

Original Paper

Ritual of Electoral Democracy, Growing Political Awareness and the Paradox of Contagious Skepticism

Mike Omilusi^{1*}

¹ Department of Political Science, Ekiti State University, Nigeria

* Mike Omilusi, Department of Political Science, Ekiti State University, Nigeria

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Abstract

As one of the pillars of democracy, election has an inescapably ritual dimension that periodically attracts political actors and thus, it has become a barometer to measure political behavior across regions of the world. Nigeria has, after two decades of uninterrupted civilian dispensation, keyed into this global phenomenon. Although democracy has been the world's predominant form of government in the last five decades and there has been broad global progress on many aspects of this type of government, conducting credible and transparent elections still remains a herculean task in many African countries. For instance, Nigeria's troubled elections continually reflect the country's lingering "do or die" politics, poor electoral management and institutionalised impunity, defying attempts at entrenching democratic norms. Consequently, there is a seeming shift from voter apathy to outright voter boycott in the country- the 2019 election recording the lowest turnout (35 per cent) since 1999. This decline has been difficult to explain in the context of an electorate's seemingly better pre-election activism and political engagements. Hence, why large numbers of citizens continually refuse to participate in this most basic civic exercise should naturally provoke agitation. Employing secondary sources of data collection, this paper establishes the relationship between voter turnout and disenchantment and other underpinning variables associated with the Nigeria's electoral democracy. It foregrounds how low voter turnout remains a stubborn challenge to Nigerian democracy and the imperativeness for post-election audit.

Keywords

democracy, elections, voter apathy, political activism, contagious scepticism

1. Introduction

In the 2019 general elections, over 55 million registered voters did not vote, marking the lowest voter participation since 1999 by way of percentage of actual voters against registered voters in each election cycle. In all, the lives of approximately 200 million people will be critically affected by the choices made by only 28 million voters; indicating that this category of voters is not substantially representative of the broader population of eligible Nigerian citizens. Yet, more than ever before, many Nigerian civil society groups are embarking on aggressive civic education and political mobilisation in the country. Many young persons, who appear to have keyed into the momentum, are daily exhibiting their political consciousness through the new media. In fact, modern technology seems to be a new incentive to broaden the scope of political participation among the Nigerian youth. In many of the party meetings, rallies and conventions, this category of the population dominates attendance.

Similarly, the religious space, across all divides, dispenses messages of citizen activism and value of electoral participation; more reason candidates and parties seek support from them during election. The hype with which election timetable is received and discussed among politicians, senior citizens, artisans, civil servants, businessmen and women also attests to the new willingness being generated about Nigeria's electoral democracy. Of recent, my field observations on election days also reveal that vote trading significantly draws some of the ordinarily uninterested voters out of their cocoons; an incredible mobilisation strategy of sort! Yet, in many of the polling centres after accreditation, an average of two-third of registered voters stays at home expecting results of an electoral exercise in which they are not participants.

Surely, there are many factors precipitating low turnout in an election such as non-self-registered individuals, mistrust of the political process, ease of voting, lack of credibility of political promises, disenchantment, institutional factors, voter suppression or indifference. Obviously, low turnout is an indictment on the legitimacy of the current system or democratic legitimacy that the election ought to generate. Bearing in mind therefore, that turnout is a key factor in legitimizing governments, the more reason non-voters, especially those with a deep-seated ideological objection to voting, should not be dismissed as irritants or mere nonconformists because they also offer an important critique of not just the ruling party but also existing power structures. But why should eligible citizens discuss election issues, attend political rallies and meetings with so much gusto/enthusiasm, and often with seeming deep concern, yet fail to cast their ballots on election day? Hence, the paradox for interrogation: Why voter education and political consciousness are increasing, there is a decline in voter turnout. If voter education is not effective enough in influencing higher voter turnout, can demonstrable political awareness (highlighted in the first two paragraphs) achieve that? If representation means keeping continuous public tabs on politicians and replacing underperformed government, what impact does low turnout have on democratic governance, particularly in nurturing the spirit and substance of democracy? Are elections mere rituals to satisfy a global consensus or meet aid conditionality for African countries? Is there any correlation between the abysmal voter turnout in the 2019 elections and the perceived

growing political awareness among the populace? Can this development enhance the legitimacy of the government or strengthen the social contract between the government and its citizens?

Though not peculiar to Nigeria, voter turnout has been declining in most developed countries over recent decades, its breadth and depth has however, reached a worrisome level in the country. This paper provides insight into the political engagement and voting ritual associated with electoral democracy in Nigeria. It establishes the relationship between voter turnout and contagious scepticism and other underpinning variables associated with the Nigeria's electoral democracy. It discusses the factors responsible for the change in citizens' participation and voter behaviour in an electoral space characterised by low voter turnout, violence during elections, and blatant rigging. It adopts simple descriptive quantitative analysis of the votes cast in the 2019 general elections and pre-election political activities of the populace to interrogate the gap between demonstrable political awareness and turnout in an election and the imperativeness for post-election audit. This paper also discusses the basic ingredients necessary for Nigeria's democracy to function properly: strengthening voter participation and interest in the electoral process; making voting a more enjoyable and community-driven experience; government providing fair representation and making benefits of participation equally available to all.

2. Electoral participation and voting ritual: A theoretical exposition

Generally, participation in politics manifests in various ways, ranging from engagement in formal political processes, such as voting in elections, to extra institutional behaviours, such as street protests or community meetings (Resnick & Casale, 2011). It is usually influenced by a number of factors, including political ideology, efficacy, structural barriers, and demographics. Electoral participation, which is one of the three main indicators of democratic performance (Powell, 1982), is also one of the most studied topics in political science and one of the most fundamental concerns of scholars and development practitioners. It is geared towards making governments more accountable and responsive to the needs of people because "voters value democracy and they recognise elections as a necessary element of modern democratic systems" (Birch, 2018).

When certain groups or section of the population do not engage or participate in electoral politics, it poses a genuine problem to representative democracy (Tambe, 2018). However, as electoral turnout is declining in most democracies (Gray & Caul, 2000), much attention is being dedicated to electoral participation and turnout in developing countries in the last decade. Given the fact that voters are those who care deeply about politics, have a lot at stake, possess disposable time and resources, or receive utility from the act of voting itself (Riker & Ordeshook, 1968), mobilizing more citizens to the polling stations has become a national obligation in many countries.

Politically, free and fair elections are an integral part of a successfully functioning democracy. The periodic election of governments through competitive, legitimate and transparent elections is core to representative democracy and "where few take part in decisions, there is little democracy; the more participation there is in decisions, the more democracy there is" (Verba & Nie, 1972, p. 1). The polity

is shaped by democracy's insistence on regular elections, by its rhetoric of voter supremacy and elected leaders as servants, by imperfections and chaotic processes, and of decision making by protest and compromise. Elections are great secular rituals. Elections serve many purposes, being the defining institutions of modern democracy (Katz, 1997, p. 1). Hence, the importance of elections can also be found in what they are capable of deciding as rightly observed by Dalton and Gray (2003, p. 23).

Elections are also important for what they decide. Electoral outcomes determine who manages affairs of government and who makes public policy. The selection of leaders and the ability to "throw the rascals out" at the next election are the public's ultimate instruments of non-violent power. Political elites may not always act as they promise, but the selection of a government provides some popular control over them. Moreover, campaign debates are among the prime mechanisms for ensuring openness and accountability in the political process. Indeed, the competitive nature of electoral politics encourages citizens to discuss the policies of the government and the behaviour of potential policy-makers.

Elections allow for the selection of parties, programmes and representatives and strengthen accountability and political control. They give legitimacy to political power, they lead to peaceful change in power, and they enhance political stability (Kersting, 2007). Elections are also central to making democracy deliver a better quality of life by linking voters' interests to those in government and allowing citizens to select representatives who reflect their will. The will of the people, expressed through their ballots, provides the basis of authority for democratic government. These concepts are enshrined in Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Universal Declaration), Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and other international human rights instruments. Democratic or not, all polities expect some public involvement in the political process, if only to obey political orders.

Democracy, however, expects more active involvement than a nondemocratic order because democracy is designed to aggregate public preferences into binding collective decisions (Dalton & Klingemann, 2011). This right to participate is a broad concept and can only be subject to reasonable restrictions that are provided by law. Authorities must take steps to assess and remove any barriers to the participation of all citizens. This includes removing barriers for traditionally marginalized populations such as ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities; women, youth or elderly citizens; and persons with disabilities (Merloe, 2009).

Voter behaviour is highly complex, however, and social scientists have been studying it from different angles for many decades (Solijonov, 2016). Plummeting voter turnout across the globe is a worrying phenomenon. Voter turnout, which is a key indicator of the vitality of a democracy, helps measure the trust that citizens place in their political institutions and politicians, and shows how citizens participate in the governance of their country (West Africa Brief, 2019). While political scientists focus on the influence of political factors such as: political group, electoral campaign and the popularity of party leaders on voting behaviour, Sociologists seem to concentrate on the socio-economic determinants of

supports for political parties, observing the correlations between class, occupations, ethnicity, sex, age and vote.

Elections—beginning with the preparation of electoral rolls and concluding with the declaration of election results— are profound events in the life of every nation, state or locality. But elections are not abstract instruments given the fact that they are something citizens experience as a great ritual, made up of smaller rituals (Orr, 2015). Elections are thus, rituals—repeated social activities full of symbolism and meaning. The electoral cycle sets up the seasons of politics. Social scientists have utilized representative surveys to understand election outcomes since the 1950s, and research has shown that a number of considerations play a role in shaping vote choice (Lau, Kleinberg, & Ditonto, 2018). Some individuals are issue voters, others are party voters, and yet another set of people focus on the characteristics of candidates as people (Lau, Kleinberg, & Ditonto, 2018). Though election results reflect the outcome and level of participation in electoral contests (Open Election Data, n.d), Burklo (2014) argues that the likelihood that any one person's vote would decide an election is miniscule. People do not vote because they think their ballot will decide the outcome. They do so because it is a ritual that is meaningful for them. He explains further:

People have lost faith not only in government, but also in corporations and churches and temples. It's a vicious cycle. We vote for politicians who don't or can't deliver, we lose faith in the institutions they run badly, and then we are de-motivated to vote at all.

Thus, those for whom elections have ceased to matter at all and those who, whether out of trust, contentment or ennui, just leave the system to itself (Orr, 2015). In fact, certain theorists and political scientists, according to Birch (2018), have recently argued that a substantial portion of the electorate is not sufficiently enlightened to make an informed choice at the polls, and that it is thus better for democracy if such voters stay at home. There are two separate components to this argument: (1) some citizens are not well enough informed to make sound choices, and (2) it is better for democracy if such voters do not exercise their franchise, as is more likely to be the case under voluntary voting laws._

3. Between Growing Electoral Awareness and Decline in Voter Turnout: The 2019 Elections in Perspective

In most democracies, voting is voluntary. The empirical literature shows that people value democracy and voting and that they believe voting is important; at the same time, many fail to vote (Birch, 2018). In fact, voter turnout rates and party membership rolls have been in sharp decline in the past few decades (Kataja, 2017). Since its return to electoral democracy in 1999, Nigeria's elections have been characterized by voter apathy. Being a nascent democratic experiment two decades ago, it was thus, regarded as one of the usual teething challenges. However, it has been a steady decline since then in spite of the perceived political awareness among the populace. Since 1999, voter turnout reached a peak of 69% in 2003 and has then continuously declined to a record-low of 35.6 percent in 2019. While Nigeria's population has nearly doubled over the past 20 years and there are about 25 million additional

registered voters, the absolute number of Nigerians who are voting has declined (30.2 million in 1999 compared to 28.6 million in 2019) (West Africa Brief, 2019).

Indeed, one of the major fallouts of the 2019 elections is the level of voter turnout. For instance, while over 84 million eligible Nigerian voters, a 25 percent rise from the last such vote in 2015, were expected at the polls, the voter turn-out only affirmed less than 40 percent of the number. Precisely, the overall turnout for the presidential elections was 28,614,190 which is 35.6 percent of registered voters, making it the lowest of all recent elections held on the African continent, according to the data from the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (cited in Ojetunde, 2019). Measured by voting behaviour such as voter registration and voter turnout, there has been decline both in the long term (1999-2015) and short term (2011-2015). The number of registered voters as a percentage of total population declined from 45.7% in 1999 to 38.3% in 2015. Similarly, voter turnout declined from 52.3% in 1999 to 43.7% in 2015 (CDD, 2019).

In 1999, out of the 57,938,945 registered voters, the total votes cast in the presidential election of that year was 30,280,052, representing 52.3 per cent. There were 29,848,441 valid votes and 431,611 invalid votes, representing 98.6 per cent and 1.4 per cent of the total votes cast respectively. That year, INEC had 60,823,022 registered voters, out of which 42,018,735 turned out and cast their votes with 39,480,489 valid votes and 2,538,246 invalid votes. The turnout in 2003 at 69 per cent represented an increase of 16.8 per cent over that of 1999 (Adedigba, 2019).

In 2007, there were 61,566,648 registered voters, out of which 35,419,262 voted, representing 57.4 per cent turnout of voters. This represented a drop in the voter turnout of 11.04 per cent. The voter turnout dropped further to 54 per cent in the 2011 presidential election. That year, there were 73,528,040 registered voters but only 39,469,484 turned out for the poll, with 38,209,978 valid votes and 1,259,506 invalid votes. This represented a drop of 4.36 per cent over that of 2007. The decline in voters' participation continued in 2015 when only 29,432,083 voters, which was 43.6 per cent out of the 67,422,005, registered voters turned out and cast their votes. That year, there were 28,587,564 valid votes and 844,519 invalid votes. The drop was 10.1 per cent (Adedigba, 2019).

An interrogation of two states- Lagos and Rivers- readily attests to the abysmal low turnout in the 2019 election. They are cosmopolitan states. Indeed, Lagos is the Nigeria's most cosmopolitan state as well the richest state in the country, with an estimated 20 million residents. It has a total of 6,570,291 registered voters but only 17.25 per cent (1,089,567) of the number voted in the national election (Adedigba, 2019). In Rivers, there are 3,215,273 registered voters but only 19.97 per cent (642,165) of the total registered number voted in the presidential election (Adedigba, 2019). Also, millions of eligible voters in Nigeria stayed away from casting their ballot to elect governors and state assembly members in the March 9 election (Abang, 2019). In fact, as explained above, turnout has been declining since the 2003 presidential election. The graph below clearly shows the percentage of voters' turnout between 1999 and 2019.

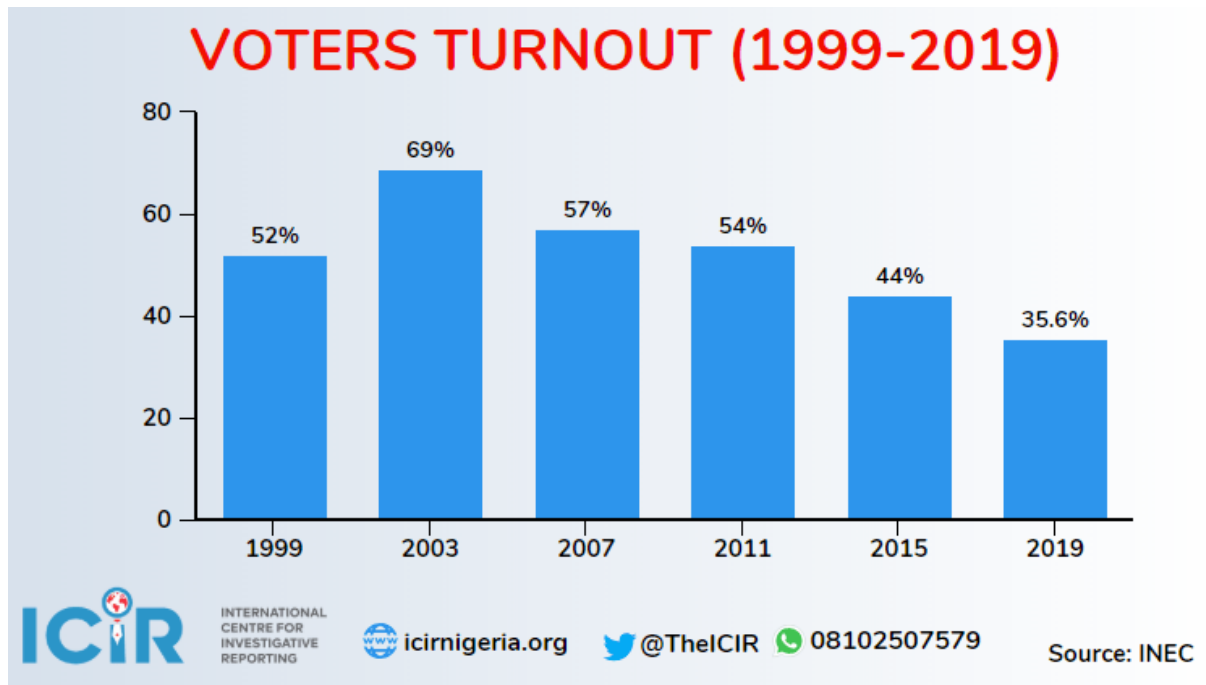
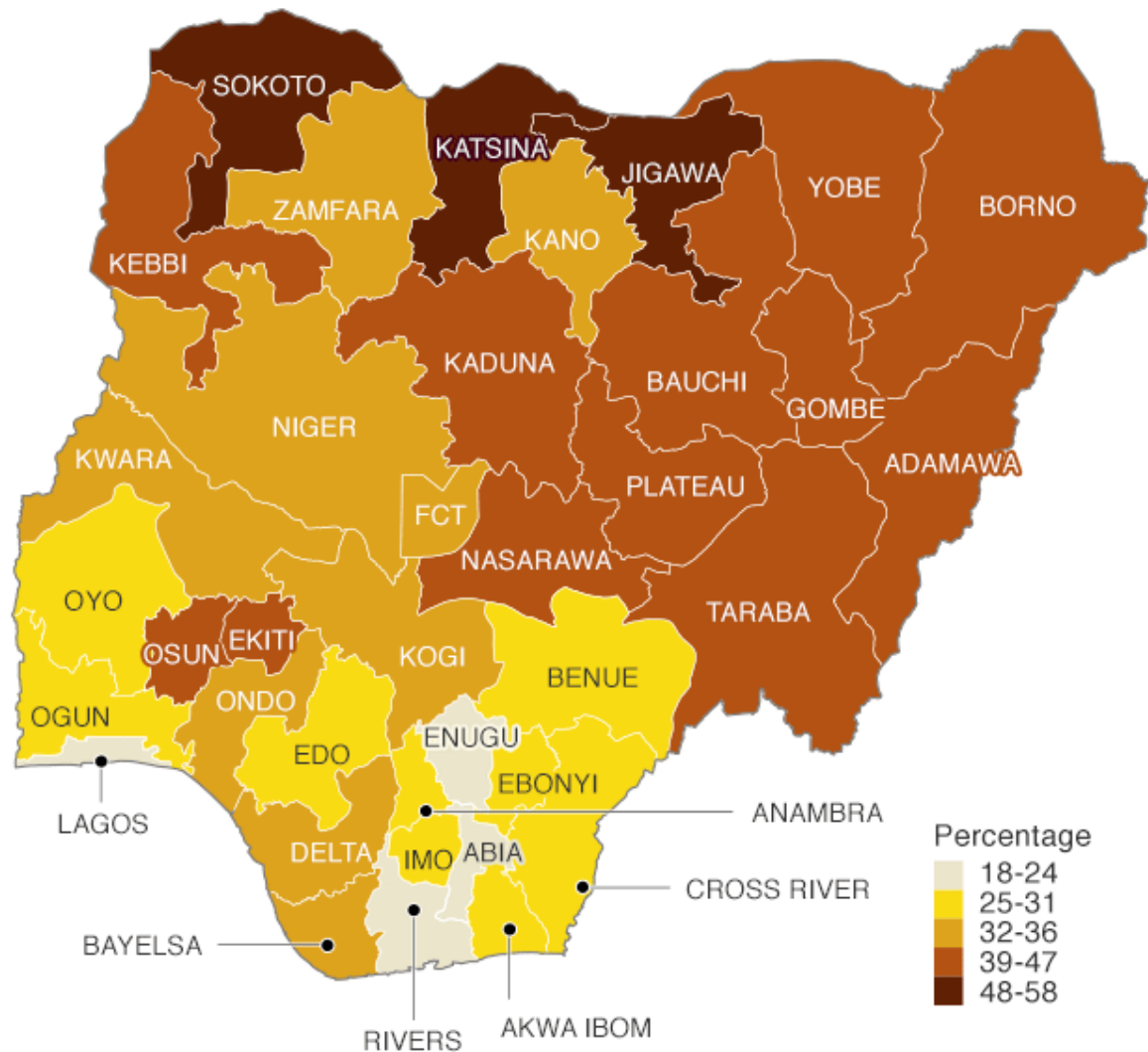


Figure 1. Voters Turnout, 1999-2019

The Voting Age Population (VAP), as well as the number of Registered Voters (REG) when compared with actual voters on Election Day can be relied upon as indicators of political participation in democracies. So, when measuring votes cast as a percentage of the estimated voting-age population and considering the above analysis, it is obvious that voter turnout in Nigeria is dismally low. Is there any correlation therefore, between high political awareness and voter turnout? Let me start by admitting that turnout may not necessarily reflect the wider health of civic engagement given the fact that political engagement is much more multi-dimensional. But turnout, among other factors, is a manifestation of civic engagement and a function of personal/group interest. Suffice to say that declining voting rates may be symptomatic of a democratic deficit” (Pammett & LeDuc, 2003; Nakhaie 2006). Based on measures of people’s interest in government, current events, and political issues, coupled with aggressive civic education by civil society groups, interest can be developed by citizens around election period. This interest, or pre-election engagement, manifests in political rally attendance, social media activism and participation in election discussions through different forums.

Nigeria Presidential Election Results 2019

Percentage of registered voters who cast their votes



Source: INEC

BBC

Figure 2. 2019 Nigeria Presidential Election Results

A vast literature points to education as a major driver of voting, as well as many other forms of civic action (Almond & Verba, 1963). In fact, it has been argued that the positive relationship between education and political participation is “one of the most reliable results in empirical social science” (La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998, p. 567). In the last decade, Nigerians have demonstrated some appreciable level of political awareness/education in many aspects of election activities, except voting on Election Day. In previous elections, politicians/political parties, the electorate, and Civil Society Organizations made extensive use of social media as they used the social media to achieve a number of interrelated objectives. Most people misperceive political participation and thus only see and reduce it

to franchise exercise (voting during elections) (Othman et al., 2018). Political participation goes beyond voting on Election Day. The fundamental point however, is that statistics about voter turnout in the last decade in Nigeria do not justify the aphorism: “education as a major driver of voting” with the 2019 general elections recording the lowest in two decades despite active participation in other areas of electioneering.

No doubt, social media stimulates online and offline political participation among Nigerians, suggesting that online political activities and offline political participation could be a function of political awareness. The relevance of this observation among Nigerian electorate, particularly in the last decade, cannot be overemphasized. Within the context of our discussion in this chapter, it can be affirmed that a key marker of political participation in democracies is voter turnout, more so that voting is the most important act of a democratic society. But given the fact that citizens’ political knowledge, socialization and general level of trust in a country have also an impact on turnout, a single factor can therefore, not be used to determine political participation. Hence, citizen political awareness may be hampered by other variables and as such, may not translate into high turn-out in an election as discussed in the section below.

4. Voting Behavior, Low Turnout and Contagious Skepticism in Nigeria

Voting behaviour, which implies the factors and attitudes that govern electorates’ selection of their prospective representatives, seems to be a result of societal development, the influence of mobilising media (such as political parties and churches), individual resources (such as time and skills) and motivation (such as political interest and trust) (Norris, 2002). Thus, pointing to a single factor as causing a person’s turnout or lack of turnout would be a vast oversimplification (Harder & Krosnick, 2008). Different explanatory models, including the sociological model, rational choice model and clientelism model, can be drawn from the political science literature to assess which factors influence how people vote in an election. In addition to this, other models of voter behaviour have been employed by political scientists in an attempt to explain the different motivations of voters: retrospective voting, prospective voting and party-line voting.

In spite of these age-long motivations, voters’ apathy has become increasingly serious globally, indicative of the need to build a sustainable society with minimal voters apathy. Low turnout may indicate that democracy is not meeting citizens’ expectations, as earlier alluded to. Low voter turnout can also be seen as an indicator of low legitimacy and limited political stability. As rightly observed by Tucker (2004), “the lower the turnout, the greater the chance that the election result is not the outcome preferred by the population of potential voters. Low turnout makes it possible for minorities to defeat majorities”. Overtime, people become bored, alienated, or mistrustful of politicians. Usually, competitive races, such as the 2019 presidential election in Nigeria, encourage higher turnout because voters realize their votes will make a decisive difference. Ironically, the reverse is the case in Nigeria. As explicitly noted in the 2019 Election Factbook (2019):

The history of elections in Nigerian state has been characterized by threats to statehood based on the manipulation of ethnicity as a divisive mechanism for the acquisition of political power by political actors, the fragile nature of political cum democratic institutions is acquainted with poor democratic culture among Nigerian citizen.

This section will focus on some of the factors precipitating abstinence from voting as observed over the years. One, going by previous elections since 1999, it is obvious that there are unnecessary barriers in the voter registration and voting process that continually prevent would-be voters from casting ballots. Elections must be conducted with integrity for strengthening democracy, furthering development, and for social and individual security. From all indications, with the prevailing government failures in meeting the aspirations of the people, potential voters feel alienated from government and there is a lack of trust in those representing them in government, coupled with the electorate's declining confidence in institutions. Political parties are among the least trusted institutions in the country. Politicians are mostly distrusted by the people. In fact, it is likely that the largest contributing factor to the extremely low turnout was the feeling that whoever won, nothing would change. The system is so corrupt that it makes no difference whether X or Y is president. Pew Research conducted in 2018 showed that only 39 percent of Nigerians were satisfied with their democracy, 72 percent said most politicians were corrupt and 57 percent said no matter who wins elections, things do not change much. Only 38 percent felt that elected officials cared what "ordinary people think" (Adekoya, 2019).

As confidence and trust in politicians and public institutions progressively declined, so too has voter participation. Going by voter's psychological disposition, which is measured by political efficacy, political interest, political trust and satisfaction with democracy, it is obvious that Nigerian voters have not felt any satisfaction in all these criteria. Generally speaking, political research considers political trust to be a prerequisite for a healthy democracy. A sense of fairness and trust in both others and institutions are fundamental prerequisites for democracy and participation. This is obviously absent in Nigeria.

Two, politics is a high-stakes game anywhere; in Nigeria the rewards of victory are particularly high. The violent nature of electioneering in Nigeria entrenched in a "do-or-die" mentality remains a cogent dissuader for prospective voters. Do-or-die, a concept that is often invoked in popular electoral discourse in Nigeria to describe the distinct but alarming nature of the country's democracy as exhibited in the desperation of the politicians and their supporters, is antithetical to electoral participation. Elections in Nigeria from 1999 to date have continued to recycle in vicious violence and unimaginable manipulation especially from the political elites: more than 800 people were killed in 2011 in post-election protests in the north after Buhari's defeat that year (Human Rights Watch, 2012). In 2015, more than 160 people were killed in election-related violence (European Union, 2016). Also, there were cases of violence in some states in the build-up to and during the 2019 elections, which may have hindered voters from exercising their franchise (Adedigba, 2019). Looking at the history of electoral violence in Nigeria, the Crisis group in its 2018 report stated that about 4,000 lives were lost

in elections conducted from 2006 to 2015, with casualty levels increasing in each election cycle (Fadesere, 2019). Due to lapses in security, challenges such as snatching of ballot boxes, destruction of voting materials, under age voting, inability to conduct elections in polling areas or attack on electoral officers in many polling units (Ajala, 2019) are regular occurrences in Nigeria. As usual, international attention and monitors were unable to discourage electoral violence in the country. All of this breeds despair in the Nigerian voter, who begins to question the logic in partaking in this quadrennial democratic ritual (Fadesere, 2019).

Three, a large segment of the Nigerian electorate does not identify with any political party in terms of membership but they usually express sympathy for parties and candidates. One would have thought that such expression can translate into votes on Election Day given that turning out to vote is an expression of political participation and determination to make a statement through ballots. Party identification is typically determined by the political party that an individual most commonly supports (by voting or other means). In other words, those people who identify with a party tend to vote for their party's candidate for various offices in high percentages. Some argue that the availability of more parties gives more options to voters, and thus increases their desire to vote. It is posited that people who identify with one of the political parties, or feel attached to them, are much more likely to vote than those who do not (Mortimore & Gill, 2017). Evidence in the literature suggests that political parties have a key role in encouraging people to turn out to vote by demonstrating it matters which party wins the next General Election, through making it easier for the public to discriminate between the main parties (Mortimore & Gill, 2017). Even when politicians of all parties recognise the seriousness of low turnouts in elections, little is being done by political parties to effect changes more than the usual jamboree during election period in Nigeria. Contrary to expectations, apart from the two dominant political parties in the 2019 Presidential elections, other participating 71 parties could not garner a million votes.

Four, just hours before polls were scheduled to open, the country's Independent National Electoral Commission postponed the vote by a week. By then, thousands of registered voters had made long journeys to their home districts to cast their ballots and literally could not afford to wait idle for another week (Ilo, 2019). Given the timing of the announcement (around 2.30 am local time), millions of eligible voters—especially those without access to the internet and social media—only found out when they woke up February 16 (Kazeem, 2019) after INEC had repeatedly told both Nigerians and international observers that it was fully prepared to bring off the elections according to schedule. The postponement of the election was met with anger and frustration among Nigerians especially as INEC's late announcement suggests a lack of consideration for its impact on citizens (Kazeem, 2019). Two main grievances, according to Obasi (2019) feed the anger: the electoral commission had four years to prepare for the polls, yet failed to deliver, and it announced its decision only hours before voting was set to start. The rescheduling comes at great economic and psychological cost to all concerned,

including the electoral commission, security agencies, political parties, local and international observation groups and, of course, Nigeria's 84 million voters (Obasi, 2019).

Five, the conventional practice that requires voters to stand in queues for long hours often discourages voters from participating in elections (Election FactBook, 2019). Really, voting usually involves multiple administrative steps and waiting long hours in queues. Long lines may discourage some from voting, thus undermining the quality of elections as an expression of the people's will. In fact, growing the apathy pool dissuades people from bothering to stand in long lines. In Nigeria where many people are often alienated from the largesse of democratic governance, queuing under the sun for hours to vote- sometimes owing to polling place inefficiency—is seen as *double tragedy*. With waits at polling places sometimes exceeding an hour, some voters do turn away as poll workers wrestle with malfunctioning equipment and overflow crowds. For a country as populous as Nigeria therefore, “seeking alternatives to the traditional waiting-in-line registration and voting system should not be an option but a necessity” (Obisesan, 2019).

The effects of all these factors could be very contagious among voters. Generally, friends and neighbours encourage one another to go to the polls on Election Day (McClurg 2004) and people in social networks encourage one another to support particular candidates. Recent studies have also elucidated the role of social networks in spreading voting behaviour (Beck, Dalton, Greene, & Huckfeldt, 2002). Voters embedded in social networks of friends, family members, neighbours, and co-workers (Nickerson, 2008) influence each other in terms of voter turnout. Thus, taking into account the dynamic response of social networks to external influences, most studies consider vote choices to be driven by various individual's biases and other external pressures (Braha & de Aguiar, 2017). It is also argued that when people are not strongly committed to a goal, seeing apathy in others triggers and reinforces apathy in them but when people are strongly committed to a goal, seeing apathy in others fuels their commitment (DiSalvo, 2016). In other words, apathy is an emotional contagion with dual effects. In Nigeria, many people who do not vote believe they do not understand enough about the government, the election process or individual party policies and they easily convince friends, neighbours, community associations and relatives, through their nonchalant attitudes, on the futility of previous ballots. Millions of people remained undecided right up to the end, and millions more were influenced by the prevailing apathy to simply give up. The contagious effect of this evidently manifested in the 2019 general elections as somewhere more than half of all eligible voters declined to participate in the election with implications that surpass anyone's ability to forecast-being the lowest turnout in two decades.

5. Pre-Election Engaged and Post-Election Enraged Voters: Stemming the Negative Trends

An analysis of key factors that influence voter preferences since 1999 will reveal that ethnicity, religion, policy performance of the incumbent, economic conditions, etc., are, on varying degrees of importance, central to their voting pattern. More predominant however, are the primordial factors. The main reason

voting ritual has been unable to engender fundamentals of democracy. By implication, the outcome of elections in Nigeria has always been beneficial to the ruling elites and their cronies while the voters are left disenchanted. As earlier pointed out, one of the most important functions of elections is the participation of the citizens in the very process of governance. This stems from the fact that the core value of democracy as expressed in the fundamental definition “government by the people” emphasizes people’s participation in the governance process. It therefore, becomes imperative to investigate why people vote as they do and how they arrive at the decisions they make.

Today, in Nigeria, the fact that electoral democracy is under stress can be measured from the voter behaviour, not only during elections but in post-election engagements. It also manifests in poor service delivery and inability to fulfil electoral promises or whether democracy has been able to address the challenges that people are wrestling with. Low turnout in poorly contested general elections is an important and well-recognized result. Then, how can participation be increased and how can the electorate become more representative of the greater population? There is no silver bullet for increasing turnout—a mix of strategies would need to be pursued, each (on their own) with incremental effects. As a starting point within the context of a developing country like Nigeria where the mass of the electorate are disenchanted, the need arises for government at all levels to make life meaningful for the people by fulfilling its electoral promises and engage them in decision-making process. Electoral reforms would help encourage participation, but so would visible improvement in governance and socioeconomic outcomes. Improving the electorate’s representativeness and understanding of policy issues is also very germane. Similarly, providing information on how well politicians and political parties deliver on promises can help voters make more informed decisions and can also create forums for engagement on political issues. This will not only create a sense of belonging among the voters but invigorate/activate the latent patriotism in them.

However, for voters to make meaningful decisions, they must understand the options the polity faces. Citizens must have a sufficient knowledge of the workings of the political system if they intend to influence and control the actions of their representatives. Even turnout, as posited by Tucker (2004), “cannot have an immediate, strategic impact on the decision made in an election unless voters have meaningful choices on the ballot”. Ordinarily, in a democracy, political leaders should present elections as real opportunities for citizens to participate in politics and an investment into their future. Now, after two decades of controversy over election and voting problems, Nigerian political leadership should commence a post-election review to critically engage stakeholders with a view to addressing the salient challenges in the electoral process, particularly how to re-evaluate and overhaul INEC’s approach to voter registration; and general conduct of election.

Also, there are a number of tools available for countries that intend to increase voter participation and expand voting opportunities for eligible voters; with the strong support of campaigns and grassroots organizations. These include: strengthening civics education in schools; streamlining voter registration with automatic voter registration and online voter registration; providing sufficient resources in

elections and ensure voting is accessible; investing in Integrated Voter Engagement (IVE) and outreach (Root & Kennedy, 2018); social pressure; same-day registration (Lemzy, 2018); customize booths to cater to different needs (Varinsky, 2016)

Nigeria can capitalize on 21st century technology to automatically register voters and update their registration information, without any need for the outmoded bureaucracy being employed at every election cycle. As a matter of fact, in a report by *Nonprofit Vote*, it identifies Automatic Voter Registration (AVR), same-day registration, and vote-by-mail policies as significant enablers, if not motivators, of the high turnout (Ginsburg, 2019). While the American society in which the research was conducted is different from Nigeria's, there is no rocket science in implementing the first two policies- Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) and same-day registration-in the country to encourage voters, because "improving the voter registration process can decrease gaps in voter participation between demographic groups" (Root & Kennedy, 2018). These tools have the potential to reshape and reinvigorate the electorate particularly when strong civics education is combined with robust integrated voter engagement. Around the world, countries with compulsory voting have higher voter turnout levels, especially when sanctions for abstention are enforced, but where voting is not mandatory, all other available tools should be employed. For instance, Sweden does not have compulsory voting but in 2018 parliamentary elections, it recorded 87% of its voting population (Timsit, 2019).

Voting is an effective means of holding elected officials accountable for their decisions and behaviour in office and thus, a high turnout in fair elections gives legitimacy to public officials and their decisions, while abstention may erode citizens' satisfaction and confidence. Low turnouts must be a concern for any democrat as they are unlikely to provide electors with representative government. It is important that voters are familiar with all laws and regulations governing the electoral process and the benefits accruable from participation. Voters should not be forced to wait in line for hours to exercise their civic duty and for their voice to be heard in our democracy. Nor should certain groups have less access and fewer opportunities to register to vote and cast ballots (Root & Kennedy, 2018). To showcase the value of civic engagement and improve participation in the democratic process, getting electorate to vote is as important, if not more, as efforts put into voter registration exercise by stakeholders. Democratic theory suggests there is an axiomatic relationship between high rates of voter participation and turnout and high levels of representation, accountability, oversight and governmental responsiveness (Fakir & Sarakinsky, 2019). Voters can use elections to hold governments accountable for their performance in office only when they meaningfully participate. Post-election engagement is also very important. More importantly, actors in the democratisation process should emphasise the importance of democratic grassroots movements targeting political reforms, and encourage interaction between civil society and the party system.

Using data for over 700 elections covering 85 democracies between 1950 and 2008, Martinez and Trinh (2017) argued that higher turnout is often found in elections with higher electoral integrity. Also, in a study conducted by Birch (2010) it is revealed that perceptions of electoral integrity, and thus

confidence in the fairness, honesty and legitimacy of electoral procedures and outcomes, are indeed positively associated with propensity to vote. Her logic is straightforward: citizens will turn out to vote if they perceive that their vote will be counted fairly. Other studies have shown that low levels of trust in the integrity of elections depress voter turnout (see Martinez i Coma & Trinh, 2017; Simpser, 2012). Those with more faith in the process proved more willing to cast a ballot (Norris, 2012, p. 13). The link between electoral integrity and turnout is fundamental for the legitimacy of democracies: if the lack of electoral integrity damages legitimacy, it should be expected to have an impact on turnout.

6. Conclusion

As one of the pillars of democracy, election has an inescapably ritual dimension that periodically attracts political actors and thus, it has become a barometer to measure political behaviour across regions of the world. Nigeria has, after two decades of uninterrupted civilian government, keyed into this global phenomenon. Though issues of clientelism, religion, class and ethnicity do certainly shape voter perceptions in African politics, as evidenced in Nigeria's six cycles of election since 1999, "other issues such as elite strategies, crosscutting cleavages, political ideology, government performance, opposition parties, candidates and key issues are also powerful determinants of voting intentions" (McLaughlin, 2008; Basedau & Stroh, 2011). However, the dominance of primordial factors over other fundamental issues, in voting behaviour is worrisome in Nigeria. This paper establishes the fact that citizen involvement is largely propelled by different types of motivation even though voting motivations may not be quite so clear-cut in the multi-ethnic societies of sub-Saharan Africa; and non-involvement in the electoral process, particularly voting, is accentuated by divergent factors. Considering the fact that election provides insight into the state of the constitutive elements of democracy, it should be more than just a ritual in a democratic society.

Given the nature of democracy as a trade-off which must also be accepted; it goes without saying that no one can have everything they want and therefore, "disappointments and slow progress must be tolerated in order for the entirety of the system to function" (Kataja, 2017). Though difficult to address, inequality must be tackled if democracy is to work in the future. The challenge for established democracies is to expand further the opportunities for citizens to participate and meaningfully influence the decisions affecting their lives. To meet this challenge means ensuring an equality of political rights and opportunities that will be even more difficult to guarantee with a wider variety of activities (Dalton & Klingemann, 2011). It is expected on a broader level, that the political leadership should build and sustain the institutions of governance, diversify the economy, create jobs for the burgeoning and youthful population, invest in the education and health of the people and reduce abject poverty in the country with a view to impacting positively on the living standard of the people. With these deliverables, the people will have cause to adduce rational basis for their current and future civic engagement through voting and express, through their actions, trust in political institutions.

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