institutional channels, particularly the courts, to resolve disputes, thereby strengthening democratic accountability. Central to this framework is the relative strength of oversight institutions, including the Electoral Commission, Supreme Court, Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, and National Commission for Civic Education, with judicial adjudication of disputed elections in 2012 and 2020 reinforcing institutional accountability pathways (Haruna, 2025).

The Role of Civil Society in Ghana's Electoral Accountability

Civil society plays a central and institutionalised role in sustaining electoral accountability in Ghana by complementing formal state mechanisms and reducing information asymmetries between citizens and political elites. The Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) exemplifies this function. Since its establishment in 2000, CODEO has mobilised tens of thousands of trained, non-partisan observers and deployed parallel vote tabulation (PVT) to independently verify electoral outcomes (Ogunbanjo, 2024). The public dissemination of its findings provides an authoritative benchmark for assessing official results, thereby enhancing transparency and public confidence. Beyond election-day monitoring, Ghanaian civil society organisations engage across the electoral cycle in civic education, issue-based accountability, conflict monitoring, and post-electoral reform advocacy. Organisations such as CDD-Ghana, STAR-Ghana Foundation, IMANI Africa, and WANEP evaluate party manifestos, promote performance-based leadership assessments, and monitor political violence (Haruna, 2025). These activities discourage patronage politics and reinforce the principal–agent relationship. Ghana's experience reflects institutional synergy, with civil society reinforcing rather than substituting state authority, underscoring the role of civic engagement, institutional restraint, and peaceful political competition.

Ghana's Experience and Implications for the 2028 National Elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Ghana's electoral experience offers important comparative lessons for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as it prepares for its 2028 national elections, particularly regarding the institutionalisation of electoral governance. In Ghana, repeated electoral cycles, supported by relatively autonomous electoral and judicial institutions, have normalised the expectation that political authority is acquired and transferred through elections (Haruna, 2025; Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). By contrast, elections in the DRC remain highly contested political events rather than routinised democratic processes. As 2028 approaches, persistent institutional fragility, especially within electoral management and dispute-resolution bodies, poses a significant risk. Strengthening the independence, professional capacity, and transparency of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) and the judiciary is therefore essential if elections are to function as mechanisms of accountability rather than triggers for instability (Moshoeshoe & Dzinesa, 2024). Ghana also illustrates the importance of electoral integrity and procedural credibility. Even under intense competition, public confidence can be sustained where rules are clear, results management is transparent, and disputes are resolved institutionally (Haruna, 2025). In the DRC, logistical failures, opaque tabulation, and politicised adjudication continue to undermine trust (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). Enhancing integrity through early planning, transparent data publication, independent audits, and collaboration with domestic observers is therefore critical. Beyond procedures, Ghana's experience highlights the role of civic trust and engagement. Restoring trust in the DRC requires credible elections embedded within broader governance reforms, including strengthening the rule of law, limiting elite capture, and improving public service delivery.

Policy Implications and Recommendations to Reform and Strengthen Electoral Accountability and Governance in the DRC

Addressing electoral accountability and governance challenges in dysfunctional African states requires coordinated, multi-level policy interventions that extend beyond election-day management. Drawing from the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) structural constraints and informed by Ghana's comparatively successful experience, this section outlines evidence-based policy implications and recommendations aimed at electoral authorities, policymakers, civil society, and international partners, with a focus on institutional reform, electoral integrity, and citizen trust ahead of the 2028 national elections.

Core Dimensions and Economic Implications of Good Governance

Good governance comprises institutional and normative principles such as the rule of law, transparency and accountability, corruption control, effective public administration, and regulatory quality, all of which directly shape economic decision-making and development outcomes (Anđelković, 2023). One major economic benefit of good governance is the creation of a favourable investment climate. Investors are more likely to commit capital where property rights are secure, contracts are enforceable, and regulatory frameworks are predictable (Islam, 2025). In many African countries, weak governance, as a result of weak electoral governance, has raised transaction costs and uncertainty, discouraging productive investment, particularly in manufacturing and other value-added sectors, essential for economic diversification. Good governance also improves the efficiency of public expenditure. Transparent and accountable institutions increase the likelihood that public resources are aligned with development priorities, delivered with minimal leakage, and subject to effective oversight, especially in high-impact sectors such as infrastructure, education, and health. Moreover, effective governance underpins structural transformation. Reducing reliance on commodities and informal employment requires capable state institutions to design and implement industrial policy, support skills development, and facilitate technological adoption (Anđelković, 2023). Without administrative capacity and accountability, such transformation is difficult to sustain. Finally, good governance enhances resilience to economic, climatic, and health shocks by improving coordination, resource mobilisation, and protection of vulnerable populations. Conversely, weak governance has amplified the

developmental costs of shocks across much of Africa.

Interaction Between Electoral Accountability and Good Governance

Electoral accountability and good governance are mutually reinforcing, though their interaction is neither automatic nor uniform across Africa. Competitive elections generate pressure for improved governance, while effective governance enhances service delivery and economic outcomes, which in turn strengthen democratic legitimacy (Papadopoulos, 2023). This positive feedback loop is evident in countries such as Botswana, Ghana, Mauritius, and Cape Verde, where relatively robust electoral systems coexist with competent public institutions and stable growth trajectories (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). However, significant risks and limitations persist. In some democracies, elections encourage short term, targeted spending rather than long term development planning, reinforcing clientelism, patronage networks, and ethnic or regional favouritism. Such dynamics weaken the developmental impact of electoral competition. Furthermore, elections alone do not guarantee strong institutions. Where the rule of law is weak and oversight bodies lack independence or capacity, electoral competition may coexist with poor governance and limited economic gains (Ramanujam & Farrington, 2022). In more extreme cases, manipulated elections, constitutional manipulation, and political repression undermine accountability, generating policy uncertainty, capital flight, and reduced investor and donor confidence.

Implications for Africa's Development Path

For Africa's development trajectory, the combination of strong electoral accountability and good governance has profound implications. Together, they shift development outcomes away from elite accumulation toward broad based growth, poverty reduction, and human development (Gebrihet & Gebresilassie, 2025). They also enable governments to engage in long term planning and credible policy commitments, including in infrastructure development, energy transitions, and industrial and climate strategies, an urgent requirement given demographic pressures and climate risks. Improved governance further reduces reliance on external aid by strengthening domestic resource mobilisation through better tax administration and reduced illicit financial flows (Papadopoulos, 2023). This enhances economic sovereignty and expands policy space for endogenous development strategies. In the African context, electoral accountability implies that political authority is conditional on economic performance and social outcomes, while good governance ensures that state capacity is sufficient to translate political incentives into tangible development gains (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). Neither is sufficient in isolation: elections without effective governance risk producing populism, corruption, and instability, while governance without accountability risks authoritarian efficiency that undermines inclusive development (Issacharoff, 2023). Combined, electoral accountability and good governance constitute the institutional foundation for sustainable, inclusive, and resilient economic development across the continent.

Institutional Reform and Capacity Strengthening

- Policy implication: Weak and politicised institutions undermine electoral accountability by eroding credibility, transparency, and rule-based governance, underscoring the importance of institutional continuity exemplified by Ghana's experience (Haruna, 2025). For the DRC, key priorities include strengthening the independence and professionalism of CENI through transparent appointments, secure tenure, and insulated funding; clarifying institutional roles across the electoral chain to reduce interference and contestation; investing in permanent institutional capacity rather than ad hoc fixes; and enhancing judicial independence and efficiency in electoral dispute resolution to ensure grievances are addressed through formal institutional channels rather than political mobilisation.

Lesson from Ghana: recurrent elections managed by relatively stable institutions normalize electoral accountability and reduce crisis-driven governance (Ohemeng, 2026; Idowu, 2024).

Strengthening Electoral Integrity across the Electoral Cycle

- Policy implication: Electoral integrity is cumulative and must be safeguarded across all

stages of the electoral process, as procedural deficits can erode legitimacy even when formal rules are observed (Norris, 2022). In the DRC, this requires early independent audits of the voter register to reduce manipulation claims; improved results management through timely publication of disaggregated polling-station data; adoption of inclusive and consultative electoral calendars to minimise disruptive last-minute changes; and institutionalised collaboration with domestic observers to enhance transparency while preserving institutional authority.

Lesson from Ghana: transparent results management and institutional acceptance of electoral uncertainty strengthen public confidence even in tightly contested elections (Idowu, 2024).

Rebuilding Civic Trust and Meaningful Citizen Participation

- Policy implication: Low civic trust weakens elections by reducing them to administrative or symbolic exercises rather than mechanisms of accountability (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). In the DRC, electoral participation is often instrumental rather than politically motivated. Addressing this requires separating civil identification from voter registration through a functional national identity system; expanding civic and voter education focused on performance-based voting and democratic rights; protecting and widening civic space throughout the electoral cycle; and engaging traditional, religious, and community leaders as intermediaries for trust-building, drawing on Ghana's established use of societal institutions to reinforce democratic norms.

Lesson from Ghana: sustained civic education and open civic space transform elections into socially embedded accountability processes rather than isolated political events (Haruna, 2025).

Role of Civil Society as an Accountability Partner

- Policy implication: In fragile contexts, civil society often compensates for weak institutions, although its effectiveness depends on political space and institutional recognition (Fundisi & Atanga, 2023). For the DRC, this requires institutionalising civil society engagement through formal consultation and accreditation mechanisms; supporting long-term election observation and reform advocacy beyond election day; encouraging coordination among civil society actors to strengthen collective legitimacy and reduce duplication; and protecting activists and observers from intimidation. Recognising civil society as a governance partner rather than a political adversary is essential for sustaining electoral accountability.

Lesson from Ghana: civil society enhances accountability most effectively when it complements, rather than replaces state institutions (Graham & Kocadal, 2023).

Responsibilities of Policymakers and International Partners

- Policy implication: Over-reliance on procedural compliance and external legitimacy incentives can weaken domestic electoral accountability. For the DRC, international electoral support should be aligned with broader governance reform, prioritising institutional strengthening over short-term electoral delivery and conditioning assistance on transparency, inclusiveness, and reform benchmarks. Supporting local capacity, civil society ownership, and regional peer learning is equally critical. Ghana's experience shows that electoral accountability is sustained when elections are embedded within credible institutions, trusted procedures, and an active civic culture (Haruna, 2025). Without integrated reforms, the DRC risks elections that confer formal legitimacy without substantive democratic accountability.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined electoral accountability and governance challenges in dysfunctional African states through a focused analysis of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as it approaches the 2028 national elections. The findings demonstrate that, in fragile democratic contexts, the effectiveness of elections as mechanisms of accountability is fundamentally shaped by institutional capacity, political legitimacy, and civic trust. In the DRC, persistent weaknesses in electoral management, recurrently contested outcomes, low confidence in state institutions, and the instrumentalization of

elections for administrative legitimacy continue to erode the accountability function of the vote. Similar electoral accountability deficits are evident across parts of Africa, including Nigeria, Ethiopia, Uganda, Cameroon, South Sudan, Sudan, Burundi, and the Central African Republic, among others. By contrast, Ghana's experience illustrates how electoral accountability can gradually consolidate when elections are embedded within relatively autonomous institutions, a rule-bound political culture, and an active civil society that complements rather than substitutes for state authority. Ghana's repeated peaceful alternations of power, institutionalised election observation, and reliance on judicial mechanisms for dispute resolution underscore that electoral accountability is a cumulative outcome of sustained governance reform, not merely the product of electoral procedures. These comparative insights suggest that, without parallel investments in institutional strengthening, transparency, and civic engagement, the DRC's 2028 elections risk reproducing existing legitimacy deficits rather than advancing democratic consolidation. The study also identifies key avenues for future research. These include longitudinal and comparative analyses of electoral management bodies in fragile states; examination of the interaction between civil identification systems and voter registration; and deeper investigation into the conditions under which civil society evolves from a substitutive role to a complementary accountability partner, as observed in Ghana. Such research would refine theory and practice on electoral accountability and inform context-sensitive policy interventions beyond the 2028 electoral horizon.

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