

Voter Apathy and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

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Abstract

This work seeks to examine the relationship between voter apathy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Voter apathy is a term that describes people's unwillingness to partake in the voting process in a country while democracy is the government of the people by the people and for the people and democratic consolidation is a term that emphasizes the entrenchment of democratic principles in the long run in a country practicing democracy. It has been observed that there are causes of voters' apathy in Nigeria which has contributed to the withering of democratic consolidation. These include but are not limited to voter suppression, lack of trust in the political process, lack of voter education, etc. While the benefits of democracy can never be overemphasized, there is a common opinion that it encourages peaceful coexistence among the people, promotes patriotism among the populace as well as provides legal rights to people and enables a country to earn respect among other countries of the world. This entails that there is an utmost need for democracy to be consolidated in Nigeria being a country with a nascent democracy and with people of different cultures, tribes, languages, religions and political affiliations if the country was to achieve economic and socio-political development.

Keywords: Voters, Voter Apathy, Democracy, Democratic Consolidation and Development

Keyword: E-learning, sustainable learning and education (SLE), Integrated Model, Community financing and bandwidth.

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Introduction

The purpose of this work is to examine the relationship between voter apathy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. Voter apathy refers to the lack of interest or enthusiasm among people towards participating in an electoral process. In Nigeria, like in many other countries especially in Africa, Asia and in Latin America, the issue of low voters' turnout has been a cog in the wheel of progress that affects democratic consolidation. Democratic consolidation itself refers to the process of establishing stable, well-functioning democratic institutions and norms that are widely accepted and respected by citizens in the long run. In Nigeria's case, voter apathy has been attributed to various factors, including a lack of trust in the electoral process, pervasive corruption, insecurity, tribalism, favoritism, religious sentiments and a sense of disillusionment with political leaders.

The negative impact of voter apathy on democratic consolidation can never be overemphasized. It limits the legitimacy of political institutions, undermines the principles of representation, accountability, rule of law and transparency, and weakens the overall quality of governance in the country. As such, it is imperative to address voter apathy and to encourage more active participation in the democratic process in Nigeria, hence this research work. As it will enlighten students, administrators, political office holders and the general public to see the reasons to discourage voters' apathy and encourage democratic consolidation for the good of all and sundry.

Conceptual Review:

Voter Apathy

Voter apathy refers to the feeling of indifference or disinterest towards participating in an electoral process (Federico, 2016). Voter apathy can also be defined as a lack of trust in the political system or government in a country resulting in a reluctance of people to vote (Putnam, 2000).

According to Keyes & Ogletree(2018), in some cases, voter apathy may be as a result of limitations in the access to voting such as strict voter ID laws or limited polling locations. Voter

apathy is often linked to a lack of understanding of political issues or candidates leading to a belief that one's vote does not matter (Miller, 2019).

Democracy

According to Tocqueville (1835) democracy is a system in which citizens have equal political and civil rights and fundamental freedoms which leads to a thriving civil society. Schumpeter (1942) defines democracy as a method for the election of individuals to public offices through competitive elections. For Dahl (1971), democracy is a polyarchy, which refers to a political system that allows citizens to have a significant impact on government decisions through participation and opposition. Edeh (2022) opined that democracy is a Greek word which literally means “rule by the people“. It is a form of government in which the people have the authority to choose their governing legislation. In a democratic state or government, the supreme power of the state is vested on the people because they make political decisions that concern the state either directly or through representatives periodically appointed by them.

He further reiterated that this definition has been corroborated by the Oxford Learner’s Dictionary. It defines democracy as government by the people- a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system. He went on to say that there are two major types of democracy viz-a-viz;

Direct Democracy: where all the citizens attend the Assembly and take part in the decision making process in order to govern the state or the society. This type of democracy was practiced in an ancient small Greek city. It was also practiced in Nigeria during the Igbo pre-colonial administration. **Indirect Democracy-** In this system of democracy, the citizens through election, elect those who will represent and govern the state on their behalf. This is opposed to the direct democracy where everyone is actively participating in the governance of the day. This type of democracy replaced direct democracy in modern states as it is impossible for everyone to participate due to the large number of people that are meant to be involved.

Features of Democracy

In a democracy, there are certain things embedded in it and are seen as its features these include;

- **Equality and individualism**

Democratic societies promote equality among its citizens and foster an individualistic spirit that can contribute to both personal freedom and social isolation (Tocqueville, 2003). Decentralization and local governance

In a democratic system, grassroots democracy and local self-government is an essential component (Tocqueville, 2003).

- **Existence of a free press**

The role of an independent and vibrant press in ensuring the accountability of the government and promoting an informed citizenry in a democratic society is assured (Tocqueville, 2003).

- **Institutionalized uncertainty**

Democracy involves accepting uncertainty about who will hold power and how their policies will affect society. Democracy thrives when there is an established framework and legal procedures to handle conflicts ensuring peaceful transitions of power (Przeworski, 1991).

- **Political freedoms and civil liberties**

Democracy requires the protection and guarantee of civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, assembly and association. These individual and collective freedoms are fundamental to the functioning of democracy (Przeworski, 1991).

- **Inclusion and political equality**

Democracy should ensure equal political rights and opportunities for citizens. This includes broad citizen participation, regardless of social, economic or cultural differences (Przeworski, 1991).

According to Edeh (2022), the main characteristics of democracy are;

- **Existence of a Constitution**

In every democratic nation, there is usually the existence of a constitution which is either written or written. A constitution can simply be defined as the fundamental laws or rules which guide a state or society. It establishes the institutions of the government such as the legislature, the executive and the judiciary and defines their powers. The constitution also contains the rights and duties of the citizens and the government. It is imperative to note that there are two types of institutions namely: Formal and informal institutions. Formal instructions are those which discharge formal functions such as the three arms of the government. On the other hand, informal institutions are those which discharge informal responsibilities such as the political parties and the press. In a democratic society, the constitution usually states how these institutions function.

- **Popular participation in politics**

One of the most important features of democracy is the popular participation in politics. From the definition of democracy explained above, it is clear that any system which does not encourage people to participate in the political decision making of the government is not democratic. Consequently, popular participation is not just a feature of democracy; it is an essential part of the system. People have to participate in politics either directly or through a representative which is legitimately recognized by them. For example, in Nigeria (a federal system), people at the local level, who cannot actively participate in politics at the central level are allowed to elect Senators who represent their opinions at the central level.

Benefits of democracy

1. In a democracy, people are given guarantee of their legal right. For example, in a democracy, the right to defend oneself before an accuser is instituted.
2. Democracy ensures continuity in governance as there is an easy route for change in governance.
3. In a democracy there is a high level of patriotism among the populace as any controversial issue that arises is not greeted with levity.
4. In a democratic state everyone is carried along in the activities of the state and there is peaceful coexistence and lesser conflicts.
5. According to Edeh(2022), democracy encourages faster economic growth. From the structure of a democratic government, it is evident that this form of government largely encourages growth and development in the economy of a state

Impacts of voter apathy on democratic consolidation in Nigeria:

1. According to Aribisala(2018), apathetic voters are less likely to engage in political dialogue and civic education thereby further entrenching political disengagement and enthrone democratic disintegration.
2. Low voter turnout could lead to a lack of diversity in political representation as certain groups may be underrepresented due to their low voter participation rates (Ezenwankwo, 2018).
3. Low voter turnout weakens the legitimacy of the democratic process both in the eyes of the citizens and that of the international community (Oloruntoba, 2018).
4. An election in which voters' apathy was recorded could result in the enthronement of inefficient or corrupt leaders due to the fact that there was a low turnout of voters.
5. Voters that didn't take part in the election would most likely be disinterested in the officials that won thereby giving the elected officials room to do what they like without worrying about checks and balances.

6. Voter apathy may strengthen the hold of political elites who have the resources to mobilize their own base of loyal voters (Suberu & Akindele, 2011).

7. Voter apathy could create room for election crises where people involved in the quest for power can use the opportunity to ensure that they win at all cost.

8. According to Olatunji(2010), voter apathy can also undermine the development of civil society organizations that promote democratic values and hold elected officials accountable.

9. Voter apathy can give momentum to civil unrest and consequently encourage political instability.

Problems related to voter apathy in Nigeria

- **Disillusionment with Political Parties**

Many Nigerians are no longer motivated to vote in elections due to a lack of trust in political parties. According to a survey conducted by the Nigerian Election Violence Report (NEVR), only 29.4% of respondents had confidence in political parties to deliver on their promises (Omotola, 2018).

- **Voter Suppression**

In some areas of Nigeria, voters are faced with intimidation and violence leading to low voter turnout. In the 2019 elections, for example, reports of violence and ballot theft were prevalent in several regions of the country, including Lagos, Kano and Rivers (Amnesty International, 2019).

- **Lack of Trust in Electoral Processes**

Nigerian voters lack confidence in the ability of electoral institutions to conduct free and fair elections. A study by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) found that only 13% of Nigerians had "substantial trust" in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) (NDI, 2020).

- **Youth Disengagement**

Young people in Nigeria often feel disconnected from the political process and do not see voting as a means for change. According to a report by NOIPolls (2018), only 40% of Nigerians aged 18-25 registered to vote in the 2019 elections.

- **Economic Barriers**

Financial constraints prevent some citizens from participating in the electoral process. For instance, many prospective voters in Nigeria complain of the high cost of obtaining a voter's card which is a prerequisite for voting (Ndubisi & Udodo, 2021).

- **Lack of Effective Voter Education**

Due to the weak voter education especially in rural areas, people don't feel motivated to participate in the electoral process. According to Ebuhe (2016), a study by the European Journal of Social Sciences (EJSS) found out that voters who lacked adequate information about the electoral process were more likely to be apathetic

Theoretical framework

Various theories can be linked to this study. These include but are not limited to;

Modernization Theory – this theory was propounded by Seymour Martin Lipset in 1959. This theory suggests that as societies modernize and develop economically, they tend to experience a higher level of political participation and democratic consolidation. What this entails is that as Nigeria undergoes modernization, voter apathy should decrease and democratic consolidation should increase.

Resource Mobilization Theory- this theory was propounded by John McCarthy and Mayer Zald in 1977. This theory argues that political participation and democratic consolidation are influenced by the availability of resources such as time, money and organizational skills. In the

context of Nigeria, if citizens lack the necessary resources to engage in political activities, this may lead to voter apathy and hinder democratic consolidation.

Rational Choice Theory – this theory was propounded by Anthony Downs in 1957. This theory suggests that individuals make rational decisions based on a cost-benefit analysis. In the case of voter apathy in Nigeria, citizens may perceive the costs of participating in elections (e.g., time, effort, risk) to outweigh the benefits (e.g., impact on policy outcomes). Therefore, they may choose not to participate leading to voter apathy and potentially hindering democratic consolidation.

Social Capital Theory – this theory was propounded by Robert Putnam in 1993. This theory emphasizes the importance of social networks, trust and civic engagement in fostering political participation and democratic consolidation. In Nigeria, if citizens lack social capital, such as strong community ties or trust in political institutions, it may contribute to voter apathy and hinder the consolidation of democracy.

Political Culture Theory – this theory was propounded by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in 1963. This theory focuses on the role of political culture in shaping citizens' attitudes and behaviors towards politics. If Nigeria's political culture is characterized by cynicism, distrust or a lack of civic values, it may contribute to voter apathy and pose challenges to democratic consolidation.

It is important to note that these theories provide different perspectives on the relationship between voter apathy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. They offer potential explanations for the phenomenon but may not fully capture the complex dynamics at play which could be varied.

Voters' Apathy and Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria: The way forward

Having observed the gains of democracy and the negative impact voters apathy can play in democratic consolidation in Nigeria, the following approaches are hereby recommended;

Introduction of online voting

With the wide spread of technology all over the world with its enormous benefits, the government should institute online voting patterns for all people of voting age in Nigeria as it is more flexible and less stressful. González (2009) notes that online voting has the potential to curb voter apathy as it allows for a broader participation of citizens in the democratic processes.

Strengthen democratic institutions

There should be emphasis on strengthening all democratic institutions in the country by the government so as to enhance democratic consolidation. For instance, the Electoral Reform Committee (ERC)'s recommendations made after it was set up recommended that there should be the establishment of an Electoral Offenses Commission to look into electoral offenses done before, during and after elections so as to entrench transparency in the voting process (ERC, 2008).

Furthermore, the government needs to ensure that the police are well equipped and ready to perform her role and that the judiciary is also independent and impartial. The judiciary, which is the last hope of the common man, plays an important role in deciding election-related disputes and ensuring that the rule of law is upheld. Like their intervention in the dispute between the main contestants in the 2023 general elections. Okafor (2018) reiterated that judicial independence prevents election-related disputes from escalating into violence or disruption of the democratic process:

- **Civic education**

Adeyanju and Dada (2017) emphasized that civic education can empower citizens with the right knowledge of their rights and duties as voters as well as the processes involved in elections. This education can never be said to have come too late. It should start from the localities to the urban areas encompassing schools, markets, offices, etc and should also involve non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society groups and most especially the National Orientation Agency (NOA).

- **Enhancing political party transparency and accountability**

Political parties should become more transparent in their operations and accountable in their dealings with citizens. This can be achieved through the establishment of internal democracy mechanisms such as in primaries and in the publication of financial reports (Ojukwu, 2016).

- **Reducing election-related violence**

Electioneering violence is a significant contributor to voter apathy and democratic consolidation in Nigeria. As it helps to scare away voters away from exercising their franchise. Measures such as deploying security personnel to polling centers, prosecuting individuals who engage in violent behavior during and after elections and imposing severe sanctions on political actors who incite violence can help to reduce election-related violence in the now and in the future (Ibeanu, 2018).

- **Improvement in media coverage of election campaigns**

The mass media should provide balanced and unbiased coverage of election campaigns to promote voter awareness and participation. Media institutions can be encouraged to provide free airtime to all political parties coupled with the ones already paid for, monitor hate speech and restrict the publication of unverified news in their reportage (Adesoji, 2017).

- **Promotion of inter-party collaboration**

Political parties can collaborate on certain issues of national importance, such as electoral reforms, voters' apathy, security, good governance, etc to promote democratic consolidation. This can be achieved through the establishment of political parties' associations and the organization of national conferences (Ike, 2020).

- **International electoral observers**

The presence of international electoral observers should be taken seriously as this can encourage citizens to participate in the electoral process because of the feeling that the world is watching and everything would go according to plan especially if they are known to be unbiased.

Other recommendations to improve democratic consolidations include; allowing voters to observe the counting process peacefully rather than sending them away, not shielding political party agents from coming close to observe the ballot papers when counting is going on, etc

In summary, voters' apathy is a cog in the wheel of progress to achieve democratic consolidation in Nigeria. But emphasizing on civic education, the encouragement of online voting, strengthening of democratic institutions, like the police, the judiciary, etc are essential to address the issues of voter apathy and also seek to promote democratic consolidation in Nigeria. These solutions require a concerted effort from all and sundry.

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