

# POLICY PULSE

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## Premature Political Campaigning in Nigeria

Aligning Law, Enforcement, and Digital  
Accountability

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Cover Image: Political supporters during a legitimate campaign rally in Nigeria's 2023 elections. © The Economist  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Premature political campaigning is a critical challenge to Nigeria's electoral integrity. Despite the Electoral Act (2022) prohibiting campaigning before the statutory window, political actors routinely engage in off-window advertising, branded philanthropy, and digital mobilisation well ahead of elections. Existing regulatory instruments, designed for in-person campaigns, leave digital activity, surrogate messaging, and covert interventions largely unmonitored.

INEC's current enforcement focuses on rallies and physical publicity, allowing governance and campaigning to overlap. Under these circumstances, patronage-driven projects blur public service with political solicitation, while the misuse of public resources erodes accountability.

The 2023 elections illustrate the stakes. Of roughly 93.5 million registered voters, only 26.7 per cent cast ballots. Such a low turnout concentrates influence among smaller, highly mobilisable constituencies. This, in turn, magnifies the impact of early interventions.

Comparative experience from India, the European Union, and the United States shows that effective reform requires legal clarity, digital transparency, and disciplined administrative oversight.

This brief recommends a Campaign Integrity and Transparency Package (CITP). By expanding legal definitions, mandating digital-ad metadata disclosure, and strengthening enforcement, CITP would level the playing field, reduce opaque patronage, and restore public trust—essential steps for democratic consolidation.

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## PREMATURE CAMPAIGNING IN NIGERIA

Premature political campaigning is increasingly common in Nigeria. Campaign-related advertising, rallies, community projects, and surrogate or influencer messaging now occur outside the statutory campaign window. Patronage-style community projects and surrogate or influencer messaging further exacerbate these challenges.

Historically, election law and administrative practice focused on visible, in-person events. The Electoral Act (2022) codified a campaign window, allowing [campaigns to start 150 days before elections and end 24 hours before polling](#). INEC, in addition, provides guidance for rallies and campaigns.

However, these rules were designed for a pre-digital environment. They fail to define or sanction modern campaign modalities such as paid social-media amplification, long-term “community project” patronage, and covert surrogate advertising. This development reflects a recurring historical pattern in which regulation persistently trails political innovation.



## TRENDS AND GAPS IN CAMPAIGN PRACTICES

Nigeria recorded roughly 93.5 million registered voters for the 2023 general elections, but only [26.7 per cent participated](#)—the lowest turnout since 1999. Low participation concentrated influence among smaller, mobilisable constituencies, increasing the impact of early interventions.

INEC and election observers have reported widespread instances of off-window campaigning. However, enforcement remains weak, as political actors continue to exploit statutory and administrative ambiguities to evade accountability.

Existing policy gaps are evident along three axes:

- **Definitional Gaps:** Campaigning according to the Electoral Act and INEC guidance, is legally defined by rallies and formal activities. Digital advertising, influencer promotion, and long-term community projects remain unregulated, creating [discretionary and inconsistent enforcement](#).
- **Transparency Weaknesses:** Political finance disclosure, media procurement transparency, and in-kind donation reporting are inconsistently applied. Civil society monitoring reveals substantial unreported spending that advantages incumbents.
- **Enforcement Limits:** INEC's monitoring powers work for physical events but struggle to detect diffuse digital campaigns or surrogate activity. Platform governance and cross-border ad buys further complicate enforcement.

## CONSEQUENCES OF PREMATURE CAMPAIGNING

Premature campaigns have political, economic, and social consequences.

The socio-cultural effects of sustained early campaigning are extensive. When political actors use philanthropy, community projects, and public works as tools for continuous self-promotion, they normalise patronage and conditional reciprocity as the main pathways to political support. This undermines civic norms of issue-based voting and entrenches a culture of transactional politics. Over time, it also shifts public expectations of leadership from governance and service delivery to constant electoral positioning. These dynamics foster voter cynicism, apathy, and disengagement. In turn, monetised patronage and premature campaign visibility reinforce elite dominance within political processes and weaken public confidence in democratic institutions.

Politically, premature campaigns entrench incumbency and concentrate resources among well-funded actors, thereby raising barriers to entry for opposition candidates and outsiders. This dynamic reduces party competition and undermines party institutionalisation by privileging personalities and patrons over programmatic organisation.

Economically, resources otherwise earmarked for public goods are diverted into long-term visibility investments (media buys, billboards, project branding), increasing the cost of political participation and creating inefficiencies in public spending. Empirical monitoring of recent off-cycle races reveals heavy investment in media and community projects before the legal window, often financed opaquely.

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## EQUITY IMPLICATIONS OF PREMATURE CAMPAIGNING

Premature political campaigning amplifies inequities already embedded in Nigeria's political economy. Early and sustained visibility privileges wealthier aspirants and entrenched officeholders while marginalising under-resourced contenders, particularly women, youth, and smaller parties that depend on regulated campaign periods for visibility parity.

Women candidates, who already face systemic funding barriers, are further disadvantaged when political competition begins informally months or years before the legal window. Without equal access to campaign finance or digital reach, their messages are drowned in the constant hum of incumbent promotion. Youth candidates, often reliant on volunteer mobilisation and digital grassroots energy, are forced into early spending cycles that strain limited resources.

For smaller or regional parties, premature campaigning erodes the value of the official window as a levelling period, deepening the dominance of major parties and dampening ideological diversity. The resulting narrowing of representation distorts democracy's inclusiveness and weakens public faith in electoral fairness.

Addressing premature campaigning is therefore not only about law and enforcement but also about ensuring a truly equitable democratic participation.



## GLOBAL LESSONS ON PREMATURE CAMPAIGNING

No democracy is immune to early campaigning. Such activity may take several forms: the erection of billboards displaying a candidate's image alongside solicitations for votes or endorsements; the utilisation of public media and official resources to highlight an incumbent's achievements within an electioneering context; the commissioning of projects or initiatives with the primary aim of garnering electoral support; and the delivery of speeches, announcements, or commentaries designed to advance or undermine a candidate's prospects. Additionally, the production and dissemination of campaign materials intended to influence voter choice fall within this category. Collectively, these subtle forms of early campaigning exploit the gaps and ambiguities in legal frameworks that seek to prohibit premature political mobilisation, undermining both the spirit and the letter of electoral regulations. Democracies around the world wrestle with how to define the campaign period, police off-window spending, and regulate digital advertising and surrogate channels. Comparative strategies include:

- Legal or administrative campaign-period delimitations with reporting obligations.
- Campaign-finance transparency and public-funding offsets.
- Platform-level transparency or restrictions on paid political advertising.

Examining these responses highlights practical policy tools Nigeria could adapt and the trade-offs each approach presents.

### **India: Model Code of Conduct and Administrative Oversight**

India's [Election Commission](#) implements a Model Code of Conduct (MCC) once elections are announced. While not legally binding, the MCC restricts incumbent officials from leveraging state resources, including public programmes, for electoral advantage. Enforcement is primarily administrative, relying on notices, monitoring, and media scrutiny. The approach curbs overt misuse of official machinery but depends on discretionary compliance. As a result, the MCC provides guidance and signalling rather than strict legal accountability, and predictability for aspirants remains limited.

### **European Union: Digital Ad Transparency and Regulation**

The European Union adopted Regulation (EU) 2024/900 to enhance transparency in political advertising. The regulation requires disclosure of sponsors, targeting parameters, and ad costs. National authorities, in coordination with major digital platforms, enforce compliance through reporting, auditing, and fines. This regime targets the digital channels that enable off-window influence and improves traceability of political messaging. However, enforcement introduces [regulatory complexity](#), and some platforms have threatened withdrawal or limited service provision, which may reduce the reach of legitimate civic communication.

### **United States: Disclosure and Independent Expenditure Dynamics**

U.S. federal law requires candidate committees to submit detailed financial disclosures to the [Federal Election Commission](#). Independent expenditure channels, including Super PACs and dark-money groups, may nonetheless spend without statutory limits, provided they do not formally coordinate with candidates. This framework delivers transparency in official campaign financing but permits extensive off-window spending through parallel entities. The outcome is a persistent imbalance: long-term visibility campaigns flourish outside candidate control, demonstrating that disclosure, in the absence of expenditure limits or enforceable coordination rules, is insufficient to prevent an early-campaign escalation.

Table showing comparative approaches to premature campaigning: Policy, Enforcement, and Lessons

Country	Policy Measure	Enforcement Mechanisms	Strengths	Limitations
India	MCC pre-poll	Election Commission notices, administrative sanctions	Restraints incumbents using state resources	Soft law, discretionary
European Union	Regulation 2024/900 (TTPA) – transparency and targeting rules	National authorities + platform compliance, fines	Digital ads traceability	Compliance complexity
United States	FEC disclosure; liberal independent spending	FEC filings	High transparency	Off-window influence persists

**Key Lesson:** Comparative cases show that no single measure suffices to curb premature political campaigning. Effective reform combines clear legal definitions, robust disclosure, administrative oversight, and platform cooperation. Public funding can further level the playing field.

## **POLITICAL ECONOMY OF PREMATURE CAMPAIGNING**

Reform in this domain confronts a complex web of interests. The chief beneficiaries of the status quo are incumbents and financially dominant aspirants who leverage public resources and sustained visibility to entrench advantage. Media firms, advertising agencies, and digital influencers also profit from the continuous flow of pre-campaign spending, making them quiet but powerful stakeholders in resisting reform.

Conversely, reform allies include civic watchdogs, opposition parties, electoral observers, and sections of the public frustrated by the erosion of fairness. INEC, though institutionally motivated to restore credibility, faces resource and jurisdictional constraints that limit its enforcement reach. The political feasibility of reform, therefore, hinges on two factors: elite consensus and public pressure.

To build this consensus, reformers must frame premature campaigning not merely as a political infraction. It should be presented as a fiscal and governance risk—one that distorts budgets and erodes public trust. Aligning anti-corruption agencies, civil-society networks, and donor partners around this argument can strengthen INEC's mandate. It can also neutralise elite resistance through normative and reputational incentives.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: THE CAMPAIGN INTEGRITY AND TRANSPARENCY PACKAGE (CITP)

Nigeria should reinforce and operationalise its existing electoral framework through a targeted Campaign Integrity and Transparency Package (CITP). This pragmatic approach prioritises reform within established structures rather than pursuing entirely new or disruptive alternatives.

The following practical recommendations are proposed:

### 1. Amend the Electoral Act or issue binding INEC regulations to explicitly define 'campaign activity'

This definition should include paid digital adverts, sponsored influencer content, branded philanthropic or community projects, in-kind donations above a specified threshold, and coordinated surrogate messaging. These modalities should trigger mandatory disclosure and enable enforceable sanctions.

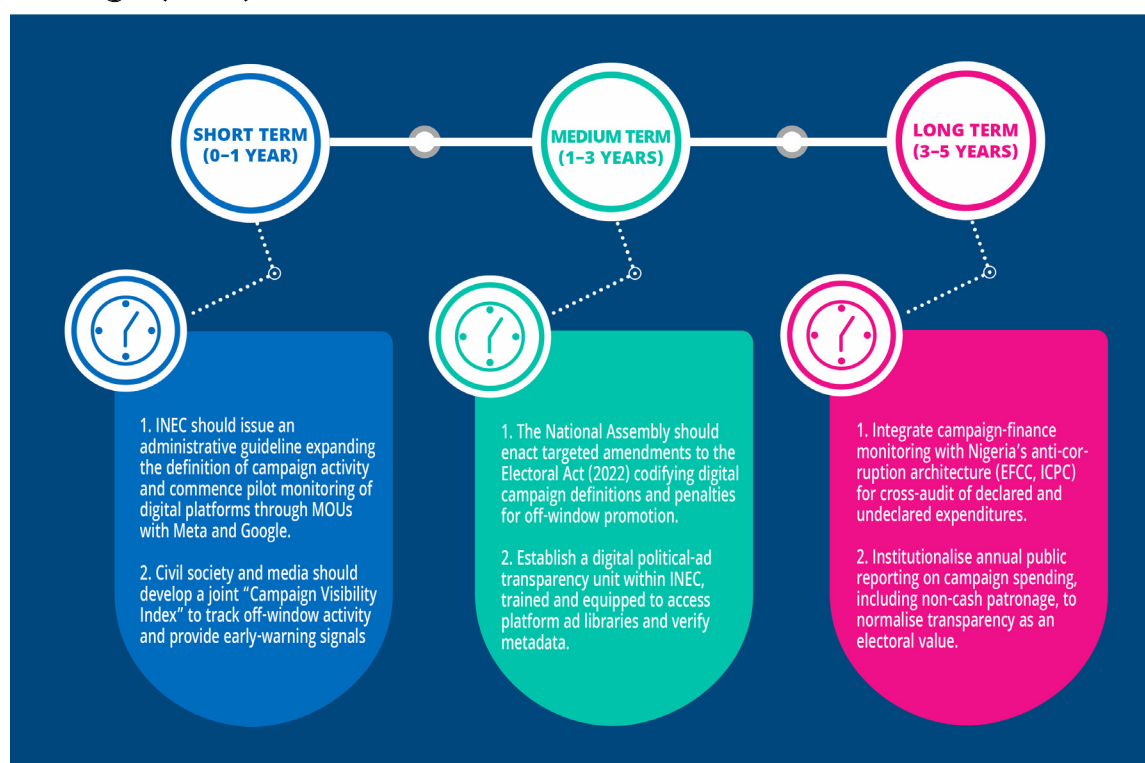
### 2. Mandate platforms serving Nigerian users to clearly label political ads and maintain publicly accessible ad libraries

Platforms should provide INEC with metadata on demand, including sponsor, spend, targeting parameters, and geographic reach. Domestic registration obligations for local intermediaries should support rapid takedowns of off-window paid promotion.

### 3. Strengthen INEC's administrative instruments, including MCC-style injunctions and rapid-response hotlines.

These measures should prohibit the use of state resources, branded public works, or official events for political visibility during the pre-poll period. Enforcement processes should allow for fast-tracked adjudication of show-cause breaches.

## Phased Implementation of the Campaign Integrity and Transparency Package (CITP)



## **CONCLUSION: POLICY IMPERATIVES FOR DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION**

Early political campaigning exploits gaps in law and enforcement, eroding fairness, accountability, and public trust. The Electoral Act (2022) and INEC's rules define the campaign window but offer little guidance on off-window advertising, branded 'philanthropy', surrogate influencers, and covert in-kind support. This omission leaves regulators poorly equipped to deter premature campaigning.

Voter turnout highlights the stakes. Of roughly 93.5 million registered voters in 2023, only 26.7 per cent participated in the presidential election. Low engagement magnifies the power of early, opaque interventions to shape outcomes.

Rather than a full legal overhaul, this brief calls for a Campaign Integrity and Transparency Package (CITP) to expand legal definitions, mandate ad metadata disclosure, and strengthen administrative enforcement.

If implemented and properly resourced, the CITP would lower entry barriers for challengers, curb opaque patronage, improve traceability of paid digital influence, and rebuild public trust—essential steps toward democratic consolidation. Acting now can help secure a fairer, more accountable electoral process; delay risks deepening the early-campaign arms race and eroding representation.

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