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**DEMOCRACY WITHOUT THE PEOPLE:
INTERROGATING LOW VOTER TURNOUT IN
NIGERIA'S 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS**

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Abstract

This paper examined low voter turnout in the 2019 general elections in Nigeria. The paper utilized both secondary as well as primary data sourced through a purposively administered questionnaire on a total of 260 respondents in Abia and Lagos States, respectively, which had the lowest turnout in the 2019 general elections. Responses showed that Nigeria recorded low voter turnout during the 2019 general elections with a score of 56%. The study found that among the factors responsible for the high voter turnout during the elections was the belief that votes do not count which scored highest at 35.7%; non-independence of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) came second with a score of 23.1%; while inadequate security arrangements at polling centres rated third with 22.3%. Similarly, failure by politicians to keep or fulfil campaign promises came fourth place with 16.4%; while long queues at the polling centres rated fifth with 1.3%. The paper considers the abysmally low turnout in the 2019 general elections as a travesty of democracy with grave implications for the legitimacy of the election outcomes and the quality of democracy. It recommends a total overhaul of the Nigerian electoral process through a comprehensive review of the 2022 Electoral Act.

Keywords: Democracy, Elections, Nigeria, Low voter turnout, People

Introduction

The participation of voters in government and the process of decision-making has been the cardinal feature of most democracies all over the world. Over the years, scholars have made efforts to develop indices for measuring democracies. One of the most accepted criteria for distinguishing one democracy from another and between democracy and other forms of government has been the amount of inclusiveness allowed or permitted by any system (Coppedge, Alvarez and Maldonado, 2008). This perhaps explains why Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, delivered in 1864 extolled the virtues of democracy as the "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (Heywood 2007, p. 3). But, the question is, what constitutes democratic participation? And what kind and how much of it is adequate or necessary for a government to be termed democratic? Whereas proponents of direct democracy such as Pervin (2018); Manin (2010); Lijphat (1997); and Landemore (2017), argue that there must be direct participation of citizens for a government to qualify as a democracy, others believe that people can be governed indirectly through representation; and citizens' could participate through elections (Bevir 2010 and Somin 2016).

Although the election is critical to any democracy as a formal procedure for making a group decision, the participation of the people as voters in the electoral process is a key determinant of the level of political inclusiveness or otherwise. While voter turnout rate, on the one hand, is widely seen as an important symbol of participatory democracy; and a measure of the credibility and legitimacy of the regime that emerges from the electoral process (Moon et al, 2006 and Ibrahim, 2006); low turnout on the other hand signals diminished legitimacy and calls to question the level inclusiveness and representativeness of the regime (Robert, 2009 and Thompson, 2009).

It must be noted that in most democracies across the world, turnout in elections has been on a steady decline. For instance, in the United States, the 2016 General Elections and the 2018 Mid-Term Elections recorded 55.5% and 49.3% in voter turnout (Domonoske 2018), respectively. In Nigeria, the 1999 Constitution (as altered) confers on citizens of the age 18 and above the

right to vote and be voted for depending on the office and as long as such persons are not legally incapacitated. These rights are detailed in Section 12(1) of the Electoral Act 2022, which is consistent with Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which provides that “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.”

The right to vote is not only a civic and democratic duty but also allows the electorates to choose, reject or revalidate competing candidates and programmes enunciated by political parties. Thus, since the return to democracy in 1999, Nigerians have exercised these rights whether in general or off-season elections. However, since the general elections that ushered in the democratic government in 1999, there has been a steady decline in the turnout of voters in successive elections. During the 2019 General Elections, the Nigerian population was estimated at 200 million people (NBS 2019). However, only about 84,004,084 were registered voters and 28,632,225 million voted in the elections (Independent National Electoral Commission 2019). Out of this number, only 27,882,398 valid voters decided the outcome of the elections (INEC 2019). This implies that out of an estimated population of 200 million Nigerians, only 27 million voters decided the outcomes of the elections, representing 33.1% of total registered voters.

The low turnout in these elections has not only raised serious concerns about the outcome of the elections but also put to question the viability and quality of democracy in Nigeria. It is against this background that this study interrogates low voter turnout in the 2019 General Elections and its implications for democracy in Nigeria.

Literature Review

Many attempts have been made at defining democracy by different scholars across philosophical, ideological, and epistemological spheres in the last two centuries. This broad spectrum of views perhaps explains the difficulty in achieving a universally accepted definition across the board

despite the seeming broad consensus on the underlying principles of democracy. Appodoria (2004); Diecy (1905) and Bryce (1921) in their disparate conception of democracy all agreed that the defining feature of democracy which set it apart from any other form of government is its central focus on the people. It is also on this premise that Abraham Lincoln (1864) extolled the virtues of democracy as the government of the people, by the people and for the people. This definition lends credence to the views of classical writers such as Locke (1704), and Bentham (1838) who treat the people as the sovereign source of political authority without whom no political authority is legitimate and should exist. The democratic principle set out by these scholars laid an enduring foundation for the participation of citizens in the political process. Specifically, Locke (1704) viewed the government as a trustee of power vested by the people who have a watchdog role to play in which case they can remove the government if its performance is below expectation. This means that beyond the primary role of investing trust through the electoral process, the supervisory role expected by citizens is equally important to keep the government accountable.

In a related study, Kanyinga (2014) affirmed that the involvement of people in making decisions that concern their lives is the very essence and feature of democratic societies. He added that since democracy is about the "rule by the people", it thus requires that people should be at the centre of decision-making processes. Kanyinga maintained that citizens' active and meaningful engagement in public affairs is the underlying and founding principle of democracy which is universally accepted as a requirement for a just society. Kanyinga (2014) further noted that this principle is also enshrined in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948, which provides that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his/her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

Kanyinga (2014) also cited the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which stipulate that: Every citizen shall have the right and opportunity... (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives; (b) To vote and be elected

at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors; (c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his [or her] country.

Similarly, Osondu (2014) pointed out that citizens' participation in the political process is what gives democracy its fundamental meaning. He suggested that citizens' participation in the political process is a bargaining process which has two important dimensions. The first is the bargain of government legitimacy which obliges citizens to obey law and order made by duly constituted authority and the second is the opportunity that exists for citizens to regulate the bargain of legitimacy through competitive elections.

Mahmud (2015, p.2-3) defined voter turnout to mean the percentage of the voting-age population (or the percentage of registered voters) who came out to vote in an election. He contends that in democratic societies, voter turnout is the most common form of political participation. In a similar study, the Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room (2015) argued that active voter turnout and civic participation are not only important predictors of a vibrant and healthy democracy but also a barometer to gauge the level of citizens' participation in politics. Voter turnout can be measured as the percentage of voters who cast a vote (i.e., "turnout") at an election including the total number of voters who cast blank or invalid votes. The Nigerian Civil Society Situation Room (2015) further noted that when voter turnout is low, it describes a state of political disengagement and the belief that voting for one candidate/ party or another is inconsequential to changing public policy. In a related study, Pateman (1970) highlighted three functional importance of citizen's participation in politics to include: (i) educative function, (ii) integrative function and (ii) legitimating function.

When Wattenberg (2002) asked: *Where have all the Voters Gone?* Patterson (2002; 2009) followed with "why are the voting booths so empty?" Little did they realize how relevant their theses would be in Nigeria a decade and a half after the 2000 American elections that animated their works. Wattenberg's position was that the declining voter turnout rate in America

which was the lowest in the industrialized world was a serious problem because greater participation is essential for a democratic government to function well. He approached the subject from a multi-disciplinary perspective arguing that the transition from diminished parties to candidate-centred politics dragged down the turnout rate in American elections. While Wattenberg illuminated the understating of voter turnout dynamics, little attention was paid to equally important questions of how negative political advertising and how difficulties encountered in the act of voting itself could have helped in driving potential voters away from the booths (Griffin, 2012).

Like Wattenberg, Patterson sets out to account for why voting booths were becoming empty in American elections despite of increasing level of education and simplification of the registration process. He engaged this question first in an article published in 2002, and subsequently in a book written in 2003, both of which were outcomes of the "Vanishing Voter Project." Patterson argued that the level of competition, clear-cut parties, uplifting campaigns and nature of adverts affect turnout rate. Closely contested competitive elections attract higher turnout rates than otherwise. When there are no real choices to make between political parties, voters tend to turn their backs on voting booths while uplifting campaigns and positive adverts inspired higher turnout rates and *vice versa* (Patterson, 2002, p. 21).

Examining factors responsible for declining voter turnout in elections, Gherghina and Geissel (2015) espoused that the global spread of liberal democracy corresponds with a growing trend of citizens' dissatisfaction with representative institutions and actors. This trend has culminated in the shrinking of party membership, reduction in the number of loyal voters and decline in electoral turnout in many democratic societies in the last three decades. Several studies have looked at elections and political participation in Nigeria. While Nwankwo et al, 2017; Falade 2014; Adeleke 2013; and Agu et al, 2013) focused on Southwestern Nigeria, others such as Nyiayaana (2019), Taiwo and Ahmed (2015), Ayanda and Braimah (2015) and Ngara et al (2014) took a national dimension. Interestingly, most of these studies appeared to agree that the major factors associated with low voter turnout in Nigeria include:

- i. Incompetence on the part of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC);
- ii. Political corruption
- iii. Youth Unemployment and political thuggery
- iv. Overcrowded Polling Centres;
- v. Failed Electoral Promises; and
- vi. Electoral Violence.

Specifically, Agu et al (2013) argued that the failure of INEC to function as an independent, competent, autonomous, and impartial arbiter of the electoral process is perhaps the most important determinant of poor turnout in elections. They maintained that there is an entrenched public distrust of INEC as an electoral umpire and other public institutions. Nwankwo, Okafor and Asuoha (2017) on their part viewed electoral fraud such as mass rigging and doctored election results as a major cause of low voter turnout during elections in Nigeria.

It is discernable from the range of literature reviews that most works on electoral behaviour or voter turnout in elections are based on Western experience, particularly in the United States. While these works are the most referred to in local research, they are hardly able to explain the peculiar context of Nigerian voters or their electoral behaviour. In addition, many of the existing studies on voter turnout in Nigeria are anecdotal and speculative thereby creating a gap in empirical research. This has warranted the need for more empirical studies to develop evidence-based policy responses.

Theoretical Perspective

This paper adopts the Rational Choice Theory (RCT) to contextualize this study. The theory owes its origin to the pioneering works of Black (1948) Arrow (1951) Downs (1957) and Tullock (1967). Although the RCT is central to most economic models, it has nonetheless enjoyed wide appeal and application in political science, especially in explaining voter behaviour. Furthermore, the frontiers of this theory have also been extended and modified with several strands and variants over the years. The application

of the RCT to this study will be done in a generic sense because of the cross-cutting effects of the different assumptions. This is because restriction to a particular variant will be limiting in terms of its explanatory powers hence the preferred reliance on the generic model.

The main assumptions of the RCT imply that every individual has a rational side, which is capable of making consistent choices (Downs 1957). At the core of the theory is the assumption that actors are rational at least to the extent that they make choices that will maximize their utility. Downs (1957) recognized that where voting is costly, individuals will consider both how much they care about the outcome and the likelihood that their vote will influence the outcome (be pivotal). For instance, Farber (2009) suggests that in large elections where the potential of the individual vote in determining the outcome of elections is negligible, the individual assessment of the expected benefit of voting may be more than the costs and could serve as a disincentive to vote. Similarly, other proponents of this theory hold that an increase in the cost of voting can negatively affect turnout in the election. This explains why policymakers are always making efforts to reduce the costs of voting through the reduction of numbers of registered voters in pooling units, the creation of more polling units for easy access and in some jurisdiction introduction of electronic and other impersonal voting options to make voting easier. Even in countries like Australia where voting is compulsory, turnout is about 80 per cent of the voting-age population (Fisher, Fieldhouse, Franklin, Gibson, Cantijoch and Wlezien 2007).

It should be noted that despite different variables and conclusions, they all assume that each individual is a rational decision-maker who cares about their economic interests: they vote only if their benefits outweigh their costs, otherwise, they abstain. The most important problem of the turnout puzzle is that while a lot of people go to vote, RCT predicts that people do not vote because voting costs outweigh voting benefits (Youngmevittaya 2016).

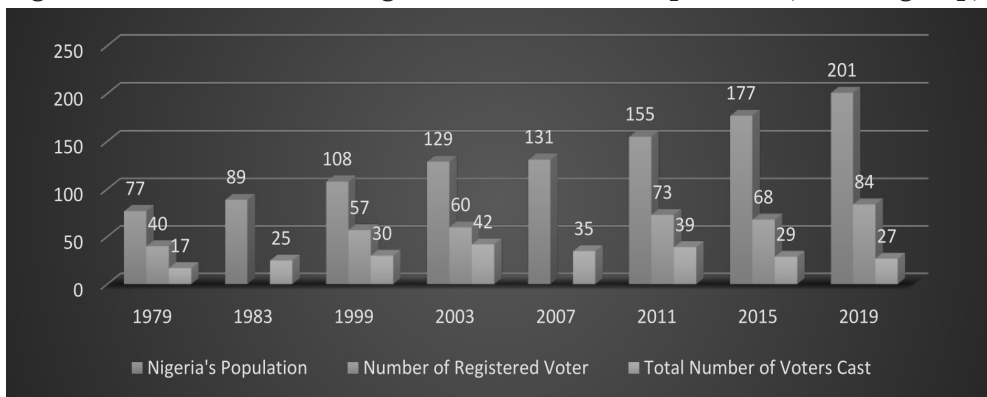
The relevance of the RCT to the present study is that Nigerian voters are rational human beings who calculate their electoral decision and choice based on the realities of cost-benefit analysis. Thus, voting decisions by

Nigerian voters as rational actors within the electoral process are practical and strategic in their motivations, often guided by self-interest (Saxena 2017). Consequently, when the voters consider that their vote may not produce the desired outcome, they may choose not to participate as voters (Nyiayaana 2019). This theory helps to explain why voters refused to come out and vote in the 2015 and 2019 general elections.

Analysing Voters’ Turnout in Nigerian Elections 1979 - 2019

In measuring voter turnout rate, there are three approaches commonly adopted by analysts. These are: (i) Actual Vote to Registered Voters and total Population (Vote-Reg-Pop); (ii) Actual Vote relative to the Voting Age Population (Vote-VAP); and (3) Actual Vote as a Proportion of Total Population (Vote-Pop). Vote-Reg-Pop allows for a comparison between the total population, registered voters, and voter turnout (Solijonov 2016). It is expected that there will be a proportionate increase/decrease in actual votes as the population changes over the years. Election Management Bodies (EMBs) particularly find this statistical information useful in making projections for planning logistics at national and community levels. See Figures 1

Figure 1: Voter Turnout to Registered Voters and Population (Vote-Reg-Pop)



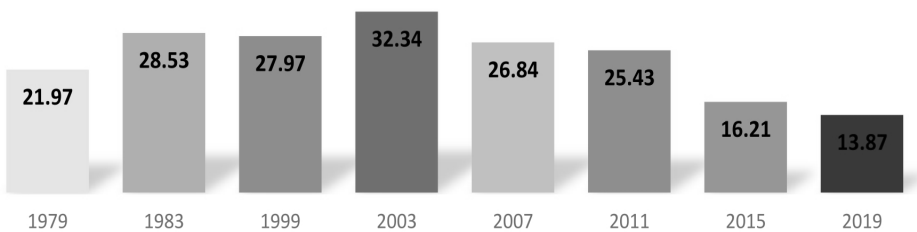
Source: Authors' compilation from FEDECO, NEC, NECON & INEC data

In 1979 when Nigeria’s population stood at 77 million with 40 million registered voters, 17 million voted (representing 42.5%) (International IDEA 2002). The nation’s population was 108 million in 1999 out of which 57 million

Nigerians registered and 30 million voted (representing 52.6%) (*Vanguard* 2011; International IDEA 2002). In 2003, there were 129 million people in Nigeria out of which 60 million registered and up to 42 million people voted, (representing 70%, the highest number ever recorded) (*Vanguard* 2011; Nweke and Etido-Inyang 2020). This figure declined drastically to 53.4% in 2011 when Nigeria’s population was 155 million from which 73 million registered and 39 million voted (*Vanguard* 2011; European Union 2011; and Nweke and Etido-Inyang, 2020). Voter turnout on March 28, 2015, National Assembly/Presidential elections declined to an all-time low since 1979 when only 29 million people turned out to vote out of 68 million people that registered (INEC, 2019; Sule et al, 2018).

This implies that, for whatever reason, more than 57 per cent of registered voters had their backs turned against polling booths. In any case, 68 million registered voters in 2015, representing 38.4 per cent of 177 million people. Whereas, in 2019 only 27 million Nigerians (13.87%) out of the 84million registered voters decided the winner of the elections. The limit of this comparison as well as the Vote-Pop in Figure 2 is that it compares the total population with actual votes without taking cognizance of eligibility to vote in terms of the minimum age requirement which is fixed at 18 years in Nigeria. It should be noted that because democracy entails “representation of the people” as against “representation of eligible voters” the Vote-Pop model remains a useful lens for assessing voter turnout rate.

Figure 2: Voter Turnout in relation to Population (Vote-Pop)



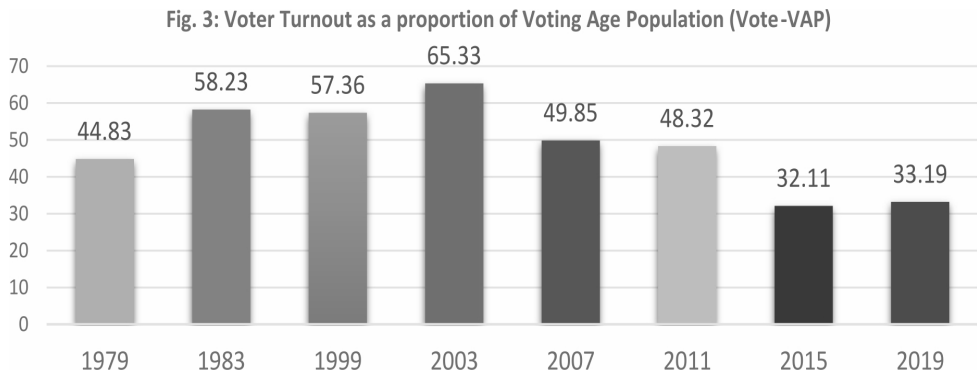
Source: Authors’ compilation from FEDECO, NEC, NECON & INEC data

Figure 2, which shows the time series trend in voter turnout relative to the Nigerian population, is relevant because democracy boils down to representation and inclusion. The idea of majoritarianism is anchored on the notion that ample space is given for the broad participation of citizens in a way that protects the interests of the majority without compromising the rights of the minority. Hence, voter turnout relative to the total population offers a valuable glimpse of the extent to which the electoral process ensures that the majority will prevail. About the total population, the turnout rate was 21.97 per cent in 1979, peaked at 32.34 per cent in 2003, declined to 25.43 per cent in 2011, and fell drastically to its lowest point of 16.21 per cent in 2015 and further to 13.87 per cent in 2019. This indicates that out of every 100 Nigerians, only 13 voted in the 2019 general elections. By any standard, the fact that 13.87 per cent of the population turned out to vote raises valid questions on the inclusiveness of the process and curiously on the representativeness of the outcome.

Rather than using the total population as the basis for estimating voter turnout, after all not everyone is entitled to vote in the first place, the analysis could be refined by comparing turnout with the voting-age population (Vote-VAP). Figure 3 shows voter turnout as a proportion of the Voting Age Population. Voter turnout increased from 44.83 per cent in 1979 to 58.23 per cent in 1983 suggesting a marginal growth rate of 13.4 per cent. The vote-VAP ratio witnessed a little decline in 1999 when it dropped from 58.23 per cent in 1983 to 57.36 per cent, indicating a marginal decline of -0.87 per cent. Voter turnout as a proportion of the voting-age population peaked at 65.33 per cent in 2003 with a sizeable marginal increase of 7.97 per cent above the 1999 figures. Voter turnout dropped massively by -15.48 per cent from 65.33 per cent in 2003 to 49.85 per cent in 2007.

The irregularities that marked the 2007 general elections were compelling and Late President Musa Yar'Adua responded by inaugurating the Uwais Panel which affirmed irregularities in the elections. However, the electoral reforms proposed by the Uwais Panel were never implemented before the demise of President Yar'Adua. Voter turnout continued its negative trend in 2011 with a marginal decline of -1.53 per cent. The 2019 General

Elections recorded another major decline of -13.87 per cent in turnout rate when it dropped from 48.32 per cent in 2011 to 33.19 per cent in 2019. This implies that only 33 out of every 100 eligible voters turned out in the 2019 general elections. By all measures, the 2019 general elections recorded one of the lowest voter turnout rates in Nigeria's electoral history.



Source: Authors' compilation from FEDECO, NEC, NECON & INEC data

The advantage of voter turnout as a proportion of the voting population (Vote-VAP) is that it makes clear the actual differential between those that voted against those who ought to vote instead of comparing with the gross population. Ordinarily, all citizens who attain the age of 18 years are expected to register and vote during elections. Provided the necessary conditions prevail, a significant proportion of this segment of the population ought to turn out during elections. If for whatever reason Vote-VAP declines year-on-year as Figure 3 suggests, there is a need for a closer examination of factors that affect turnout to unravel the impediments to turnout among eligible citizens and use the information to propose actionable and constructive remedies.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed method which consisted of the use of both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were obtained through the administration of questionnaires while secondary data were collected through consultation with textbooks, journals, periodicals,

newsletters, conference and seminar papers, monographs, and other unpublished materials relevant to this study. The research population consisted of 84,004,084 registered voters in the 2019 General Elections. The sample population comprised INEC staff, select voters (both those who voted and those who did not vote in the 2019 general election), Civil Society organisations (CSOs), security personnel and members of the academic community.

Due to the special nature of the information required for the study, purposive sampling was adopted. A total of 270 questionnaires were administered in two states, namely; Abia and Lagos states. 135 respondents were selected from each of the states, respectively. The two states were purposively selected as representatives of the 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT). This is because the two states (Abia -18% and Lagos 17.6%) had the lowest voter turnout in the 2019 Presidential and National Assembly elections. The method of data analysis employed includes Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), descriptive statistical tools, prose and narratives.

Discussion

The findings from the sampled respondents showed that there was a low turnout in the 2019 General elections. When asked whether they belong to any political party, 121 respondents, representing 50.8 per cent answered in the negative while 104 representing 43.7 per cent affirmed their membership of various political parties. However, 13 (5.5%) of the respondents were undecided. This shows a high level of political apathy among Nigerians. Similarly, among the 238 respondents sampled, 184 representing 77.3 per cent were registered voters, while 51 representing 21.4 per cent were not registered voters. However, 3 respondents declined to state their registration status. The foregoing indicates that although many adult Nigerians of voting age are registered voters, some due to one reason or another do not vote during the elections. See Table 1.

Table 1: Registered Voter

		Frequency	Per cent	Valid Per cent	Cumulative Per cent
Valid	Undecided	3	1.3	1.3	1.3
	No	51	21.4	21.4	22.7
	Yes	184	77.3	77.3	100.0
	Total	238	100.0	100.0	

Source: Field Survey

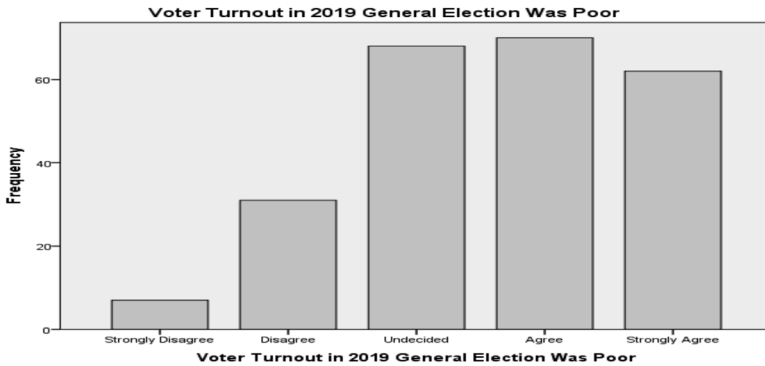
When asked about their Permanent Voters' Card (PVC), 186 (78.2%) respondents stated that they have their permanent voters card, while 51 (21.4%) do not have their PVC. It also shows that despite having their PVCs, some respondents still did not vote in the 2019 elections. Also on the question of whether people voted in the 2019 General Elections, 164 (68.9%) agreed that they voted in the last election while 73 representing 30.7 per cent did not vote.

When asked whether they have been participating in elections since 1999, responses indicated that 147 (61.8%) have been participating in elections since 1999, whereas 89 representing 37.4 per cent say they did not participate in elections since 1999. Only 2 (0.8) respondents stated that they were below the voting age as of 1999. In the same vein, in determining the level of voter turnout in the 2019 general elections, 14 (5.9%) respondents rated voter turnout in the election as very low, 46 respondents representing 19.3 per cent rated turnout low, while 99 (41.6%) respondents rated the turnout as average. Conversely, 57 (23.9%) of the respondents rated the turnout high, while 22 (9.2%) respondents said the turnout was very high.

Responses also indicated that voter turnout in the 2019 General Elections was low as the majority of the respondents affirmed. For instance, 62 (26.1%) of the respondents strongly agree with the view that voter turnout in the 2019 General Elections was low. 70 (29.4%) agreed, while 68 (28.6%) were undecided. Conversely, 31 (13.0%) disagree with the assertion that voter turnout in the 2019 General Elections was low, while 7 (2.9%) strongly disagreed. The summary of the responses in this regard shows that those

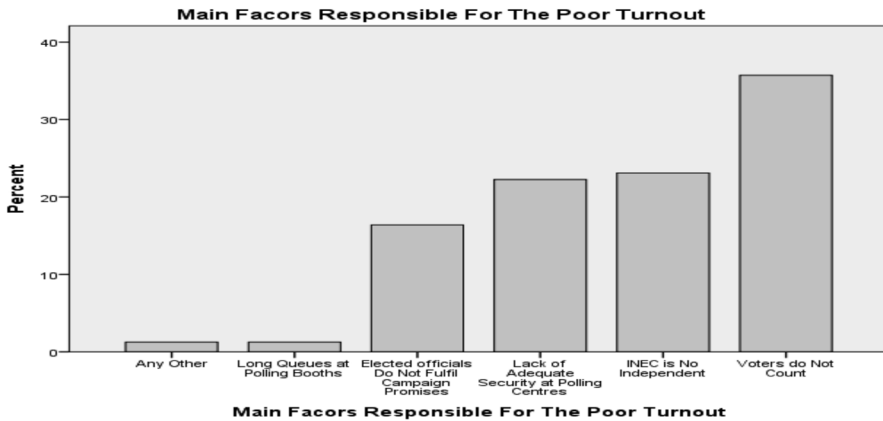
who strongly agree with that assertion are placed third highest while those who disagreed were in the minority as reflected in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Responses to Whether Voter Turnout in 2019 General Elections was Low



The study also revealed that several factors were responsible for the low voter turnout during the 2019 general elections. Respondents while identifying factors that were responsible for the low voter turnout in that election answered as captured in Figure 6. Whereas 85(35.7) respondents indicate that votes do not count as the main factor, 55 (23.1%) said the low turnout was due to the perception that INEC was not independent, 53 (22.3%) of the respondents ascribed the low turnout to inadequate security arrangements at polling centres, while 39 (16.4%) of the respondents believed the low turnout was because elected officials do not fulfil campaign promises. Meanwhile, 3 (1.3%) say long queues at the polling booths were the reason for low voter turnout during the elections as presented in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Factors Responsible for Low Voter Turnout in 2019 General Elections



In measuring the impact of votes not counting on low voter turnout during the 2019 General Elections, 75 (31.5%) respondents indicate that the impact of votes not counting on low voter turnout is very high. 70 (29.4%) think that the impact is high, 43 (18.1%) say the impact is low, and 22 (9.2%) of respondents believe the impact is very low. This means that its impact on voter turnout was indeed high.

On the impact of the belief that *INEC is not independent* of voter turnout, 55 (23.1%) respondents rated it very high while 83 (34.9%) rated it high. In addition, 55 (23.1%) respondents rated its impact low while 25 (10.5%) rated very low. However, 20 (8.4%) were undecided. On the impact of the belief that *lack of adequate security at polling centres* on voter turnout, 61 (25.6%) respondents rated it very high while 88 (37.0%) rated it high. In addition, 55 (23.1%) respondents rated its impact low while 25 (10.5%) rated it very low. However, 9 (3.8%) were undecided.

When asked to rate the impact of the *failure of elected officials to fulfil campaign promises* on voter turnout, 79 (33.2%) respondents rated it very high, while 74 (31.1%) rated it high. In addition, 44 (18.5%) respondents rated its impact low while 28 (11.8%) rated very low. However, 13 (5.54%) were undecided. This indicates that the failure of public officeholders to deliver on their campaign promises is a major contributing factor to political apathy in the country. When asked to rate the impact of *long queues at polling booths*

during the 2019 general elections on voter turnout, 65 (27.3%) respondents rated it very high while 70 (29.4%) rated it high. In addition, 60 (25.2%) respondents rated its impact low while 19 (8.0%) rated very low. However, 24 (10.1%) were undecided. The implication is that poor logistics arrangements engendering long queues in polling booths generate stress and frustration for electorates thereby contributing to discouraging voters from participating in voting during elections.

Conclusion

The voter turnout as a proportion of the voting age population (Vote/VAP) has been on the decline in successive elections in Nigeria since the return to democracy in 1999, except in the 2003 general elections when it peaked at 65.33% and plummeted to 33.3% in 2019. The 2019 general elections have so far witnessed the lowest voter turnout in Nigeria's electoral history. During this election, there was a total of 84,004,084 registered voters out of which only 28,632,225 million voters turnout during the elections. This number represents 33.3% of the registered voters and 14.3% of the total estimated population of about 200 million people. By any democratic standards, these figures show an undesirable signal of a declining level of inclusion, legitimacy and quality of democracy.

Out of the several factors identified as a disincentive for voters in the 2019 General elections, the perception that "votes do not count" scored highest with 35.7%. The perception of lack of independence by INEC came second with a score of 23.1%; inadequate security arrangements at polling centres rated third with 22.3%, while the belief that politicians do not keep or fulfil campaign promises came fourth place with 16.4%; and long queues at polling centres rated fifth with 1.3%. Since democracy can only be established, maintained and sustained on the kernel of active involvement and participation of the people, the low voter turnout experienced during the 2019 general elections showed that Nigerian democracy is without the people. Thus, Nigerian democracy is susceptible to elite capture and manipulation with grave consequences for the legitimacy of the electoral outcomes and the quality of democracy.

Recommendations

From the foregoing findings, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. INEC should ensure the easing of the stressful, time-consuming and tedious Continuous Voter Registration exercise in Nigeria. This can be achieved through digitization of the registration process in a way that prospective voters can use computers or mobile devices to register on a portal specially created for that purpose. Furthermore, INEC can develop an accurate cartographic and geographic information system to allot sufficient registration and polling units strictly based on population. Residential areas with large populations should have not more than 500 registered voters in a polling unit.
2. There is a need for the ongoing review of the 1999 Constitution to unbundle INEC into smaller agencies with specialized and manageable mandates. Voter registration, education and mobilization should be handled by a separate independent organization rather than the present omnibus structure that seems to have too much to chew simultaneously. Unbundling INEC into smaller manageable agencies may be an attractive reform trajectory that will improve the effective and efficient voter registration process.
3. The INEC, the mass media, political parties, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), development partners and other election stakeholders should engage more in voter education and enlightenment to sensitise the public on the importance of voter registration and turnout in elections.
4. Another important way to optimize voter turnout in Nigerian elections is to accommodate Early Voting in the Nigerian electoral system. The National Assembly should give legislative support to amend the Electoral Act 2022, to enable election-day workers such as election officials, observers, security and medical personnel and others on essential duties to cast their ballot earlier before the day of the election.
5. An effective way of altering the cost-benefit calculus in the voting process is to ensure that a voter's card is an indispensable means of identification in some critical transactions. Issuance of a

Driver's License, vehicle documents, international passport, bank transactions, mobile phone registration and others could be tied to possession of a voter's card. To make this effective, banks, mobile telecommunication companies, Nigeria Immigration Service, travel agents and other stakeholders should as a matter of policy demand voter's cards as part of the identity verification criteria.

6. The Federal government should make it compulsory for all adults of voting age to vote during elections. This can be achieved by altering the 1999 Constitution and amending the Electoral Act 2022.
7. The INEC, political parties and other stakeholders in elections should be committed to the total reformation of the Nigerian electoral system by ensuring that votes count during elections. Deliberate efforts should be made to address all forms of electoral malpractice, political thuggery and violence. This can be achieved through the arrest and diligent prosecution of election offenders by an Election Offences Tribunal/Commission to be established through an Act of the National Assembly. Stiffer punishments should be provided in the Electoral Act for electoral offenders, and INEC should also be empowered to sanction erring political parties and their candidates as may be spelt out by the enabling legal framework to ensure accountability.
8. To make INEC truly independent, the process of nomination of INEC Chairmen by the President should be stopped. The nomination of candidates for the Chairmanship of INEC should be done by the Committees on INEC of both chambers of the National Assembly. The Committees would then present shortlisted candidates at the plenary for screening and confirmation.
9. Digital security surveillance and image-capturing devices should be deployed at polling areas for effective policing during elections.

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