



# Elections and poor voter participation in Nigeria: insights from below, 1959-2019

Jonas O. Eze<sup>1\*</sup> and Matthias Nwande<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of History & International Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup> Department of Public Administration and Local Government, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

Correspondence Author: Jonas O. Eze

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## Abstract

Nigeria's political leaders are elected by less than half of the registered electorate. The registered voters are often an infinitesimal percentage of the voting age population in the country. In other words, greater percentage of the eligible voting electorates fails to register for elections in the country. Questions have continued to be asked, why do few Nigerian citizens seem interested in showing up to register as voters in elections in the country? Why do many of the registered voters in the country refuse to go out on pool days to exercise their right to vote? Writers that have volunteered to answer these questions seem to have done so with conflicting opinions. This work is an attempt to answer these questions with perspectives from below. This study also seeks to highlight the implications of such undemocratic behavior to the country's democratic establishment. Primary data was collected by the use of mixed (closed and open-ended) questionnaires as well as oral interviews, while secondary data was collected through review of relevant literature. The findings are that Nigerian electorates fail to turn out to vote because of the personality of most party candidates that contest the elections, mal-distribution of political wards, lack of authenticity and genuineness of voters register, muscles and violence that characterize the elections etc.

**Keywords:** elections, democracy, participation, rigging, low turnout

## 1. Introduction

In 1959, Nigeria conducted its first major federal election in the country's democratic history. In this "almighty" election leading to the nation's independence in 1960, 79.5% of the registered electorate trooped out to vote. But in the subsequent elections in the country voter turnout became abysmally low. In the nation's 1979 election for instance, only 34.6% of the few registered electorate came out to elect the President of the country. In the 1983 Presidential elections in the land, only 38.9% of the registered voter population voted. In the same vein, in the 1993 federal election in the country, only 36.6%

registered electorate voted in the June 12 presidential election. Indeed, in all elections in Nigeria since the fall of its First Republic in 1967, voter turnout has been abysmally low. Presidential elections were held in Nigeria in 1979, 1983, 1993, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. House of Representatives elections were held in the country in 1959, 1979, 1983, 1992, 1998, 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015 and 2019. The table below furnishes a graphic evidence of voter turnout behavior in Nigeria's democratic history-Presidential, Senate and House of Representatives elections from 1959 to 2019.

## Voter turnout in presidential, senate and house of representative's elections in Nigeria, 1959-2019

Table 1

Elections	Date of election	Registered voters	Turnout	Percentage (%)
House of Reprs.	Dec.12, 1959	9,036,083	7,185,555	79.5%
Presidential	August 11, 1979	48,033,782	16,846,633	38.9%
Senate	July 7, 1979	48,033,782	12,532,195	25.8%
House of Reprs.	July 14, 1979	48,033,782	14,941,555	30.7%
Presidential	August 6, 1983	65,304,318	25,430,096	38.9%
Senate	August 20, 1983	65,300,000 (Approx)	Not available	--- --
House of Reprs.	August 27, 1983	65,300,000 (Approx)	Not available	---- ----
Senate	July 4, 1992	38,800,330	15,800,770	40.7%
House of Reprs.	July 4, 1992	38,800,330	16,903,371	43.6%
Presidential	June 12, 1993	39,000,000	14,293,396	36.6%
Presidential	Feb. 27, 1999	57,938,945	30,280,052	52.2%
Senate	Feb., 20, 1999	57,938,945	24,386,247	42.1%
House of Reprs.	Feb., 20, 1999	57,938,945	23,573,407	40.7%
Presidential	April 19, 2003	60,823,022	43,018,735	69.1%
Senate	April 12, 2003	60,832,022	29,995,171	49.3%

House of Reprs.	April 12, 2003	60,823,022	30,386,270	50.0%
Presidential	April 27,2007	61,567,036	35,397,517	About 50%
Presidential	APRIL 16,2011	73,528,040	39,469,484	53.7%
Senate	April 16,2011	73,528,040	NA	About 50%
House of Reprs.	April 16,2011	73,528,040	NA	About 50%
Presidential	March 28,2015	67,422,005	26,432,083	39.20%
Senate	April 28,2015	67,422,005	29,432,083	43.65%
House of Reprs.	April 28,2015	67,422,005		
Presidential	April 11,2019	82,344,107	28,614,190	34.75%

Source: Wikipedia

From the table it is very clear that Nigeria's political leaders are elected by less than half of the registered electorate. Important to mention is that, the registered voters are often an infinitesimal percentage of the voting age population in the country. In other words, greater percentage of the eligible voting electorates fails to register for elections in the country. Therefore, what we have as the percentage of traditional votes cast in Nigeria's democratic elections is not the percentage of the voting age population but that of the very few registered electorates. In Nigeria's 2019 elections for instance, while the adult/voting age population was 99,958,216, only 28,614,190 electorates voted. In essence, 71,344,026 of Nigeria's adult population had nothing to do with the election that produced the then incumbent President.

## 2. Review of relevant literature

Margaret M. Conway (1991), Ruy A. Teixeira (1987). Peter Baker (1996), Francis Fox (1989) William Hudson (1998) and many more have all provided us insightful and impressive discuss on the reasons for low voter participation especially in advanced democracies in the last couple of decades. To William Hudson low voter turnout in United States elections is caused by the busy, tight and rigid schedules of many American electorates. The busy schedules of many American citizens make it difficult for them to participate in voting on election days. Further, to vote, one must have registered as a voter, but the busy American citizens see going to registration centers as something disruptive to their daily routine. As Peter Baker noted, in industrial democracies, the electorate see going to registration centers to register as potential voters as a special trip they cannot afford on account of their tight schedules. It was also the view of these authors that low voter turnout in elections is caused by the collective benefits that follow electoral outcomes. That is to say whether one votes or not, one stands to enjoys the benefits of the election's outcome. As William Hudson (1998) observed, while low voter turnout in advanced democracies e.g. America could be regarded as a sign of regime stability and citizens' contentment with the democratic establishment, in Nigeria and Africa in general, low voter turnout is an indication that something is fundamentally wrong with the institution.

Damilola Ojetunde (2019) in his article entitled "2019 Election: Nigeria has the Lowest Rate of Voter Turnout in Africa", defines the rate of voter turnout as one calculated by the percentage of the total number of registered vis-à-vis the total number of votes (the summation of the total number of valid votes and the total number of rejected votes) accrued at [www.synstojournals.com/multi](http://www.synstojournals.com/multi)

the end of the election. As he pointed out, the rate of voter turnout in Nigeria's 2019 Presidential election is second lowest in the history of elections ever in African continent. He gave Zimbabwean's 1996 presidential election as the lowest ever in Africa. The author listed some factors responsible for poor voter turnout in Nigeria as insecurity/over security, apathy and poor planning.

According to Sam Itodo (2019), the Executive Director of Youth Institute for Growth and Development, Nigerians hardly turnout to cast their votes because democracy is not delivering development to the people, it will increase level of turnout because there is affinity between democratic development and fulfillment of campaign promises. When people's lives are not improved, when poverty and inequality are institutionalized people find it difficult to connect to the social contract that they enter by virtue of voting and the deliverables that come from democracy.

The writer enumerated the following as the causes of poor voter turnout in the country's elections: crisis of confidence of the people in the nation's democratic institution, high level of violence that characterize elections in the country and militarization of the entire electoral process in the land.

Daily Trust (21 February, 2019), in its issue "Nigeria, How Voter Turnout Shapes Nigeria's Elections", made statistical presentation of the total number of registered voters and the total number that voted in the nation's democratic elections from 1999-2015 and asked the question-will 2019 be different? Auwal Musa (2019), the Executive Director of Civil Society Legislative Advocacy Centre seemed to have volunteered to answer the question as he had this to say after the election, "Threat of violence was one of the factors that deterred voters from coming out to vote in the election". According to him, a further factor that deterred people from coming out to vote is the fact that political parties did not convince Nigerians about their programs and policies if voted into power. To BBC Africa (28 February, 2019) low voter turnout in Nigeria's 2019 elections especially in the South is an indication of the voters decreasing faith in the political establishment and what it can deliver to the people.

Remi Adekoya (2019), in his work entitled, "Democracy has failed in Nigeria when Voters no Longer Care who wins", lamented dismally the low turnout in Nigeria's 2019 Presidential election. As he noted, such reveals fractured relationship between the politicians and the populace. The writer identified five reasons for poor voter turnout in Nigeria's elections. These are poor organization of elections in the country, the cumbersomeness of the voting process where

voters wait long hours, fear of violence and over securitization of the civil space. The last but not the least reason given was the founded conviction of the people that whoever won, nothing would change. According to him, the system is so corrupt that it makes no difference to the people if X or Y is the president of the country.

Although the above sources are veritable literatures for understanding poor voter participation in Nigeria's democratic elections, lacuna exists when taken with insights from below. It is this gap that this paper seeks to address.

### 3. Method

This study adopted a cross sectional survey design. The target population for the study was drawn from 4 of the 6 geographical zones of the Federation. The study used both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through oral interviews and mixed (closed and open-ended) questionnaires, while secondary data was collected through review of relevant literature.

The questionnaires were administered using the 'drop and pick up later' method so as to allow the respondents ample time to respond to the questions, thereby enhancing accuracy in responses.

### 4. Research design and study setting

Given that the study is qualitative in nature, the work adopted quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative techniques involve the use of questionnaires to understand the respondents' extent of awareness of the causes of poor voter participation in Nigeria's democratic elections. Qualitative method involved in-depth oral interviews used to both enhance and authenticate quantitative results generated in the survey.

The study took place in four of the six geo-political zones of the Federation of Nigeria. These were North-Central, South-South, South-East, and South-West geo-political zones. Three states were selected in each of the zones as follows: Benue, Kogi, and Nasarawa States (North-Central), Cross River, Delta and Edo States (South-South), Enugu, Anambra and Ebony States (South-East), Ekiti, Oyo and Ogun (South-West). These states were selected because of the high level of poor voter turnout behavior in democratic elections in the country. The study began with contact setting and visits to relevant authorities especially the traditional rulers requesting from them the permission to be allowed to carry out the study.

A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed in the four geo-political zones, that is 150 in each zone. The distribution went to a total of 100 males and 50 females between the ages of 22-70. A total of 400 persons took part in the in-depth interviews in the 4 geopolitical zones, that is, 100 in each zone. 250 men and 150 women were involved in the in-depth interviews.

### 5. Questionnaires and meeting with respondents

On account of the qualitative nature of the study, primary data was collected by the use of mixed (closed and open-ended) questionnaires as well as oral interviews. In view of the subject matter under study, the questions administered to the respondents were limited. Nevertheless, they were sufficient

enough to meet the objectives of the study. The open-ended questions allowed the respondents to explain in more detail the reasons behind their responses given in the close-ended section of the questionnaires. Such was to give one a better picture of the issues under study. Questionnaires for this work sought answers to such pertinent questions as sex, age, residence, status/position/rank, marital status, awareness of the reasons for poor voter turnout behavior in democratic elections in the country etc. The questionnaires were used in the study because they are convenient and could yield both qualitative and quantitative data. The study took place from March 2019 to February 2020.

### 6. Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with the electorate, young and old of the voting age population in the zones. A total of 400 such eligible voting electorates were interviewed. 600 questionnaires were distributed to respondents of voting age, but only 593 were diligently completed and returned.

### 7. Data analysis

The researcher began by first transcribing the data from the interviews. The process of transcribing the data helped the researcher to connect with the thinking of the respondents. Perceived gaps and missing links in a respondent's information were filled through phone calls and e-mail communications with the concerned respondent. In analyzing the interviews, the thematic analysis technique was used to uncover themes and trends. Excerpts from quantitative results were used to compliment the qualitative depositions. *Data analysis took place at two levels – descriptive statistics level and inferential statistics level.*

### 8. Theoretical framework

Two theoretical frameworks guide this study. These are the Rational Choice theory and the Participatory Democracy theory. The Rational Choice theory (Garry Becker, 1981) posits that individuals make rational decisions based on both self-interest and cost-benefit analysis. In the context of low voter turnout, the theory argues that the electorates consider the costs associated with voting and compare them to the expected benefits especially the responsiveness of the elected officials. In the case of Nigeria, this theory can explain poor voter turnout by referring to such factors as lack of trust in the electoral process, electoral violence, intimidation and other electoral irregularities. To the theory, the like factors erode the people's trust in the system and kill their motivation to vote. To the Participatory Democracy theory, voting is an instrument of popular sovereignty, an end in itself. The rendering of this theory is that political apathy especially poor voter turnout in elections is caused by weak political institutions, and lack of opportunities for significant participation, in the politics of the land. In essence, poor voter participation in elections is a by-product or consequence of the weaknesses of the structure of social and political institutions in a state. In their statement of principle dubbed "*a democracy of individual participation*", they called for reformation of such nations' political, social and

economic institutions to make them more conducive to participation especially in elections (William Hudson, 1998: 134). The theory advocates the expansion of participatory opportunities in politics and national elections. This theory is useful in explaining poor voter turnout in elections in Nigeria by pointing to the weaknesses of Nigeria's democratic establishment. Nigeria's democratic space is both ganged and hijacked.

### 9. Discussion and presentation of findings

Reasons for low voter turnout in Nigeria's democratic elections although very many writers have provided us insightful and impressive discuss on the reasons for low voter participation in elections especially in Western democracies, their professed reasons seem not to offer fitting explanation for Nigeria's poor voter turnout survey. This perhaps is because Nigeria's democracy is a peculiar democracy with peculiar contradictions. To Maximus Ezemuoh (personal interview, December 2019) one of the major reasons for poor voter turnout in elections in Nigeria is the people's loss of confidence in the electoral process in the land. All over Nigeria, there is consistent massive rigging of elections at every stage of the electoral process. May we listen to the lamentations of Nigeria's Roman Catholic Church of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province. This Church after observing the May, 2003 State House of Assembly elections in the country had this to say, (Eze, 2009):

It is unfortunate and indeed a national embarrassment that an Election such as the one to the State House of Assembly whose results are supposed to have a greater impact on the lives of Nigerians was largely treated with a high level of apathy and nonchalance. This may not be unconnected with the loss of confidence in the electoral process on the part of the electorate, majority of whom felt that the results of the elections as announced by INEC was a subversion of the will of the people (going by the fraudulent results announced by INEC in the earlier two elections- Senate and House of Representatives, Presidential/Governorship).

In Nigeria, most elections are often rigged before the election day. The rigging of some elections in Nigeria begins right from their constitutional and legal frameworks. When it is observed by the electorate that the election's attendant processes are corrupt being full of irregularities, many dissatisfied, would on their own decline not to participate in the polls (Jude Enemuoh, personal interview, 2018). This fact was apparent in Nigeria's 1979, 2003 and 2015 polls. Nigeria's 2003 Voters' registration exercise for instance was attended by unparalleled fraudulent practices and irregularities. As the Catholic Secretariat, Ijebu-Ode, Nigeria lamented after observing the exercise with 7,455 trained observers: 'The exercise was encumbered by under – registration, hoarding, selling/buying of voters cards, violent conduct of parties, short supply of registration material insufficient registration centers, and other forms of irregularities' (Eze, 2009).

To B. I. Ijomah (2005), corrupt electoral processes such as maldistribution of constituencies, political wards etc., cause poor

turnout of voters. Richmond Idowu (personal interview, August 12, 2019) lending a voice to this point had this to say, elections are not necessarily about election day activities, although they form an important component. Elections involve a complex set of activities that act and feed on one another. It encompasses mainly activities before and during elections. It includes the legal and constitutional framework of elections, the registration of voters and political parties, party campaigns, the activities of the electronic and print media, campaign financing, the activities of security agencies and the government in power. It includes also, the authenticity and genuineness of voters register, the liberalism or otherwise of the political process in the country and the operations of the electoral agencies and organs. Apparent irregularities in these processes in Nigeria cause voter apathy and low turnout of the electorate on election days in the country.

Next, the personality of most party candidates contesting elections in Nigeria is another major cause of low voter participation in elections in the state. In the words of Marthias Okonkwo (personal interview, August 9, 2019), "*Election in Nigeria is a higgledy –piggledy collection of notorious men, cabals and fraudsters*". As he pointed out, in Nigerian politics unlike in other democracies, criminals are both seen and heard. Without qualms, political parties in Nigeria, field foul personalities for elective political positions. From the day the parties announce their selected candidates, most electorate conclude that such candidates are not good for anything. Worse still, a good number of such candidates are often ones that have participated one way or the other in looting and in dividing the spoils of the state and the commonwealth. Put succinctly, the parties field men that are products of corruption and graft with no respect for law and justice, truth and honesty. But in politics and leadership, personality is almost more important than party programmes and principles. Joseph Ways (Okafor, 1981) lending a voice to this point had this to say, "*Because of the fielding of thieves, and shacks as candidates by parties for elections in Nigeria, many eligible, registered electorate chose to avoid the polls on days of election*".

Further, one of the major reasons for low voter turnout in Nigeria on pool days seems to have been graphically captured by the theory of rational ignorance (William Hudson, 1998). To this theory, in many democratic states, registered and eligible electorate do not turn out to vote on pool days because as they feel, their vote will not be decisive in the election. This unfounded conviction is the popular thinking of most registered voters especially in Presidential elections in Nigeria. In the words of Raymond Nuhu (personal interview December 2018), "*I do not go out to vote on election days because my one individual vote will make no difference in an election in which millions of other Nigerian registered voters participate*". In this belief, many duly registered voters in the country fail to go to the polls on poll days to exercise this democratic right.

Closely allied to the above fact is the belief of a reasonable number of both the eligible and registered electorate that election victory confers collective benefits. In other words, whether one votes or not in an election, the dividends accruing from the electoral victory will be enjoyed by all persons in the



region or country (William Hudson 1998: 10). Edet Ekpo (personal interview, November, 2019) demonstrating this very popular belief of the Nigerian electorate puts it thus: *"Whoever wins whether I vote or not, na we put am there, if he do well, he do for all of us, na we all go enjoy am, if he do bad na we all go suffer am"*.

The promotion of violence, intimidation and thuggery as ingredients of democracy for elections in Nigeria is another chief cause of low voter participation in elections in the land. Elections in country are characterized by violence and incredible intimidation of the electorate. Trigger happy thugs armed with AK47s are Nigeria's elections invaluable industry. In the words of S.O. Mgbada (personal interview December 18, 2018), *"Why would people not develop political apathy in a nation where seekers of political offices maintain a killer squad for eliminating opponents and intimidating the electorate"*. J. I. Adonu (personal interview, July 17, 2018) seems to have put this point very succinctly. According to him, *"There is poor turnout of voters in Nigerian elections because politics in the land to this hour has remained a game of muscles and violence. But unfortunately, democracy is the law and will of the people"*. J. E. Adele (personal interview, February 6, 2019) tried to strengthen and deepen this point. As he noted, *Low turnout of voters in the country is caused by the chemicalization of Nigerian politics especially since the Second Republic. I liken Nigerian elections to what happens when two antagonistic elements or substances are mix in a test tube. The result is a violent reaction in which case one chemical tries to destroy its supposed opposite. This is exactly the reaction and action today in our nation's politics and election experiences. One group or party making frantic efforts to destroy the other. Kill-me-I-kill-you.*

It has also been identified that low turnout of the electorate in the country's elections is caused by the people's disappointment with Nigerian politician's mortal mentality of greed, avarice, embezzlement, bribery and corruption, ethnicism and many more. In the words of M. C. Ogodu (personal interview, January 8, 2019), *"How can people turn out to vote when politicians in the country have hijacked the society and polluted it with corruption, arson, murder, embezzlement, broken promises, lies and falsehood.?"*

### **Implications of low voter turnout for Nigeria's democracy**

In examining the implications of low voter turnout on Nigeria's democracy and good governance, one may begin with the views expressed by Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Chief Awolowo after observing Nigeria's 1979 Senatorial election where only 25% of the registered voters elected the Federal law makers lamented thus: *"The danger in poor poll is that the wrong persons.....by default find themselves in power"* (Ojiakor: 1981). In this vein, it could be said that poor polls have been responsible for the recycling of bad leadership in Nigeria.

Put another way, because of low turnout of voters, Nigerian electorate are incapable of installing responsible and responsive government. In the words of Finer, (1949), *"A healthy democracy demands not just universal suffrage but*

*universal turnout"*. B.I.C. Ijomah (2005) seemed to have authenticated the above view of Finer when he pointed out that because of low voter turnout in Nigeria, the elected political leaderships are irresponsible and are incapable of forming responsible government. According to him, such emergent leaderships ruin both the national democratic establishments and the economy. Emerging often as leaders without the people's mandate, many spend 50% of their tenure defending in courts of law positions they never truly won, and so have no time and mental disposition for good governance. Therefore, in Nigeria, low voter turnout, bad governance and poverty are coterminous.

Further, by abysmal low turnout on poll days, the Nigerian electorates have destroyed the two major voting decision rules in elections which are accountability and mandate. By accountability voting, the electorate vote to return an incumbent regime that has done well. By mandate voting, they vote to unseat an erring incumbent. These notions of reward and punishment guide voters in all known democratic establishments. By poor turnout of voters in Nigeria, the electorates lack the capacity to unseat a regime with their votes. So in Nigeria, regimes are dislodged not through the voting power of the electorate but through organized, high level rigging.

### **Findings**

Since the fall of Nigeria's First Republic in 1966, voter turnout in Nigerian elections has witnessed a steady, abysmal decline. In 2019, Nigeria recorded the lowest turnout in its general election in the nation's history as a democracy. It is difficult for Nigeria's democracy to maintain its legitimacy given that only insignificant percentage of the citizenry believes in it. Democracy in Nigeria like marriage cannot survive without trust, and trust is scarce if it abounds at all in Nigeria's democratic space. Political apathy prevails all over the nation because the relationship between the Nigeria leadership class and the electorate seems to have broken down irretrievably. The reason for this being that there is a huge gap between the expectations of the people and the realities of governance. This seems mightily demonstrated in the increasing declining capacity of the nation's democratic institution to deliver goods and dividends of democracy and in the militarization of its democratic space. Suffice it to say that Nigeria is practicing a trapped democracy. A trapped democracy is one that has failed for whatever reasons to improve its democratic qualities, measured by its procedure, contents and results.

### **Conclusion**

Nigerian political leadership class is elected by less than 50% of the country's very few registered electorates. The reasons for abysmally low turnout of Nigerian electorates on poll days are multidimensional. It ranges from the personality of most party candidates, mal-distribution of political wards, lack of authenticity and genuineness of voters register, muscles and violence that characterize the elections, the people's loss of confidence in the electoral process. Intimidation and corruption. The consequences of this voter behavior for

democracy in Nigeria are alarming and tragic. Voter apathy in the country has destroyed the key functions of election which are mandate and accountability. The electorates often lack the capacity to effect regime change through the ballot. In Nigeria, low voter turnout and bad governance go hand in hand. A healthy democracy in the country demands not just universal suffrage but universal turnout. True survival of democracy in Nigeria demands active participation of the citizens at all levels of the democratic process.

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