

Voters-Registration Apathy and Credibility of the Nigerian Electoral System

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Abstract

The credibility of any electoral system begins with an assessment of the measure of confidence which the electorate reposes on such a system. Thus, given a situation where a large spectrum of the society believes that votes do not count, then, credibility turns a front-burner issue that must be interrogated. This study examined the credibility of the current electoral process in Nigeria against the background of the loss of confidence in the system and the resultant lukewarm attitude to the just concluded voter registration exercise in the southern and eastern parts of the country. Data obtained from secondary sources comprising books, journals, periodicals, magazines, newspapers and the internet, etc., were analyzed by means of content analysis. Results revealed that the electoral system in Nigeria is far from being credible as most potential voters in the southeastern states have lost confidence in the system, thus, ignoring the just concluded voter registration exercise.

Keywords: *Voter- registration, Apathy, Credibility, Electoral system, Frontrunner.*

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Background to the Study

There is no doubt that election in democracies play the vital role of ensuring representation of popular choice or candidacy which helps in securing the legitimacy of the political system. It is against this background that Mozaffar (2002) expressed the view that, “credible competitive elections have become a necessary, albeit sufficient, source of behavioral, if not attitudinal, legitimacy in Africa's emerging democracies”. Corroborating this strand of thought is the assertion by Dalton (1988), that, “citizen involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful”. While taking these views seriously, it needs to be stressed also that, there is at the same time, global evidence of apathy, lack of psychological involvement in public affairs, emotional detachment from civil obligations, and abstention from political activity. Voter apathy has emerged as a major problem in mature and emerging democracies, settled and volatile societies, large and thriving economies, as well as small and troubled ones, among youth, women and other marginalized groups as much as among mainstream dominant interests.

The low voters' turnout in Nigeria since 2007 is an indication that Nigerians have greatly become apathetic towards elections as evidenced figures floated by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC). INEC (2015) statistics indicate voter turnout in the country as follows;

52.2% in 1999, 69.08% in 2003, 57.49% in 2007, 53.68% in 2011 and 43.65% in 2015.

It is an undisputable fact that if the masses of a particular country refuse to fulfil their electoral obligations, then there is a disconnect between the masses and government. Thus, a decline in voter turnout (which is often the result of voter-registration apathy) is nothing but a reflection of the failing authenticity of democracy. Hence, Wallenburg (2002), argues that “low voters turnout decreases the legitimacy of democracy” which has the electoral process as the pivot. As a matter of fact, the international institute for democracy and Electoral Assistance once positioned that, “voters turnout has always been below 40% of the general registered voters” (IDEA, 2006). However, if a country records a major low turnout of voters in an election, it brings forth the question of the legitimacy of the government which emerges from such an election.

Statement of the Research Problem

Over the years, Nigeria's electoral process has been bedevilled by several untoward tendencies which range from massive frauds, rigging, intimidation of both opponents and potential voters, state interference, lack of ideological conviction of the ruling class, lack of continuity, violence, etc. to mention but a few. This results in apathy on the part of the electorate which translates to low voter turnout during elections. INEC (2015), reveals that “despite the electrifying effect of the Nigerian 2015 general elections, it was discovered that less than half of the registered voters, 42.76% officially voted”. What implication does this (tendency) apathy portend for the credibility of the electoral process in the current study?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the significance of voters-registration apathy to the credibility of the Nigerian electoral process. The specific objectives include to:

- a) Ascertain the effect of voters-registration apathy on voter turnout during elections in Nigeria.
- b) Assess the implications of low voters turnout for the nation's democracy.

Research Questions

Two questions will be answered in this study they include:

- a) What is the effect of voters-registration apathy on voter turnout during elections on Nigeria?
- b) How does low voters turnout affect Nigeria's democracy

Literature Review

Concepts

Voters' apathy: There are various perceptions of voter apathy. Yakubu (2012) believes that “voter apathy is the indifference on the part of the electorate as regards their attitude towards electoral processes such as voting”. It refers to the absence of interest in or concern about the electoral process. Cloud (2010), maintains that “voter apathy occurs when eligible voters do not vote in public elections. Such voter apathy often leads to low voter turnout. Hence, Crewe, Fox & Alt (1992), see the word 'apathy' as “denoting a lack of feeling of personal responsibility, passivity and indifference for political affairs”. Voters apathy goes beyond just lack of interest or passivity of voters towards voting, it is the insensitivity of voters to electoral processes, particularly voting caused by disenchantment arising from dissatisfaction with the political system and sometimes, ignorance and lack of proper education.

Credibility: The first feature of a credible election is that it must have the reflection of the will of the people. The second feature is that it must be participated by all qualified political parties. Thirdly, the electoral processes must be trusted by the citizens. Building the public trust in the election process is of utmost importance to elections management bodies around the world. The credibility of an election largely depends on the actual and perceived integrity of the electoral process. More specifically, if citizens believe the electoral process is defective, dishonest, or less than free and fair, they may not accept the outcome.

According to OPPD (2011), gubernatorial election (2014) election is one of the key components in ensuring democracy because they, “enhance citizen participation in government, ensure government accountability and encourage political competition”. This is because, “the free, fair and credible election is one of the basic and crucial elements of democratic government and governance” Musfin (2008); Huntington (1993).

Electoral System: An electoral system is a set of rules which determine how elections and referendum are conducted and how their results are determined. Certain electoral systems such as mixed systems, attempt to combine the benefits of non-proportional and proportional systems. According to Farrell, (1997, 2001), “we can think of electoral systems as being made

up of a set of choices which include the electoral formula, the district magnitude, ballot structure, and electoral thresholds” Norris(2004) is of the opinion that “the impact of electoral systems on democratic transition and consolidation may be tempered by other cultural factors” indeed, she identified two theoretical traditions in the literature on democratization – rational choice institutionalism and cultural modernization.

Electoral system is generally viewed as the method by which voters make a choice between different options. Elections are used to choose heads of State, heads of governments, and members of the legislature, as well as a variety of other offices in political democracies. For Chief Executives, election could be via direct or indirect means. In a direct election, voters cast ballots directly for a set of eligible candidates. Political systems which used direct elections of the President include France, Russia, and Argentina. When the system involves indirect election, a group of electors are selected that would elect the President. The U.S is a typical example where the President is elected by indirect method. In this method, voters (or state legislatures) select Presidential electors, who then comprise an Electoral College.

It is important to underscore the point that electoral systems do not exist in a vacuum. “Electoral effects are not shaped by electoral systems alone but are also heavily contingent upon other structures and institutions” (Reynolds, Reilleg and Ellis, 2005., Horowitz, 2003; Cox, 1997).

Empirical Literature

Studies (past and current) related to this issue of discourse in this study are hereby presented in a tabular form as follows.

Table 1.

Names of Researcher(s). Study title year	Geographical and Content Scope Covered.	Data Sources and Analytical Tools.	Findings/ Recommendations/ Conclusions.
Agaigbe (2015) Voter apathy and voter turnout in the 2015 General Elections: The Benue State Experience	Benue State of Nigeria: voter Apathy in 3 Local Government areas in the states of North east senatorial Zone.	Primary data obtained by interviews of participants in the 3 local government areas during the 2015 general elections.	Findings reveal that there are pre-conceived notions among many voters that, the outcome of most elections are predetermined. Consequently, they believe their votes will not count. There is also the fear of violence during elections. There was also the culture of imposing candidates on the electorate without popular appeal. Recommendations were made in the paper.
Uchemna, Idika & Okeke (2013). Voter Apathy and Revival of Genuine Political Participation in Nigeria.	Nigeria: The study interrogated the causes of voter apathy.	It made use of primary data obtained from Questionnaires distributed among 1,120 respondents whose mean age was 24.89, SD=1.70.	Result revealed that there exists a strong relationship between voters' age, occupation, gender and voting in general (p = 000). The age of voters, the occupation and gender are all significantly related to the voters' apathy.
Olisadum & Annulika (2018). Electronic voting and credible election in Nigeria. A story of Owerri Senatorial Zone	Nigeria: Owerri Senatorial Zone. Electronic voting and ballot paper voting.	It was a survey which used primary data obtained by using structured questionnaire to elicit information from respondents.	The study found that e-voting will reduce incidences of electoral fraud especially as regards voting and counting of voters. It recommended the use of evoting.
Ayo, Adebisi and Sofoluwe (n.d). Curbing Political Violence in Nigeria: The role of security Personals.	Nigeria: The paper reviewed the e-registration exercise by INEC with a view to using it as a springboard for e-voting implementation in Nigeria.	The study employed a two-proned research approach i.e. explanatory and empirical. These include: 1. A survey of relevant literature conducted to obtain the state of the art of e-voting implementation and associated snags, and 2. To design an integrated voting system that is interoperated based on extensible Markup Language(XML) and Extensible Style sheet Language(XSL) to cater for the various classes voting devices	Consequent upon its findings, the paper recommended an integral voting system which incorporates an Electronic Voting Machine (EVM), internet voting (i-voting) and mobile voting (m-voting) to enhance participatory democratic practices.

Theoretical Framework

This study borders on the issue of the electoral process; hence the systems theory is adopted as our theoretical framework. In this vein, Parsons (1968:453) maintains that follow:

Something consisting of a set (finite or infinite) of entities among which set of relation is specified, so that deductions are possible from relations to others to the behavior or the history of the system.

System analysis bases its position on the idea that objects within a group are in some way related to one another and in turn, interact with one another on the basis of certain identifiable process. The approach allows one to see the subject in such a way that each part of the political canvas does not stand alone but is related to each other part. System theory aids in determining a political system's capacity for ensuring the rules are followed. This is the duty of election managers. Electoral actives are interrelated and they have consequences for the system and environment. To get a credible election, laws regulating activities are spelt out in the electoral laws. The electoral umpire and other agencies in charge of administering these regulators are to maintain the equilibrium, and the output of credible election depends on the level of acceptance. Lapses from these agencies are currently being remedied by the judiciary which system to how together.

Research Methodology

This study is a quantitative research data obtained from secondary materials are synthesized by means of content analysis. The analysis is in the following sequence:

Research Question One (1): What is the effect of voter registration apathy on voter turnout during elections in Nigeria?

Going by the reports on the Nigerian Tribune (2015), “one issue that did not escape the attention of most observers both international and local, was the extreme level of apathy Nigerian potential electorates expressed freely during the course of the elections”. Despite the overwhelming effect of the presidential election as following the announcement of the results of the result in the evening of Tuesday 31st march, 2015, there were several spontaneous jubilations across the country yet, it is most fundamental to espouse that in the election, less than half of the registered voters, 42.76%, officially voted (Dsmoplinsaction, 2015). The implication is that a great chunk of Nigerian potential electorate has totally lost confidence on the importance of electoral process in the country. Reasons have been which include to the fact that most politicians fail to fulfill their promises when they get in to office. As a matter of fact, a pre-election poll carried out by Gallup word polling (GWP) revealed that, “only 13% of Nigerians had confidence in the honesty of elections” (Loschky 2015). So much money was known to have been spent during the 2015 elections. At a point in time, many analysts contended that the election campaigns were all about money context between two rival wings derived of any ideological conviction whatsoever. It is therefore ironical that most potential electorates in Nigeria felt disenchanted with the voting as the elections witnessed a major decline in voters' turnout in the history of Nigeria. A study by Uchenna, Okeke and Idike

(2013) on voters Apathy and revival of genuine political participation in Nigeria as indicated on their paper, revealed that there exists a relationship between voter's age, occupation and gender on voting in general.

Commenting on the level of apathy displayed by Nigerian citizens in the 2011 General Elections, the chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission Chairperson, Professor Attahiru Jega lamented:

That there exists voter's apathy in Nigeria is no longer contentions. Voter's turnout in the just concluded general elections had provided scientific and empirical evidence of voter's apathy and disinterestedness of sections of the electorates in elections. (Odebode, 2011).

Furthermore, statistics from INEC on the just concluded 2015 general elections puts voters turnout a 43.65% out of 67,422,005 registered voters. This is indicative of the further decline in voter turnout in elections. In his contribution on the voter turnout situation in the country, Amadi (2014), identifies “the institutional arrangement of the Nigerian state as a major factor for low voter turnout”. He maintains that:

The democratic process and political participation in Nigeria in a learning one and this is so because the democratic structure and institutions are so fragile and coupled with low level of democratic culture of the citizens resulting from long years of military dictatorship.

These fragile democratic structures have affected the political process thereby, reducing the measure of confidence in the political process by the citizens. This has greatly affected the extent to which they will participate in a political system. Falade (2014) says that” Politics in Nigeria is influenced by money, ethic and religions factor.” He maintains that since independence in 1960, religious and ethnic politics characterize election earring process and that is why it practiced politics with bitterness, hated and rancor. This has resulted in the apartheid and passive feeling of the citizens leading to low voter turnout.

The low voter turnout manifested greatly in the 2015 general elections which marked a milestone in the history of elections in the country as the ruling party for the first time suffered a defeat by the opposition. This changed the political landscape at the national level. In some state like Benue, the situation was not vastly different from that at the centre. The table below presents the scenario in a nutshell.

Table 2: Voter's turnout for presidential election in Benue State.

S/N	Senatorial District	Registered voters	Accredited Voters	Percentage turnout	Total no. of voters
1	Benue North East	661,067	290,446	44%	271,228
2	Benue North West	1,668,320	298,584	18%	282,976
3	Benue South	539,347	166,633	31%	153,498
4	TOTAL	1,927,062	754,634	—	703,131
5	Percentage Turnout			39.15%	

Source: INEC, 2015 General Elections.

The above figures in the table above indicate that no senatorial district recorded a turnout up to 50%. This is evident of the low voter turnout in Benue.

Table 3: Summary of voter's turnout for gubernatorial elections in Benue State.

Voter Turnout

1	Total Number of Registered Voters	1,927,062
2	Total Number of Accredited	797,788
3	Total Number of Voters Cast	759,397
4	Percentage turnout for Gubernatorial elections	41.40%

Source: INEC, 2015 General Elections

The table above shows a higher turnout rate for the gubernatorial elections that was recorded at the presidential. However, the issue of voter registration/voter turnout is clearly manifested. This fact is further buttressed by the empirical findings in the study by Agaigbe (2015) which maintains that “there is a pre-conceived motion among many voters that the outcome of most elections in Nigeria is pre-determined”. Consequently, they believe that their voters will not count, hence the apathy in both registration and turnout. Research Question Two (2): How does the low voter's turnout affect Nigeria's democracy?

Representative democracy rests on the assumption that the citizens possess and demonstrate some civic capacities. “The citizens must be able to understand the best interest of the community, to subordinate their own will to the several will and must feel their responsibility to the community and be prepared to serve it by voting” (Appadorai, 2004). On the contrary, indolence, indifference and political apathy have hindered the entrenchment and sustenance of representative democracy in Nigeria. Falade and Orungemic (2010) argued that “true democratic governance is absent in Nigeria and many parts of Africa”. According to Fabiyi (2010), “the consequence of the non-participants is the inability of the masses to have a link between their state of underdevelopment and their non-participants in the electoral process”. Aluko (2010) noted that “the low level of political participation of the Nigerian women is becoming alarming and disturbing”. Since independence in 1960, the Nigerian women have remained invincible in the political process.

The 1985 Beijing declaration to which Nigeria is a signatory provides that 30% of all positions in a government should be given to women. “This policy is yet to be implemented in Nigeria because there is a continuing trend of male domination of political and other public positions” (Ologede 2004; Adelcan, 2010). A study by Falade (2014) revealed that 57% of the participants in a survey actively involved in political activities, also, it was discovered in the study that there was the effect of gender on political participation. 30% and 13% of males and female respectively were regularly involved in voting exercise. Lastly, the study found that majority (53%) of respondents and no confidence in their political leaders.

According to Azutoru (2011) “there has never been an election in Nigeria that ever guaranteed the provision of basic right and development for the provision of basic rights and development for the poor communities in Nigerians”. The tragedy of the situation is that “social capital” is almost extinct while performance of government at all level may be measured through the high level of incompetence and corruption. Many years into the nation's democratic experience, corruption is elevated impunity and meddlesomeness to political creeds that have robbed governance the much needed responsive and caring human face. This double jeopardy: “bad politics and poor economic management characterized by collapsing institutions, disoriented political elites and an abused, violate, disillusioned and disenfranchised populace, has led governance that have failed to deliver the much promised political dividends of democracy” (Ojakorutu, 2009). Elections in Nigeria though seen as a means of controlling the government, within the context of electorates participation reveals a rather disturbing state that has called for serious concern. Hence, Amfowose (in Duru, 2002) Observed that, indeed, the Nigeria electoral process since independence has gained an unenviable reputation for fraudulent practices.

Findings

This study recorded the following findings following analyses:

1. Less than half of the registered voters, 42.76% officially voted during the 2015 general elections In Nigeria.
2. A great chunk of Nigerian potential electorate has lost confidence in the electoral system due to failed promises of elected government officials and the violent and fraudulence often consociated with elections in the country. Only 13% of these of this electorate still believe in the electoral process.
3. Many analysts of the 2015 general election share the view that the electoral campaigns were of money contexts rather than ideological convictions. Thus, the electorate has the feeling of disenchantment.
4. There exist a relationship between voter's age, education and gender in the Nigerian electoral system.
5. Voter apathy in Nigeria is no longer a contentious issue but a reality that is dispelled entrenched in the system.
6. INEC figures revealed that while a total of 67,422, 005 potential voters were registered, only 43.65% of this number actually turned out to vote.
7. The institutional arrangement of the Nigeria state is a major contributor to the low turnout during elections in the country.

8. The low voter turnout and resultant low level participation in the political process has led to the election of less credible leaders which has further showed down the rate of development in country.
9. Indolence, indifference and political apathy have hindered the entrenchment and sustenance of representative democracy in Nigeria.
10. This study also revealed the low level of political participation of women in Nigeria which has led to the non-compliance of the nation to the Beijing Declaration of allocating 30% of all government position to the Nigerian women.

Conclusion

This study employed the analytic of content analysis to examine secondary data obtained in respect of non-registration apathy and voter turnout in Nigeria with a focus on Benue state. It found that voter apathy in Nigeria is the result of loss of confidence by the electorates on the political system which is fraught with indolence, fraud, violence, etc. Such voter-registration apathy and turnout has translated to a situation where the credibility of the electoral system is eroded and wrong leaders enthroned. This has the ultimate result of slowing the process of development in the country.

Suggestions

Against the background of the findings recorded in the study, the following may be suggested:

1. The loss of confidence on the part of the potential electorate in Nigeria should be addressed as a matter of urgency.
2. The above can only be actualized though the activation of institutions saddled with the implementation of the electoral process.
3. Women must be encouraged to participate fully in the electoral process. This can be achieved through the implementation of the Beijing Declaration of 30% slot to women in government positions.
4. Politicians voted into positions of authority must be made accountable to ensure they fulfill their electoral promises while in office.
5. Voter education must be accorded the priority it deserves.
6. Parties must be formed and built on ideological and around personalities.

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