

VOTERS' APATHY AND ELECTORAL PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES IN NIGERIA: AN EXAMINATION OF UNRESOLVED ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship that existed between voters' apathy and electoral processes and outcomes in Nigeria. The objective of the study was to determine whether any relationship existed between voters' apathy and electoral outcomes in Nigeria. The theoretical frameworks adopted for the study were the Rational Choice theory and the Political Alienation theory. The study used descriptive research method to describe characteristics of the population being studied. It aimed to accurately and systematically describe the phenomenon of voters' apathy in Nigeria's elections. Voters' apathy means a general decline in citizen's involvement in the political activities of a particular country. Causes of voters' apathy according to this study included the belief by voters that all political candidates are the same in deceit, lack of political accountability by the politicians, failed promises of political leaders, corruption, violence, lack of proper mobilization of the electorates for election, lack of credible leaders, security challenges during election and lack of faith in the electoral umpire by the voters. The effect of voters' apathy was such that it could sharply reduce the number of people whose voices are heard in an election. It was concluded from the study that government should restore the confidence of the voters during elections by ensuring that their votes actually counted. Finally, it was recommended among others that voters' education be aggressively pursued along with the de-monetization of the voting process in Nigeria. The study would be a further contribution to de-escalate the despicable incident of voters' apathy in Nigeria.

Introduction:

In modern democracy, voting represents a major form of electoral behaviour. Electoral behaviour can be seen as a collection of attitudes, values, beliefs and norms in which people of a particular society have towards political processes across national, international and local levels. Electoral behaviour can be seen as a pattern of political participation that takes place in democratic societies where people follow certain laid down values, principles and beliefs about how their leaders are chosen. This set of principles, values and beliefs are mostly by individual's age, gender, income, ethnicity, religion, the roles played by the

law courts, employment status of the voters, residence, how independent the electoral empire is, level of information available to the voters, his level of education and exposure, etc.

Voting is the pedestal of the political pyramid in a democracy and serves as a basis for legitimizing democratic rule (Edet, 2018). Voting is a process of aggregating individual preference into collective decision during election. Voting involves showing one's choice of candidate or political party at an election.

Verba, Nie and Kim (1978) say that voting is the most common and important activity in a democracy. The act of voting is

seen as a person's expression of electoral behaviour. But voting does not take place every time. It takes place only on days and time stipulated by law. Such days and time are well known in advance to the voters so that they can decide, based on information available to them, who to vote for or choose as their leaders.

Voters' turnout is one of the crucial indicators of how citizens participate in the governance of their country. Higher voter's turnout is symptomatic of their support to the political system while lower turnout is usually associated with voter's apathy and mistrust of the political process (Solijonov, 2016). Since 1999, Nigeria's electoral processes seem to lack credibility, transparency, acceptability and have highly controversial outcome. This is also because most electoral outcomes (results) are always settled in the law courts before the respective candidates would painfully accept the result.

Obviously, from 1999 through 2023 general election, Nigeria tends to witness steady decline in voter's turnout (Akinyemi, 2019). This could be attributed to the growing frustration of the electorates over perceived electoral malpractices and crude maneuvering of electoral process in Nigeria. Therefore, we cannot overemphasize that democracy that is founded on the ultimate will of the people is doomed. Democracy seems to be a failed process when citizens are unconcerned about who emerges their leader in an election (Adekoyo, 2019). This simply means that low turnout occasioned by voter's apathy does not only expose the fractured relationship between government and citizens but also demonstrates the failure of governance. This paper therefore seeks to examine voter's apathy and its

impact on the democratization project in Nigeria.

Conceptual Clarification:

Concepts such as voter's apathy, electoral process have acquired huge relevance in this work because of their implications for democracy. Voter's apathy has aroused the thought of scholar's overtime because of its increasing negative impact on democracies across the globe. Apathy comes from the ancient Greek word, *apathies*, which means "Lack of feeling". In politics, ancient Athenian praised attentive citizens and condemned the apathetic ones (Bennett, 2001).

Voter's apathy is seen as the indifference citizens have towards political activities that affect or could affect their lives. Fagunwa (2015) perceives voter's apathy as "deficient response, indifference and nonchalance in electioneering" voter's apathy is a situation where the eligible voters are unwilling and deliberately avoid participating in election.

Voter's apathy signifies a general decline in citizen's involvement in the political activities of a particular country. It is a decline in voter's participation in elections. Voter's apathy also refers to a lack of interest on the part of voters in participating in the political process. This involves detachment and dispassion among voters for reasons best known to them. Election offers the citizens an opportunity to have a say in how they want to be governed in a state. However, voter's apathy can sharply reduce the number of people whose voices are heard in an election. Voter's apathy is the lack of interest displayed by citizens of any country with regard to voting in elections. Political apathy is more embracing because it is the indifference on the part of citizens

with regard to his/her attitude towards political activities such as elections, public opinions, civic responsibility, etc. Once a person cultivates lackluster disposition towards political processes, activities or affairs it is likely to culminate in political apathy about politics in general and voting in particular. In most cases, people support their government because they feel they have benefited from government policies and activities but become apathetic when they feel they have gained little or nothing from the government.

Theoretical Framework

This work uses the Rational Choice theory to explicate on the concept of voter's apathy in electoral process in Nigeria. The rational choice theory originated in the eighteenth century and can be traced back to the Scottish political economist, Adam Smith. Rational Choice theory states that individuals use rational calculations to make rational choices and achieve outcomes that are aligned with their own personal objectives. These results are also associated with maximizing an individual's self-interest. Using rational choice theory is expected to result in outcomes that provide people with the greatest benefit and satisfaction, given the limited option they have available.

Rational choice theory is based on the assumption that individuals choose a course of action that is most in line with their personal preferences. The theory holds that individuals are in control of their decisions. They don't make choices because of unconscious drives, tradition or environmental influences rather they use rational considerations to weigh consequences and potential benefits. The theory further posits that human beings are rational, self-interested creatures that make decisions based on a reasoned weighing of

potential costs and benefits. By extension, the study postulates that an individual will perform cost benefit analysis to determine whether an option is right for them or not.

The relevance of this theory to this work is that voters are assumed to be rational human beings who make rational choices to achieve political outcomes that align with their own objectives. In other words, voters choose or vote for a candidate they believe will provide people with the greatest benefit and satisfaction that will enhance their individual and collective well-being in the society. The voters believe that whoever they vote for or choose as their leader is based on rational choice that is capable of maximizing their welfare in the society. The belief also is that before they make a choice or vote for candidate as their leader, they must have weighed their options closely, and the consequences and potential benefits of their choice.

According to Edet (2018), voters are seen as rational decision makers. Voters behave rationally when voting because they balance the cost of voting against its benefits. They tend to choose candidates whom they believe as being of benefit to them and stand a reasonable chance of winning. Here, the electorates take their voting preference on the establishment of a judgment of how the incumbent government has performed in enhancing the welfare of the people, and the odds that the contrasting camp could accomplish. It should be noted however, that most of the citizens lack adequate knowledge and information that could make them take rational decisions about voting during elections. Only negligible number of voters, usually those with good education and high level of political savvy seem to understand political and electoral issues, discussions, debates and voting patterns.

Types of political culture

Almond and Verba (1963) classify political culture into the following:

1. **Parochial political culture:** This exists where individuals hardly relate to politics and government or such relationship is uncertain and ambiguous. Here, majority of the populace are illiterates, poor and unexposed, unenlightened, and have little knowledge of the political system beyond their localities. Their orientations focus more on outcomes from their ethnic groupings with less expectation from outside their ethnic groupings.
2. **Subject political culture:** Here, the citizens have a passive relationship towards the political system. Their orientation toward the political system is high in terms of outputs dimension but very low in relationship to the input dimensions (Asua, 2018). While the citizen is aware of the outputs of government but he or she plays no part in the input process.
3. **Participant political culture:** The citizens actively participate in the political process. It is characterized by citizen's awareness of both inputs and outputs processes of government and the awareness is relatively high.

Finer (1975) also identified three types of political culture, namely:

- a. **Mature or High Political culture:** According to Finer, this exists when the political formula by which rulers claim the right to govern is generally

accepted and obeyed, when the structures and procedures that make up the political system are recognized as authoritative. Government institutions and structures are highly developed and accepted as legitimate. The processes and procedures of transferring power from one government to another are known by the people and are officially approved by the authorities.

- b. **Developed political culture:** Here, civil structures and institutions are well developed, governmental structures are well rooted and the public is proportionately wide and well organized with powerful associations. But the legitimacy of the processes or procedures for transferring political power and who constitute sovereignty are in dispute (Udokang, 2006).
- c. **Low and minimal political culture:** Here, the public is relatively narrow, passive, inarticulate and weakly organized. Governmental powers are considered illegitimate and not well rooted, disputed and frequently challenged public opinion is weak and divided, or in a state of constant flux. E.g Nigeria's Interim National Government (ING) in 1993.

All these political cultures exist in different societies with different measures and orientations. No modern society has a single political culture. Common history, geographical location, shared belief, life situations, development experience and personality formations, in a society are the means to determine the dimensions of political culture.

Forms of political Apathy

Political apathy is a generic term and embraces voter's apathy. Voter's apathy is a part of political apathy. What applies to political apathy can apply mutatis mutandis to voter's apathy. This, Tom (2018) notes the following as forms of political apathy which apply to voter's apathy.

- i. **Refusal to register:** Voter's registration is an important aspect of any election. It is a precondition for voting in an election. However, some citizens see voter's registration as a waste of time as such people give excuses to ignore the exercise.
- ii. **Refusal to belong to a political party:** People who refuse to join political parties are apathetic towards the system as they can neither aspire nor emerge as a candidate of any political party during elections.
- iii. **Refusal to fight or protest against rigging and other electoral malpractices:** Electoral malpractices are situations in which electorate and electoral bodies falsify and manipulate the electoral process, especially voting in order to ensure that an unpopular candidate wins the election which could be in form of ballot snatching, multiple voting, underage voting, etc. which facilitate wrong people emerging as leaders.
- iv. **Refusal to vote:** This is a situation whereby the total number of votes cast is very low compared to the total number of registered voters. This is the most outstanding form of apathy where many eligible voters purposely refuse to vote.

- v. **Refusal to participate in electoral process:** This is the refusal to participate in processes or series of events or activities such as debates, seminars, campaigns, that ultimately culminate in elections or choosing the candidate(s) of one's conviction to emerge as a leader(s).

Causes of Voter's apathy

Voter's apathy can result from the fact that most people have poor knowledge or understanding of government and politics. Others fail to understand the importance of their votes in the political system. Many factors cause voter's apathy. Some of these causes include:

1. **Violence during elections:** According to Odigbo and Okafor (2019), due to the high incident of violence before, during and after elections in Nigeria, most people shy away from elections for the safety of their lives and property. It is common knowledge to see some politicians arming thugs (most of them unemployed youths) to fight their political opponents. Also, the violence perpetrated during campaigns usually discredits the integrity of most political parties and their candidates during elections and this further fans the ember of political apathy.
2. **Rigging of Elections:** This stands out as one of the major reasons for voting apathy in Nigeria. For some time now, elections in Nigeria have been plagued with rigging and malpractices as such most Nigerians do not believe in electoral system of Nigeria. The idea is that their votes do not count. The belief also is that

voting is a waste of their votes. This is one of the most prominent reasons why a lot of Nigerians always refuse to turn out for voter's registration and for actual voting during elections. They always decide to stay at home because of the belief that their votes will have no impact on electoral outcome.

3. **Poor Governance:** Poor governance makes a lot of people to lose faith in the electoral process of voting for any candidate during election. This is even made worse when the performance of both elected and appointed people in government is below average. The above scenario heightens voting apathy in the political system.
4. **Failed Electoral Promises:** Some voters believe that all politicians are the same in terms of deceit and 'political ojoro'. All politicians are believed to be political 'maradona' who deceive the electorates to score their imaginary goals that serve their personal interest and not that of the voters. This usually breeds frustration and alienate voters which obviously results in voter's apathy.
5. **Negative media coverage of election:** Some people might be discouraged from voting by the political scandals the media report on. Nigerian media often paint politics as inherently dirty and hence discourage people from having anything to do with it. This usually discourages most people from participating in politics and in voting as these results in voting apathy.

6. **Weak security measures during Elections:** A lot of Nigerians believe that their votes are not secured during elections. This flows from the long history of election rigging, ballot boxes snatching, disruption of voting process by thugs, assassination, fighting, kidnapping, abduction, from the first Republic till the 2023 general elections. Such conditions usually discourage a lot of people from voting during election.
7. **Dislike for politicians:** Some Nigerians refuse to vote during election because they don't like any of the political candidates standing for the election. This usually results in voting apathy.
8. **Chaos in the political system:** The Nigeria's political system is full of confusion and disorderliness occasioned by politician's selfishness, greediness and hypocritical tendencies. Politicians perpetrate political oppression, victimization, political infighting, blackmail, conflicts, scandals, etc. Such conditions discourage many people from voting.

Voter's apathy is a phenomenon where individuals who have the right to vote in political elections choose not to do so for a variety of reasons.

Consequences of voter's apathy in the Nigerian political system

The most common voter's apathy definition is a sense that an individual's vote is meaningless or that there is no point in participating in an election or political

activities. Voter's apathy can have far-reaching impacts or consequences on politics if a large percentage of eligible voters are indifferent, dispassionate and unengaged in voting at the local, state or federal elections. The following are some of the consequences of voter's apathy in any election.

1. **Unpopular leaders are elected:** When a large number of eligible voters refuse to go out and vote during elections, they are giving way for few voters to go out and elect unpopular leaders who do not enjoy popularity among the electorates. Such type of winning does not give the winner confidence that (s)he is a popular representative of the people.
2. **Elections are not truly representative:** The representative of the people must be elected by the majority of eligible voters in a well conducted free and fair election (Obiora, 2008). The people must be given the opportunity to make choices among contending candidates so that when the winner emerges, (s)he becomes a true representative of the people.

Obiora (2008) points out clearly thus:

Democracy allows the views of all to be heard but the wish of the majority to be implemented. This is because it is the government of the majority. The minority will have their say, but the majority will have their way. Indeed, democracy is a system of government in which decisions are arrived at by securing the agreement of the majority of the participants.

This implies that the will of the majority shall prevail over that of the minority. But with voter's apathy, the reverse becomes the case

in point when citizens fail to elect a popular candidate because of voter's apathy (Idike, 2014). This makes most electoral outcome unpopular and hence unacceptable.

3. **Agitation/Political instability:** Voter's apathy leads to undue agitation and glamour for a better political system and this always opens up the system for insecurity occasioned by lack of faith in the political system. This may result in high rate of kidnapping, killings and terrorism, armed gangs, bandit attacks or even self-determination agitators. For instance, when indigenes of Biafra (IPOB) in the process of their agitation for self-determination declared non-participation of their people in 2019 general election, it culminated in high level voter's apathy in that region of the country and affected electoral outcome, even if in a mild way.
4. **Voter's Apathy hinders good governance and decision making:** Most political leaders that emerge discriminate against certain areas in appointments and siting of projects because (s)he did not get votes from such areas. This could have been because of voter's apathy from people of that area either because they didn't like the candidate or the political party or because they lack faith in the government of the day. This obviously results in bad governance and poor decision making by the leaders.
5. **Bad image abroad:** The technological innovations and the use of social media in sharing and receiving information have compressed the world into a global village where there is a high level of voter's apathy in an

election, the leaders that emerge from such election(s) may be perceived by the outside world as unpopular, unacceptable by the majority of the people and hence not credible enough to lead the people.

6. High voter's apathy is a vote of no confidence on the political representatives as most citizens feel there is little or nothing they gain from wasting time, resources and energy voting for someone who might not be of any benefit to them (the voters) but only to himself, family and cronies.
7. Increased voter's apathy can dilute or compromise good governance indices such as checks and balances, accountability, rule of law, etc. This leads to bad governance. Voter's apathy throws up the emergence of greedy politicians that may not have the interest of the people at heart.

Nature and Dimension of Voter's Apathy in Nigeria

There is huge scholarly evidence that voter's apathy poses threat and danger to the survival of any democracy. Moliki and Dauda (2014) opine that voter's apathy is a danger ravaging many countries of the world and does not appear to receive adequate attention by world leaders. Voter apathy has

been with us since the introduction of electoral principles in Nigeria in 1922 but got worse when Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999. A historical trajectory on voting trends in the level of voter's turnout during the country's general election, to start with, the 1959 general elections symbolized an important milestone in Nigeria's electoral history.

This is because that was the year the first general elections were held on December 12, 1959 preparatory to the attainment of political independence on October 1, 1960. A total of 9,043,404 voters were registered, of which 7,189,797 (75%) voted (Ushie, 2005). This turnout, which was regarded as impressive has been explained as a result of heightened social and political mobilization of voters for this all-important seminal election. However, since the 1959 general elections, voters' turnout in subsequent general elections have been less impressive. For example, all stages of the 1979 general elections were characterized by low voters' turnout, with 34 percent of voter's voting in the 1979 presidential election (Yusufu, 2012). Although there was a marginal increase in the 1983 elections, the turnout was still very low such that in the presidential elections, for example, only 25,430,096 out of the 65,304,818 registered voters cast their votes, which amounted to 38% of votes.

Summary of Voters' Turnout in Nigeria's general elections (1959-2019)

Elections	Registered voters	Turnout	Percent
1959 General Elections	9,043,404	7,189,797	75.50
1979 Presidential Elections	48,633,782	16,846,633	34.00
1979 Senate Elections	48,633,782	12,532,195	25.80
1979 Reprs Elections	48,633,782	14,941,782	30.70
1983 Presidential Election	65,304,818	25,430,096	38.00

1983 Senate Election	65,304,818	n.a	n.a
1983 Reprs Election	65,304,818	n.a	n.a
1992 Senate Election	36,923,571	14,716,074	37.00
1992 Reprs Election	36,923,571	15,329,670	41.00
1993 Presidential Election	37,826,460	14,321,963	37.00
1999 Presidential Election	57,838,945	30,280,052	52.30
1999 Senate Election	57,838,945	24,386,427	42.11
1999 Reprs Election	57,838,945	23,573,407	40.70
2003 Presidential Election	60,823,022	42,018,738	69.10
2003 Senate Election	60,823,022	29,995,171	49.30
2003 Reprs Election	60,823,022	30,386,270	50.00
2007 General Election	61,566,648	35,419,262	57.4
2011 General Election	75,528,040	39,409,484	53.7
2015 General Election	64,422,005	29,432,083	43.6
2019 General Election	84,344,107	28,614,190	34.75

Source: Omotala and Aiyedogbon (2012); INEC (2019); The News Agency of Nigeria (2019).

As at February 2019, Nigeria's population reached 200,963,599 and the total registered voters increased by 14 million people through the INEC continuous voter's registration, a total number of 84,004,084 eligible voters registered for the 2019 general elections but only 28,614,190 people willingly voted in the election representing about 34.75 percent voter turnout. The total votes cast in 2019 general elections were one of the lowest ever witnessed since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. The 2023 general elections came with even a greater shock! Out of the total 93.47 million registered voters, only 24.9 million persons voted in the just concluded Presidential and national assembly elections. This represents a meagre 26.72 percent voter's turnout, the lowest since the return to democracy in 1999 (Dataphite.com, 2023).

The virtues of voter apathy

The argument is that voter's apathy is not all that bad after all. It is not all vices and no virtues. The belief is that voter's apathy

has its own virtues or benefits to the political system.

In their book, **Voting**, Berelson, Lazarsfield, and McPhee (1954) claim that political apathy is good for democracy. They go ahead to ask "How could" a mass democracy work, if all the people were deeply involved in politics? Lack of interest by some people in the political system is not without its benefits to the system.

Huntington (1965) posits that the effective operation of any democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and non-involvement on the part of some individuals and groups. Election apathy on the face-value may look undemocratic, unhealthy and sabotaging "but it had also been one of the factors which has enabled democracy to function effectively. Krauthammer (1990), in Time magazine, calls low turnout in election "a leading indicator of contentment", reminding us of Eulau (1956) argument that apathy indicates the "politics of happiness". According to Eulau (1956), non-voting makes

“more room for the things that really count: science, art, religion, family and play”.

Dye and Zeigler (1993) argue that democracy is government 'by the people; but the survival of democracy rests on the shoulders of elites. This is the irony of democracy: Elites must govern wisely if government 'by the people' is to survive”. But because the “masses are authoritarian, intolerant, anti-intellectual, nativistic, alienated, hateful and violent”, an important responsibility that falls to the “enlightened elite” is to protect democracy by formulating policies that best serves the interest of everybody.

Some Unresolved Issues

The following are some issues that must be tackled headlong if voter’s apathy is to be mitigated in Nigeria:

1. Hunger in the land. There is so much hunger in the land to the extent that the poor and wretched citizens can be given a pittance to get their votes. Besides, most of the citizens sell their voter’s cards to get money to feed. As long as hunger and poverty in the country are not adequately addressed, we should forget about voter’s apathy.
2. Some people refuse to vote in election because the outcome of the election will only favour few political elites and the cronies to the detriment of the masses. For instance, political appointments, employment opportunities, contract awards always go to the political elites and the political king makers with little or nothing left for the people.
3. Another unresolved issue is that of security challenges before, during and after elections. This has

culminated in killing, maiming, kidnapping and threat to life of prospective voters and hence voter’s apathy.

4. Infrastructural deficits have made a lot of voters to refuse to go out and vote during elections. They have forgotten about government incessant promise and fail syndrome and have resign their fate to the Almighty. This category of people sees no reason they should go out and vote a government that cannot keep to her promises.
5. Election results should be made to reflect the wishes of the people or we should forget about large turnout during elections. Many Nigerians are apathetic to go out and vote during elections because of the belief that their votes will not count and that the outcome will reflect the true wishes of the electorates.
6. Winner-take-it all syndrome has made a lot of people lose faith in the political system. Elections in Nigeria are seen as a warfare and whosoever wins goes with all the spoils of war and may even use his privileged position to threaten, marginalize and intimidate the opposition into submission or to join the winning party or the party in power.

Conclusion

This paper examined voter apathy in Nigeria's election. The paper underscored the importance of citizen’s participation in elections. Low voters' turnout in elections has the effects of producing poor leadership, bad governance, unguarded agitation and political instability. The causes of voter's apathy were identified to include: political

violence, insincerity on the part of INEC officials, low mobilization of voters by political parties and civil society organizations for elections, dislike for some politicians or political parties and loss of trust or faith in the government of the day, among others.

Recommendations

The study made the following recommendations to stem the tide of voter apathy in the Nigeria's electoral system:

1. Government should provide adequate security for voters before, during and after elections to instill confidence in the voters to go out and cast their votes during elections.
2. Most citizens refuse to go out and vote during elections or participate in any political activity because they have lost faith in our political leadership. Therefore, government should meet the needs of the people by providing employment opportunities, good business environment, social welfare, infrastructure to boost the confidence of the electorates in the government of the day.
3. Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), such as INEC should be firm but fair in the way it conducts elections in the country to restore the confidence of the people in the electoral body. This calls for non-partisanship, unwholesomeness, unethical conducts and unfairness on the part of INEC officials in the conduct of elections.
4. Voters should be free to cast their votes for any candidates of their choice without undue intimidation and threat from the government in
5. Poverty and lack of economic welfare owing to failed promises by politicians have been identified to be one of root causes of voter's apathy. Therefore, our political leadership should formulate policies that reduce the rate of poverty in the country and implement other welfare policies. This will raise the hope of the citizens to vote in elections to produce leaders of their choice.
6. Finally, adequate voter's education, political mobilization and awareness creation are necessary to call attention of the people on the need to exercise their civic responsibilities. This will involve the activities of political parties, civil society organizations, National Orientation Agency (NOA) and the mass media.

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