

LOW VOTER TURNOUT IN ELECTIONS IN NIGERIA: A CALL FOR BETTER MANAGEMENT OF ELECTIONS & GOVERNMENT COMMITMENT TO GROWING VOTER PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the lack of quantitative explications on the alarmingly low rate of voter turnout in Nigeria's elections since the late 1990s and the adverse implications on Nigeria's continuing quest for democratic consolidation. To achieve this objective, the study utilized a well-structured questionnaire as its principal method of data collection and the descriptive analytical model for its data analysis. Adopting Anthony Downs' theoretical model of rational choice, the study uncovered a number of factors for the low voter turnout and the overall attitude of the Nigerian electorate towards political election. It found that the higher the level of credibility of an election, the higher the level of voters' turnout. The study concluded that its findings could possibly help improve electoral credibility of elections in Nigeria and what recommendations for stakeholders to plan and manage elections better in order to contribute positively to Nigeria's democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Voter, Apathy, Electoral Outcome, Electoral Credibility, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

The holding of acceptable, free, and fair elections is one of the most crucial and important aspects of any democracy. According to Orji (2005), a free and fair election ensures a tangible and stable political process for the engagement of citizens to help install and maintain political

candidates to their official positions with the appropriate calibre. Dalton (2008) believes that for democracy to be sustainable and meaningful, citizen participation in the political process is crucial. However, Nigeria's democracy has been characterised by incompetent, unqualified, and inexperienced leadership. A likely reason for the situation could be voter apathy or low voting pattern especially since the late 1990s.

To be sure, Nigeria is not the only nation facing this low voting behaviour. As a result, some nations today have made voting mandatory for all citizens. Such a stance is understandable given that people have experienced political disappointment on multiple occasions. But this solution may overlook flaws in the electoral system that may explain voter apathy, missing an opportunity to correct them to improve the system. Furthermore, mandatory voting could also lead citizens compelled to vote to do so indifferently. This could also easily lead to incompetent, unqualified, and inexperienced politicians elected as leaders. It is thus still necessary that an understanding of voter apathy be undertaken with the aim of long-term improvements for the management of the electoral system to improve voter commitments and democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

According to Attaihiru Jega (2019), former chairman of the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC), Nigeria has witnessed a consistent decline in electoral voting in the past decade or so. The voting turnout for the general election was 52.2% in 1999, 69.08% in 2003, 57.49% in 2007, 53.68% in 2011, 43.65% in 2015, and 34.75% in 2019. This study would look into the contributing factors to the low voter turnout as well as the general political attitude of the Nigerian voters towards elections.

Research Objective

The objective of the research was to learn from the factors that contributed to the low voter participation in order to conduct and manage better general elections in future to increase voter participation with the aim of achieving further democratic consolidation in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study had two research questions and they were as follows:

1. What are the contributing factors to high voter turnout in elections?
2. What were the contributing factors to low voter turnout and apathy in The Nigeria?
3. What might be policy options needed to help increase voter participation in Nigeria?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study could be used as an example of how Nigeria can combat voter indifference and encourage widespread election participation, which is a sign of a healthy democracy. The study's conclusions would be useful to decision-makers and all parties involved in the Nigerian electoral process to conduct and manage better elections to generate wide voter participation. The study may challenge election researchers, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, etc. to focus more on finding ways to reduce voter indifference and promote a healthier and more meaningful form of democracy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political/Voter Apathy

Voter apathy is actually a subset of political apathy, according to scholars like Powell (1982), Ugwu (2007), and Holland (2014). Conceptually, political apathy refers to a decline in a nation's citizenry's political engagement. It is the decrease in a nation's citizens' participation in its political system (Arowolo & Aluko, 2010). Voter apathy can only be a result of the broader issue of political apathy, as political engagement involves the entire political system, including community activities, public opinions, policy formation, civic responsibility, and the election of political leaders. Given that voting is a crucial component of the political process in a democracy, the direct impact of voter apathy on democracy is not improbable.

In most developing nations, including Nigeria, Ugwu (2007) believes that people's engagement in political activities is essentially a burden. Of course, this results in political apathy. In Nigeria, political apathy has taken the following forms: (1) a refusal to register as a voter; (2) a refusal to cast a ballot; (3) an unwillingness to protest election manipulation; and (4) a refusal to provide the security forces with helpful information (Yakubu, 2012). Tan (2012) contends that a country's declining political involvement, which at first glance could seem innocuous, is the most noticeable effect of political apathy. As participation and interest in politics and government wane, governance loses its human meaning, interest and commitment, and politics is no longer done by, for, or of the people. Government ceases to be a living organism of the people and turns into a mindless machine in the absence of the expression of actual people and their concerns. What is left is an impoverished country with a broken society. Political apathy, according to Yakubu (2012), is a lack of love and devotion to a state. In fact, every divisive political trend is a manifestation of political apathy, to the point where, in this

"us" against "them" dichotomy, while one is pointing the finger at someone else as the cause of political disinterest, the other fingers are pointing at the accuser.

In Nigeria, it has been suggested that true political engagement has been steadily declining. According to Idike (2014), those who are in government are there for selfish reasons, and those who are not yet there equally want to be there for selfish reasons. Meanwhile, unselfish involvement and interest in government and politics have continued to drop. The aspect of humanity, such as caring for fellow citizens, is gradually being taken away from government, continues, and as a result, democracy is no longer of the people, by the people, and for the people (Idike, 2014).

Elections versus Voters Apathy

Elections are commonly acknowledged as a key component of democracy, democratization, and effective government (INEC and FES, 2011). Electioneering simply refers to the activities by which politically motivated actors, bodies, and organizations seek to canvass and win votes for a particular candidate of preferred choice (Okoye, 1996). Electioneering processes encompass management of all of the activities involved in campaigns and mobilizing the electorate of a nation for elections. These activities necessarily include the electoral body conducting the elections, managing the procedures to ensure that the election is carried out freely, fairly and safely for the citizens. As elections are a key way in a democracy to ensure that people's will is represented, voting is the most obvious and common form of citizen participation in a nation's democratic political system. But when voter turnout has been significantly low and declining, it obviously calls into question the credibility of election as a measurement of democracy and democratic governance. Thus the importance of free and fair elections to provide a strong foundation for a widespread participation of the general population in a particular nation.

Free and fair elections are clearly evidence of the first essential step towards democracy (Molutsi & Singh, 2003). While issues like respect for human rights, the rule of law, the existence of transparent and accountable governance to improve the lives of citizens, and other issues, are equally what configure a viable democracy, the aforementioned issues cannot be realised without a legitimate, free, and fair election that has widespread voter participation. It goes without saying that the electoral body needs to play its duty professionally during the politicking, campaigning and voting process. This duty surely includes performances to promote an election in order to prevent voter apathy or promote voter participation. Their performance needs to be stepped up further to stem the trend of increasing voter apathy in the

past few elections in Nigeria. For this reason, academics have argued that, among other factors, the technique and manner in which elections are managed is an important variable to examine the cause of low voter turnout (e.g., Rakner & Svasand, 2005). The management of elections, if done well by the electoral body, has a favourable impact on the populace, because elections that are popularly seen as being genuinely contested and properly managed tend to raise voter interest and turnout (Ballington & Masterson, 2005).

Elections with low turnout also have a negative impact on governance. In addition to jeopardizing a government's legitimacy and the people's authority to represent themselves in government, a drop in voter turnout also weakens the people's ability to hold government officials accountable. Voters' apathy typically provides the politicians with the incentives they need to act improperly while in office because there is no real threat of not being reappointed. Because of this, low turnout undermines one of elections' fundamental purposes, which is to act as a sanction to force politicians to act in the people's best interests (Sylvia et al, 2013). Apathy eliminates incentives for politicians to develop policies in the public interest because elections are designed to hold the government accountable to the people (Chinisinga, 2003).

Low Voter Turnout in Nigeria

The literature has uncovered a number of factors that have contributed to Nigeria's low voter turnout. They include election manipulation that leads voters to doubt the importance of their votes and a lack of proper protection for voters during elections as many have assumed voting can be dangerous due to a national history of violence, ballot box thefts, thugs creating difficulties and conflicts at some voting locations, etc. Danjibo and Oladeji's (2007) state that lack of trustworthy candidates who are honest is also cited as a reason for the low voter turnout. Voters would therefore prefer to abstain or sit out an election. The inability of politicians to give effective leadership is arguably the biggest factor contributing to voter indifference. As a result, confidence and any desire to comply with patriotic demands have been eroded.

Nigeria's election management and results were also due other reasons: the electoral system was seen to be structurally weak and consistently ineffective; the political actors and agencies behaved like gladiators instead of statesmen; and the populace is frequently powerless in the face of political and electoral misbehaviour. Voting does not equate to making a decision since political oligarchs make their decisions outside of the framework of electoral norms, rules, and practices. Fawole (2005) asserts that in these situations, "winners and losers have often been selected before the contest, and voters essentially go through the charade of

confirming decisions previously made." According to Fowler and Kam (2006), voters also incurred expenses to travel to the polls but did not immediately reap the rewards for doing so.

Despite the trend of low voter turnout for Nigerian elections since the late 1990s, there is still a dearth of serious scholarly attention and research on the subject. This study is a first scholarly attempt to fill this gap in the hopes that understanding on the factors contributing to voter apathy and low voter turnout would help arrest this trend or improve voter turnout for future elections.

The Rational Choice Model

The study is guided by the rational-choice theoretical model because it best captured voters as rational actors who express their preferences among the available policy options that are put before them. It provides a practical explanation of how self-interest influences the voting preferences of voters. The origins of the theory on voting behaviour can be found in Anthony Downs' 1957 book called *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. Adopting an economic perspective on voter preference, it compares how people behave during elections to how people behave when shopping (Antunes, 2010). Voters as rational economic actors express their preferences among the different policy options provided to them by parties or candidates, just like consumers acting on their purchase preference in a market. Voting is thus viewed as an instrumental act rather than a habitual behaviour. In other words, voting serves a purpose. The fundamental presumption is that casting a ballot is a deliberate, logical act in which each voter carefully considers the advantages and disadvantages of the various options before casting their ballot (Lutz & Marsh, 2007). A person will vote for the party or candidate with the plans and policies that best serve and reflect their own interests after carefully weighing the costs and advantages (Catt 1996; Andersen & Heath 2000; Downs 1957).

This rational-choice perspective emphasises the individual and his or her freedom of choice as opposed to earlier models, which placed more emphasis on socialization and social determinants. It essentially asserts that when using their right of choice in elections, voters behave in a reasonable and intentional manner (Oppenheimer, 2008). As a result, an individual's motive for voting or not and how to vote is determined by the advantages associated with that choice.

To put it in another way, people base their decisions on what they anticipate getting in return for their political support. As a result, sensible voters are likely to vote based on their own interests, which means making choices that would benefit them personally the greatest, given that the expected rewards of voting fluctuate from election to election. For instance, a

voter may be interested in immigration and health policies in one election cycle but concerned with education policy in the next. These unaligned voters, whose interests are continually shifting, play a role in deciding election winners and losers as well as the alternations in electoral outcomes (Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji & Harrison, 2014). Evans (2004), however, argues that the primary factors that influence voters' decisions towards a certain party or candidate are group benefits, financial gain, and party ideology. Still, he does not discount the point that how voters' stand to gain from campaign promises can be a factor as well to voter turnout for elections.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a descriptive survey research design. The study was carried out in the Nigerian states of Osun and Oyo in 2015. Eligible voters constitute the population of the study. A sample size of 500 respondents was selected randomly for data collection. Twenty Local Government Areas were randomly selected for the study; 10 LGAs from Osun and 10 LGAs from Oyo states respectively.

Two hundred and fifty respondents were randomly selected from Osun and Oyo state respectively. Twenty Five (25) respondents were selected from each of the 20 LGAs involved in the study. A survey questionnaire was used for data collection. The aim is to have deep knowledge of low voters turn out, its causal effect in south-western Nigeria and how to provide a solution to the menace voters' apathy to deepening democracy in Nigeria. Data collected were subjected to percentile (%) analysis.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the analysis of data elicited from the questionnaires administered and discussions of findings arising from the study. Simple percentage tools were used to discuss the findings emanated from the study.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1: Gender of the respondents

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Male	219	43.8
Female	281	56.2
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 1 shows that women made up more of the respondents in the study than men with a percentage 56.2% or 281 of the respondents from Osun and Oyo. The educational qualification of the voting respondents (Table 2) shows that 164 of the respondents representing 32.8% were secondary school holders, 145 (29.0%) were primary school holders, 105 (21.0%) were post-secondary, and 86 (17.2%) had none.

Table 2: Educational qualification of the respondents

Education Background	Frequency	Percentage
None	86	17.2
Primary	145	29.0
Secondary	164	32.8
Post-secondary	105	21.0
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 3 shows that 18 - 23 year-old respondents made up the highest percentage of all age group respondents. Meanwhile the lowest percentage of all the groups was at 5% and they were those between the ages of 36 and 41 years of age.

Table 3: Age distribution of the respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
18-23	203	40.6
24-29	73	14.6
30-35	38	7.6
36-41	25	5.0
42-47	33	6.6
48-53	49	9.8
54-61	31	6.2
62-67	48	9.6
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 4 (next page) shows the occupational status of the respondents and it indicates that the group with the most representation at 261 respondents or 52.2% were the unemployed.

Table: 4: Occupation distribution of the respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
Paid Employment	104	20.8
Self-Employment	135	27.0
Unemployed	261	52.2
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2020)

In terms of religious beliefs, Table 5 below shows 349 respondents (69.8%) were Muslims, 131 (26.2%) were Christians, and 20 (4.0%) were traditional worshippers.

Table 5: Religion distribution of the respondents

Religion	Frequency	Percentage
Islam	349	69.8
Christianity	131	26.2
Traditional	20	4.0
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 6 shows 283 respondents (56.6%) were single, 81 (16.2%) were married, 47 (9.4%) were separated, 29 (5.8%) were divorced, and 60 (12.0%) were widowed.

Table 6: Marital status distribution of the respondents

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Single	283	56.6
Married	81	16.2
Separated	47	9.4
Divorced	29	5.8
Widowed	60	12.0
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Another variable studied pertained to the number of years respondents stayed in a community to share some ideas about their commitment to issues of a community. Table 7 below shows that the most number of respondents, at 165 respondents (33.0%), had spent the lowest number of years in a community, between 1 and 10 years, while the lowest number of respondents at 36 (7.2%) had spent the highest number of years, at 31-40 years.

Table 7: Distribution of years of stay in community

Years	Frequency	Percentage
1-10	103	20.6
11-20	165	33.0
21-30	40	8.0
31-40	36	7.2
41-50	73	14.6
51 and above	83	16.6
Total	500	100.0

Source: Field Survey (2020)

In summary, the socio-economic demographics data show that this research viewed the importance of being inclusive by capturing a broad demographic background of Nigerian respondents/voters the better to (i) reflect the thinking of a broad segment of the Nigerian population and (ii) understand the background and perspective of Nigerians on elections.

High and low voter-turnout elections

Table 8: Factors for high voter turnout elections

Factors	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Good governance	251(50.2%)	200(40.0%)	16(3.2%)	33(6.6%)	500(100%)
Electoral umpire be independent	353(70.6%)	98(19.6%)	20(4.5%)	29(5.8%)	500(100%)
Vote must count	244(48.8%)	211(42.2%)	7(1.4%)	38(7.6%)	500(100%)
Confidence/trust in electoral process	199(39.8%)	285(57.0%)	12(2.4%)	4(0.8%)	500(100%)
Safety of voters	247(49.4%)	204(40.8%)	8(1.6%)	41(8.2%)	500(100%)
Credible candidates	251(50.2%)	197(39.4%)	11(2.2%)	41(8.2%)	500(100%)

Source: Field Survey (2020)

Table 8 shows respondents' perception of factors for a credible election that would encourage high voter turnout or participation. To begin with, respondent ratings for the six factors were very competitive, the lowest rating was 89.6% for "Credible Candidates" and highest rating was 96.6% for "Confidence in the Electoral Process". If the focus is on the "strongly agree" and "agree" criteria, two factors that cleared the 90 percentile rating were "Confidence in the Electoral Process" and "Vote Must Count" (at 91%). These two factors are clearly about the way elections are organized, ran and maintained to the point of ensuring that every vote cast must be correctly counted. It strongly points to the importance of a well-managed electoral process, starting with the moment the election commission takes up the responsibility of conducting an election.

Table 9 (next page) summarizes respondents' perceptions of factors responsible for low voter turnout and apathy in Nigeria. Again, ratings from respondents were competitive, although a little less compared to respondents' perceptions of factors for a high voter turnout. Of the five factors, three of them rated in the 93 percentiles strongly agree and agree that "Violence/Lack of Voter Safety", "Non-credible Candidates" and "Lack of Trust in Election Management Board" accounted for low voter turnout. The highest percentile was for "Violence" at 93.4%, followed by "Non-credible Candidates" at 93.2% and "Lack of Trust" at 93%. While the Election Commission has nothing to do with who to compete in an election, having no decision on the eligibility or credibility of candidates unless the latter engaged in activities that got them disqualified according to the election rules,, the other two factors clearly come under their role and responsibility. The lack of trust in the Election Management Board could only be due to board members' competency or fairness in their management of elections. Echoing the findings on factors for high voter turnout in elections, the data here also strongly points to the importance of a well-managed electoral process, starting with the moment the election commission takes up the responsibility of conducting an election.

Table 9: Factors for low voter-turnout elections

Factors	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Non fulfillment of electoral promise	281(56.2%)	120(24.0%)	70(14.0%)	29(5.8%)	500(100%)
Vote will not count	270(54.0%)	138(27.6%)	18(3.6%)	74(14.8)	500(100%)
Violence / Lack of voter safety	207(41.4%)	260(52.0%)	7(1.4%)	26(5.2%)	500(100%)
Non-credible candidates	333(66.6%)	133(26.6%)	6(1.2%)	28(5.6%)	500(100%)
Lack of trust in election management board	312(62.4%)	153(30.6%)	3(0.6%)	32(6.4%)	500(100%)

Source: Field Survey (2020)

What Nigerian government can do

Other than what the Election Commission (or INEC) can do to run and manage elections well to attract voters to the polls in large numbers, it is, of course, important to raise this question on the government: what can the government do to help overcome political apathy? Table 10 below presented six factors or areas that the government could work on, according to respondents, with the lowest scoring a rating of 91% (for “Voter Education”) and the highest of 98.2% (for “Demonetize electoral position”) in strongly agreeing and agreeing to the areas. While “Making Voting Compulsory” scores 94.2% for strongly agree and agree responses, it actually ranks third among the six factors, behind “Demonetize Electoral Position” and “Aggressive Mass Mobilization National Integration & Orientation” (at 95.4%). Respondents appeared not to think making voting compulsory was the most important factor or all that was needed to boost voter turnout in elections.

Table 10: The policy option needed to catalyse voter participation in Nigeria

Factors	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Making voting compulsory	263 (52.6%)	208(41.6%)	11(2.2%)	18(3.6%)	500 (100%)
Unbundle & restructure INEC	263(52.6%)	204(40.8%)	20(4.0%)	13(2.6%)	500 (100%)
Aggressive mass mobilization, national integration & orientation	376(75.2%)	101(20.2%)	3(0.6%)	20(4.0%)	500 (100%)
Good governance	364(72.8%)	100(20.0)	8(1.6)	28(5.6%)	500 (100%)
Demonetize electoral position	254(50.8%)	237(47.4%)	9(1.8%)	-	500 (100%)
Voter’s education	242 (48.4)	213 (42.6%)	1 (0.2)	44 (8.8)	500 (100%)

Source: Field Survey (2020)

CONCLUSION

By examining voter turnout levels in elections held in the Nigerian States of Osun and Oyo, the study aimed to understand the pattern of decline in voter turnout in Nigerian elections in recent elections in order to improve on voter turnout in future elections. If the current trends in lowering voter turnout are not swiftly reversed by pertinent stakeholders, there would be a serious threat to the nation's hopes of achieving a functioning democracy. The overall findings do not appear to blame on the weaknesses of political candidates and the government for the low voter turnout. They indicate that it is more important to improve on conducting and managing elections while the government also needs to take care of factors that can grow voter turnout or participation in the future, factors that are, of course, beyond the means of elections commissions. The findings also do not seem to suggest there is a factor that can bring about an instant increase in voter turnout like mandating voting by citizens. They suggest improvements in voter turnout would need time to realize, not an overnight solution.

To sum up, there is evidence of voter indifference in Nigeria, which is causing the turnout at elections to steadily fall in at least the past decade. This study shows that voters' lack of interest in and dedication to electoral procedures is a result of their lack of trust in both the electoral system, the managing of it, and the overall Nigeria's political culture, including the government for failing to attend to provide means and resources to grow political interests and participation, at least in elections. Of secondary importance, the findings of the study show, are broken campaign promises, politicians' lack of concern for the interests of the people, and Nigerians lack of faith in their political leaders.

Electioneering and democracy are in a sense both games of numbers. It is thus important that governments do everything within their power to cultivate a culture that entuses voters to play their important part in a democracy characterized as government for, by, and of the people. Just as important is that institutions, like the Election Commission, play a robust role of conducting and managing elections efficiently and professionally to help facilitate and empower citizens to vote.

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