

VOTER APATHY AND VOTER TURNOUT IN THE 2015 GENERAL ELECTIONS: THE BENUE STATE EXPERIENCE.

By

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Abstract

Since Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999, electoral processes have been characterized by high level of apathy by the electorates and this, impacts negatively on the nation's democracy. This paper examines voter turnout in the 2015 general elections with focuses on the Benue state experience. The views and perceptions of voters in Benue State from 3 local governments in Benue North-East Senatorial zone were analyzed with a view to ascertaining the factors that were responsible for the rather low level voter turnout and participation. Findings reveal that; there are pre-conceived notions among many voters that, the outcome of most elections are pre-determined. Consequently, they believe their votes will not count. There was also fear of violence during the polls. Another factor was the culture of imposing candidates on the electorates without popular appeal. Based on these findings, the paper makes recommendations on the way to improve political participation in Benue state. Hopefully, the recommendations have value for the rest of the country, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and security agencies.

INTRODUCTION

The conduct of credible elections is essential in any democracy, and is at the core of citizens' democratic rights. Since the end of the Cold War, the reintroduction of multiparty democracy and the gradual reopening of the political space have ensured that the conduct of elections is the acceptable means of political change in most democracies. In addition, 'credible competitive elections have become a necessary, albeit sufficient, source of behavioural, if not attitudinal, legitimacy in Africa's emerging democracies' (Mozaffar 2002: 86).

Elections in democracies play the vital role of ensuring representation of popular will and, help to secure the legitimacy of the political system. Thus, Dalton (1988, p.35) holds that, "citizen involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful". However, there is at the same time global evidence of political apathy, lack of psychological involvement in public affairs, emotional detachment from civic obligations, and abstention from political activity. There is ongoing concern to understand the sources and character of this political abstention. Voter apathy, a component of political apathy, which has emerged as a major problem in mature and emerging democracies, settled and volatile societies, large and thriving economies, as well as small and troubled ones, among youth, women and other marginalized groups as much as among mainstream dominant interests. In Nigeria, the systemic voter turnout since 2007 is an indication that Nigerians have greatly become apathetic towards elections. Statistics from the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC capture the trend in voter turnout in the country; 52.2% in 1999, 69.08% in 2003, 57.49% in 2007, 53.68% in 2011 and 43.65% in 2015. This paper therefore, seeks to establish the factors that are responsible for the alarming voter apathy and consequently, a decline in voter turnout. Our focus in this study is the Benue state experience in 2015 General Elections. To do this, three local government areas Viz; Katsina-Ala,

Logo and Ukum have been selected from Benue North-East Senatorial District for this study.

Conceptualizing Voter apathy and Voter turnout

There are various perceptions of what voter apathy is. Crewe et al, (1992) see the word Apathy as denoting a lack of feeling of personal responsibility, a passivity and indifference for political affairs. Subsequently, it denotes the absence of a feeling of personal obligation to participate. Yakubu (2012) holds that, voter apathy is the indifference on the part of electorates as regards their attitude towards electoral processes such as voting. It is the absence of interest in, or concern about electoral process. In a similar view, Cloud (2010) maintains that, voter apathy occurs when eligible voters do not vote in public elections. Voter apathy thus, brings about low voter turnout.

Voter apathy goes beyond just lack of interest or passivity of voters towards voting; it is the insensitivity of voters to electoral processes, particularly voting caused by disenchantment arising from dissatisfaction with the political system and sometimes ignorance and lack of proper education. Voter apathy thus, results in low voter turnouts. In a country supposedly run by elected officials, disenchanting and inactive citizens can present a problem. This is because, when very few people vote at elections, the elected persons do not necessarily represent the beliefs and values of the general population. Fewer voters at the polls lessen the impact of the popular vote and strengthen the impact of special interest groups.

Voter Turnout: On its most basic level, the term simply refers to the percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot in an election. Roberts, (2009) conceives voter turnout as the total number of people that vote in a given election, sometimes given as a percentage. Defining turnout as the share of the population that has cast its votes is correct but not necessarily complete. Geys (2006) opines that, when

turnout is defined as a share of ‘the population’, a clear operationalization of the population variable is also needed. The ratio of the number of voters to the entire population, to the population of voting age, to the eligible population or people registered to vote must be considered. This affects the size of – and quite likely also the variation in turnout rates and may thus affect the estimation results.

The number of electorates who turn out to vote for their government is important in understanding people’s political participation. Emphasizing on the importance of voter turnout in a democracy Kuenzi and Lambright, (2007) argue that, because democracy in its most fundamental sense is “rule by the people,” the proportion of the citizenry expressing its preferences through voting is of interest. While high voter turnout is a desirable indicator of participatory democracy and legitimacy of a current system, low voter turnout is an expression of dissatisfaction on the part of the voting public with the status quo or an indication of political apathy (Chinsinga, 2006).

An overview of political participation and voter turnout in Nigeria

Political participation is the involvement of citizens in political and especially, electoral processes, which is a fundamental requirement for representative democracy. Powell, (1982) sees electoral participation as one of the three main indicators of democratic performance. Unfortunately, there has been a trend of declining electoral turnout and generally, a low level of political participation in most democracies, Nigeria inclusive. Many Nigerians are indifferent in political and especially, electoral matters. The explanation according to Dahl and Stinebrickner, (2005), may be that, people are not by instinct civic-minded beings. Many of our most imperious desires and the source of many of our stronger gratifications can be traced to ancient and persistent biological and physiological drives. Commenting on the level of political apathy displayed by Nigerian citizens in the 2011 General Elections, the INEC Chairman, Prof. Attahiru Jega lamented:

“that there exists voters’ apathy in Nigeria is no longer contentious. Voters turnout in the just concluded general elections had provided a scientific and empirical evidence of voters’ apathy and disinterestedness of sections of the electorates in elections...” (Odebode, 2011).

The statistics from INEC on the just concluded 2015 general elections puts voter turnout at 43.65% out of 67,422,005 registered voters. This is indicative of a further decline in voter turnout in elections. In general, low voter turnout is often considered to be undesirable for any democracy because, voting is seen to occupy the central place in democratic politics as well as one of the key forms of citizens’ involvement in politics. Powell, (1992).

Broadly, Vergne, (2009), Falade, (2011) and Amdi, (2014) have identified some factors that affect political participation and voter turnout. Vergne, (2009) holds that, the expected benefit of voting depends on some variables. Very importantly is that, based on the policy packages that the electorates prefer to be carried out and the parties or leaders they prefer to be in governance. This implies that, there should be at least one party offering the type of candidates and policies that they voters prefer, otherwise they will not benefit from the voting and abstaining will be rational to them. Indeed, when there is no policy package or leader that appeals to the citizens, they simply just stay away from the polls.

Amdi, (2014) identifies the institutional arrangement of the Nigerian state as a major factor for low voter turnout. He maintains that, the democratic process and political participation in Nigeria is a learning one and this is so because, the democratic structures and institutions are very fragile and coupled with low level of democratic culture of the citizens resulting from long years of military dictatorship. These fragile democratic structures have affected the political processes thereby, reducing the measure of confidence in the political process by the citizens. This has greatly affected the extent to which they will participate in a

political system. Falade (2011) says that politics in Nigeria is influenced by money, ethnic and religious factors. Since independence in 1960 he maintains, religious and ethnic politics characterize electioneering process and that is why it practiced with bitterness, hatred and rancor. The result of this is, the apathetic and passive feeling of the citizens leading to low voter turnout.

Again, deceit and unfulfilled promises by political leaders also discouraged a number of Nigerians from participating in electoral processes. Falade, (2008). He argues that, politicians make promises during election campaigns. Most of these promises are often not fulfilled after they have been voted in to power and as a result many voters lose interest in elections and generally become indifferent.

The 2015 General Elections: Benue State Experience

The 2015 General Elections in Nigeria were initially scheduled for 14th and 28th February but were later rescheduled just a week before the initial date. The elections marked a milestone in the history of elections in the country as they were different both in conduct and the outcome. At the National level, the political landscape was completely changed as the opposition party, All Progressives Congress, APC, defeated the ruling party, Peoples' Democratic Party, PDP, to the Presidency and also won majority seats in the two chambers of the National Assembly. The situation in Benue state is not any different from what obtained at the Centre. The APC won the Governorship and 14 seats in the State Assembly against 15 by the PDP. In spite of the outcome of the election, an alarming rate of apathy and low voter turnout characterized the polls in Benue state. Table 1 below is highly suggestive as well as illustrative:

Table 1: Voter turnout for Presidential Elections in Benue state

S/n	Name of Senatorial District	No. Registered voters	No. Accredited voters	Percentage Turnout	Total no. vote
1	Benue North East	661,067	290,446	44%	271,228
2	Benue North West	1,668,320	298,584	18%	282,976
3	Benue South	539,347	166,633	31%	153,498
4	TOTALS	1,927,062	754,634	-	703,131

5	Percentage turnout	39.15%
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Source: INEC, 2015 General Elections. Percentages worked out by researcher

The figures in Table 1 show that none of the Senatorial districts in the state had up to 50% turnout. The percentage turnout for Benue North East was 44%, Benue North West 18% and Benue South 31%. This provides evidence that there was very low voter turnout in Benue state in the General Elections. The focus of this paper however, is on voter apathy and voter turnout in three local governments in the North East Senatorial district of the state which include; Katsina-Ala, Logo and Ukum local governments.

Summary of voter turnout for Presidential Election in the 2015 General Elections from Katsina-Ala, Logo and Ukum Local Government Areas.

Table 2: Voter turnout for Presidential Elections in select local governments in Benue State

S/n	Name of Local Govt.	No. Registered voters	No. accredited voters	Percentage Turnout	Total votes cast
1	Katsina- Ala	104,749	48,159	46%	44,123
2	Logo	48,484	24,259	50%	22,985
3	Ukum	101,124	37,117	37%	33,685
4	TOTALS	254,357	109,535	-	100,793

5	Percentage turnout for select local governments	43.06%
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Source: INEC, 2015 General Elections. Percentages worked out by researcher

Summary of Voter turnout for Gubernatorial Elections in Benue State
Table 3: Voter turnout for Gubernatorial Elections

a	Total Number of Registered Voters	1,927,062
b	Total Number of Accredited Voters	797,788
c	Total Number of Votes Cast	759,397

d	Percentage turnout for Gubernatorial Elections	41.40%
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Source: INEC, 2015 General Elections

Table 3, is a summary of voter turnout for the Gubernatorial Elections in Benue state. The figures indicate a higher turnout in the Gubernatorial Elections than that of the Presidential Elections. In spite of this, the turnout is still low, confirming the existence of voter apathy among the electorates in the elections.

Methodology

Research Design: this study is descriptive in nature and uses survey design. The quantitative approach is adopted to obtain the data necessary for this paper.

Subjects: the quantitative data was obtained through the use of questionnaire. Three hundred (300) respondents were selected across the study area which is Katsina-Ala, Logo and Ukum local governments for this study and the criteria for selection of these respondents are; age, gender, occupation, education and local government - one hundred (110) respondents each from Katsina-Ala and Ukum and eighty (80) from Logo local government were selected through purposive sampling. Purposive was used due to the variation in the population of registered voters in the three local governments as well as to ensure that each segment has a

fair representation.

Instrument: Questionnaire was the major instrument used in this study. The questionnaire is titled Voter Apathy and Voter Turnout Scale (VAVTS) and made up of two sections. Section A is concerned with the personal information and characteristics of the respondents, while section B is made up of 10 items on voter turnout and apathy in elections.

Quantitative Analysis:

Three hundred (300) respondents that were selected for this study and they answered and returned all 300 questionnaire. These respondents were drawn from Katsina-Ala, Logo and Ukum local government areas of Benue state. Katsina-Ala local government has a composition of urban, semi-urban and rural communities while Logo and Ukum local governments are semi-urban and rural communities. The composition of the respondents selected from these areas is as presented.

Table 4: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percentage
18 – 25	50	17%
26 – 35	55	18.3%
36 – 45	65	22%
46 – 55	70	23.3%
56 and above	60	20%
Total	300	100%

Source: Field work, June, 2015

Table 4 shows the age distribution of the respondents, where 17% (50) were between the ages of 18 – 25 years, 18.3% (55) were between ages 26 – 35, 22%

(65) were between ages 36 – 45, 23.3% (70) were between ages 46-55 and 20% (60) were 56 and above.

Table 5: Gender Distribution of Respondents

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Male	170	57%
Female	130	43%
Total	300	100%

Source: Field work, June 2015

Table 5 shows that 57% (170) of the respondents were males while 43% (130) were females; indicating that both gender were represented in the sample.

Table 6: Educational Qualification of Respondents

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Not Literate	50	17%
Primary School	76	25.3%
Secondary School	93	31%
Tertiary	81	27%
Total	300	100%

Source: Field work, June 2015

Table 6 shows the education attainment of the respondents. 17% (50) were not literate, 25.3% (76) had primary education, 31% (93) had secondary education while 27% (81) had attained some form of tertiary education.

Table 7: Occupational Affiliation of Respondents

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Students	60	20%

Farming	90	30%
Civil Servant	62	21%
Traders	69	23%
Others	19	6.3%
Total	300	100%

Source: Field work, June 2015

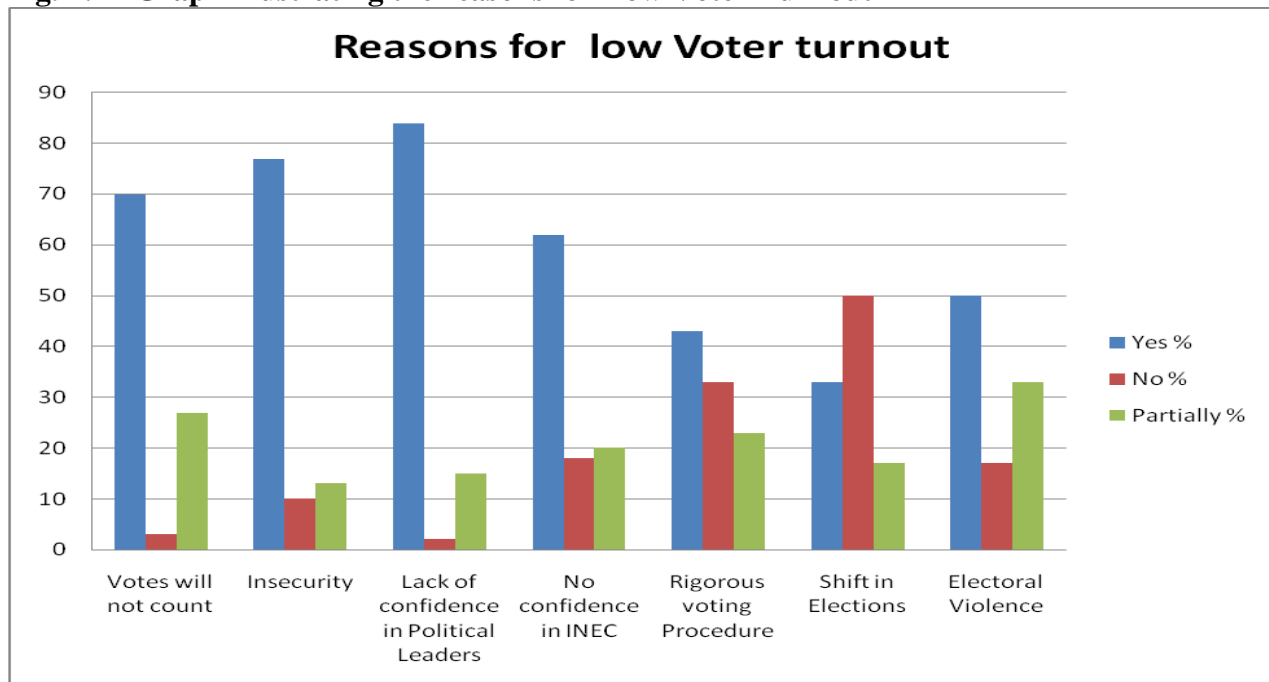
Table 7 indicates that 20% (60) of the respondents are students, 30% (90) are farmers, 21% (62) were Civil Servants, 23% (69) were traders while 6.3% (19) were of other occupations like artisans. It is important to note here that, the categories of respondents presented here are predominantly rural dwellers who just barely subsist. This has largely contributed to their lack of participation in political processes. As Ngara et al (2014) observed that, the high level of poverty in Nigeria has promoted in the same measure a high level of inequality, social injustice and consequent political apathy.

Table 8: Reasons for low voter turnout in Benue state.

S/n	Reasons for low turnout	Response and Percentages						Total	
		Yes	%	No	%	Partially	%	Respondents	Percentage
1	Votes will not count	210	70.0	10	3.0	80	27.0	300	100%
2	Insecurity	230	77.0	30	10.0	40	13.0	300	100%
3	Lack of confidence in Political Leaders	251	84.0	5	2.0	44	15.0	300	100%
4	No confidence in INEC	185	62.0	55	18.0	60	20.0	300	100%
5	Rigorous voting Procedure	130	43.0	100	33.0	70	23.0	300	100%
6	Shift in Elections	100	33.0	150	50.0	50	17.0	300	100%

Source: Field work, June 2015

Fig. 1: A Graph illustrating the reasons for Low Voter Turnout



As Table 8 and Fig. 1 above indicate, 70% (210) respondents agreed that there was low voter turnout at the General Elections which was as a result of anticipated rigging. They were of the opinion that the outcomes of elections in the state and indeed all over Nigeria were usually predetermined, this implies that their votes will not count. 3% (10) of the respondents however, objected while 27% (80) partially agreed to this fact. Insecurity was identified and ranked very high as a factor responsible for low voter turnout. 77% (230) of the respondents that they did not turn out due to insecurity in the Senatorial zone, arising especially from the clashes between Fulani herdsmen and Benue farmers. 10% (30) respondents held a contrary opinion while, 13% (40) respondents partially agreed.

Again, lack of confidence in political leaders was responsible for low voter turnout. 84% (251) respondents affirmed to this while 2% (5) and 15% (44) respondents objected and partially agreed respectively. Other registered voters who did not turnout attributed their decision to the loss of confidence in the electoral process and electoral body, INEC given that elections in the past had been characterized by manipulations and distortion of election figures. 62% (185) respondents attested to this whereas 18% (55) respondents disagreed and 20% (60) respondents partially agreed. This was further compounded by the shift in the date for the General Elections from the 14th and 28th February, 2015 to 28th March and 11th April, 2015. This shift in date discouraged some persons from coming out to vote after the elections were rescheduled. 33% (100) respondents agreed that the rescheduling of elections was the reason for their abstention. 50% (150) respondents however, did not see this as a reason for low voter turnout whereas 70% (50) respondents accepted partially.

Another factor was that of the rigorous voting procedure which required the voters to first go through the process of accreditation, and then return again to vote. This was further compounded by technical hitches encountered with the card reader machines. 43% (130) respondents affirmed this as a key factor for the low voter turnout while 33% (100) respondents objected this view with 23% (70) respondents partially accepting. The fear of electoral violence and a culture of imposing candidates on the electorates by political elite without popular appeal are also reflected in the low turnout of voters to elections. 50% (150) respondents attested to this while, 17% (50) respondents did not see these as affecting the turnout of voters. 33% (100) respondents partially agreed to this.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that there was an overall low voter turnout in Benue state at the 2015 General Elections. The statistics from INEC to this effect are indicated in Table 1 above. The total percentage turnout for Presidential Elections was only 39.15%, indicating a decline of about 15% from 2011 elections which had a turnout of 53.68 %.

The findings of this study also reveal the existence of voter apathy in Benue state. Going by the statistics from INEC and the figures from the interviews conducted by the researcher, it is clear that, the disenchantment and passive feelings displayed by the electorates is primarily responsible for the low voter turnout at the 2015 General Elections. This finding is further strengthened by Yakubu, (2011) where he posits that, political apathy has been a major factor for low voter turnout at elections in Nigeria.

Again, the findings of this study reveal that lack of confidence in their political leaders has led to voter apathy and consequently, low voter turnout. 60% of the respondents who did not vote said that political leaders are not used to fulfilling promises made during campaigns after they have been elected so, they cannot be trusted. This finding agrees with the previous findings of Mattes et al in Falade, (2014) that, popular trust in political institutions remains at relatively low levels. They found that over one third (37%) trusted the president and just under a third (31%) trusted the parliament. One quarter (28%) trusted provincial government and (24%), local government.

Electoral violence is another factor that affects political participation and voter turnout. Elections in Nigeria are characterized by high levels of violence and rancor. As Agu, et al (cited in Amdi, (2014) note; low voter turnout and apathy in elections is because of the intra and inter- party violence associated with the

electoral process that has created an atmosphere of fear in the electorate. This violence they say, does not only end between party supporters and members, it is perpetrated against members of the general public and prospective voters. This level of violence discourages a lot of eligible voters from voting in elections. Ojo (2014) holds that, between 1960 and 2011, Nigeria has conducted several general and regional elections and a survey of the political history of post independence Nigeria shows that these elections were marred by electoral violence. Falade (2008) points out that during the 2007 General Elections in Nigeria, there were cases of political thugs who openly displayed machetes and guns to intimidate and prevent people coming out to vote. In Mbater council ward in Logo local government the respondents say that in eight (8) polling units during the recent elections, there was cases of thugs carting away ballots boxes at gun points after the ballots had been cast while, four (4) persons were killed in the said polling units.

The level of poverty especially in the rural areas is one that cannot be overemphasized as a factor for voter apathy. The poverty situation since the birth of the Fourth Republic in 1999 included a dimension of powerlessness, this is characterized by dependence on others and lack of voice and options. As analysts conclude that poor people lack information about and access to government and they see the state as ineffective, irrelevant and corrupt (Mattes, et al cited in Ngarra, et al (2014). Finally, lack of confidence in the electoral body – INEC, and the electoral process as a whole was also revealed as a factor against voter turnout. This finding is further buttressed by a research conducted by The Friedrich Elbert Stiffing Foundation on 2011 general elections which identified lack of transparent elections as one of the major reasons for voters' apathy. 62% of the respondents said that the electoral process is full of manipulations and discrepancies. They further argued that in the 2011 gubernatorial elections in Benue state were heavily

manipulated because, as far as popular view was concerned, they had voted against the then incumbent governor yet he was returned elected. For some, that was the turning point as far as elections in Nigeria are concerned, they would never go out to vote.

Conclusion

There is evidence that there exists voter apathy in Nigeria leading to a steady decline in the voter turnout at elections. This paper reveals that, lack of interest and commitment to electoral processes by the electorates is due to lack of confidence in the electoral process and the political culture in Nigeria. A political culture characterized by violence, intimidation, manipulation and deception is reflected in the electorates shunning the ballot. The paper also reveals that Nigerians do not have confidence in their political leaders due to undelivered campaign promises and non-responsiveness to the needs of the masses. Security challenges in some rural communities of the area covered were seen to be a reason for low voter turnout.

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