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DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION AND VOTER APATHY IN NIGERIA: DYNAMICS, TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Election is an ideal of democracy. And, the participation of people in this democratic process underscores the substance of representative governance beyond symbolism. Sadly, emerging and advanced democracies across the world is today challenged by the unpleasant phenomena of voter apathy. In Nigeria, observations and studies have shown the declivity of voter turnout in recent national and sub-national elections. Acknowledging this factuality, this paper examines the historical dynamics of voter apathy and its causality in Nigeria's electoral democracy. The methodology of this study is qualitative design where the authors adopted a documentary source and non-participant observation methods of data collection and textual analysis of data and events. It revealed persistence trend of voter apathy sustained by exacerbating conditions with adverse effects on democratic consolidation. The paper whence opines that measures to reverse the trend of voter apathy in Nigeria is streamlined in two dimensional perspectives to strengthen the process of democratic consolidation through voter enthusiasm.

Key words: Democracy, Democratic consolidation, Voter apathy and Voter enthusiasm.

Introduction

Nigeria as a democratizing polity is grappling with myriads of socio-political challenges which have over the years constrained efforts and process towards democratic consolidation and national development. Notably, among these problems is crisis of election process. Today, election crisis constitutes one of the daunting challenges in the country's multi-party democracy. Hence, it manifests in dysfunctional election management, logistic inadequacies, violence and apathy. In a specific sense, voter apathy represents an ugly trend in Nigeria's electoral democracy. It is an unpleasant situation which had in the recent years elicited serious concerns among scholars, electoral practitioners and election observers with regards to its adverse effects on the country's fractured democratic process.

In a generic sense, voter apathy is a global phenomenon. Cross sectional analysis of electoral democracies has shown that the percentage of citizens who vote in elections vary considerably across countries (IDEA, 2005, p.23). In advanced democracies such as United States, the percentage of voter turnout has been fluctuating since 1960 with reference to 62.8 percent in 1960, 52.8 percent in 1980, 53.3 percent in 1984, and 50.3 percent in 1988 then rising to 55.2 percent in 1992 and fell to 50.3 percent in 2000 and rise to 55.5 percent in 2004. It however recorded an exponential rise in 2008 with 60 percent. And, it was 57.5percent in 2012 and 58.1 percent in 2016 presidential elections. (Ethridge and Handelman, 2012, p.99, and Anderson, 2017, p.2). In Europe, there has been persistent trend of voter apathy since the 1990's and incidences of lower voter turnout in North and South American countries and African continent (IDEA, 2005 p.11). This global electoral challenge has over the years stimulated national discourse and scholarly literature on the best modalities to sustain voter's interest in liberal democracy.

In Nigeria, the same optimism is shared to evince the scope and relevance of this discourse. The discourse is premised to make explicit analysis of the dynamics and causes of voter apathy and, the extent it has violated the process of democratic consolidation in Nigeria. In a thematic sense, the discourse is divided into five sections which begins with introduction and conceptual explication on democracy, democratic consolidation, elections, voting and voter apathy, and, emphasis on historical dynamics and causes of voter apathy, and its effects on democratic consolidation.

Conceptual Discourse

The conceptual analysis of voter apathy accentuates the need for critical review of certain symmetrical variables: Democracy, Democratic consolidation, Elections, Voting and Voter Apathy. Democracy is a term which underscored the significance of civil liberty, popular and alternative views, rule of law which are entrenched in governance and political process. However, analysis on theory and practice of democracy is depleted with plethora of varied perspectives among scholars and practitioners of governance.

Being a derivative of two Greek words, "rule of the people", the central theme of the concept, "democracy" is popular governance or ruler-ship of the people. The notion of the rule of the people was first conceived in Athens and best captured in Pericles (415–429BC) funeral oration as chronicled by Thucydides (Ikin, 1981, p.60). Ikin's view provides a historical insight to the practice of democracy as was first documented in the 5th century ancient Athens city-state of Greece but failed to explain the process of people's rule from what scholars classified as "direct democracy". In this sense of gap, Sabine and Thomson (1973) illustrated the direct form of democracy as seen in Athenian Ecclesia or Assembly (the-whole-people assembly) which holds its sessions to discuss the affairs of the "polis" where every male citizen (who had reached twenty years of age) attend. Beyond its classical form, democracy has a modern meaning as illuminated by Birch (1995) in Ezirim, et al (2016, p.98),

From the American perspective, it has been used to mean some-what more than a structure to indicate a phenomenon; with the term "democratic" indicating a "degree of social equality not a form of government. This idea depicts people-

ness or being people-centred probably resulting in the most popular and ordinary definition of it being the one generally credited to Abraham Lincoln as a “government or rule of the people”, by the people and for the people. It conjures, the idea of the people being responsible for their own affairs individually and collectively.

American perspective of democracy as enunciated by Abraham Lincoln underscored the import of representative democracy or modern democracy. Similarly, Appodari (1974) viewed modern democracy as representative, indirect; where the people govern through representatives periodically elected by them. The foregoing analysis however merely projected the symbolism of democracy (as a people-driven system of governance) without critical review of its indices and attributes.

In this regards, Omemma (2016, p.129) illuminated the indices fundamental in liberal democracy: (a) substantial individual freedom of belief, opinion, discussion, speech, publication, broadcast, assembly, demonstration, petition and the internet. (b) freedom of ethnic, religious, racial and other minority groups (as well as historically excluded majorities) to practice their religion and culture and to participate in political and social lives. (c) the right of all adult citizens to vote and to run for office (if they meet certain minimum age and competency requirements). (d) genuine openness and competition in the electoral arena, enabling any group that adheres to constitutional contest for office. (e) legal equality of all citizens under a rule of law, in which the laws are dear, public known, universal, stable and non-retroactive. (f) an Independent Judiciary to neutrally and consistently apply the law and protect individual and group rights. (g) due process of law and freedom of individuals from torture, terror and unjustified detention, exile, or interference in their personal lives by the state or non-state actors. (h) institutional checks on the power of elected officials, by an independent legislature, court system and autonomous agencies. (i) real pluralism in sources of information and forms of organization, independence of state and thus a vibrant civil society. (j) control over military and state security apparatus by civilians who ultimately accountable to the people through elections.

A pertinent question is therefore asked, “what does consolidation of democracy entail?” For Odoh and Aro (2016), democratic consolidation had over the years attracted wide interest of scholars and, it means the institutionalization of democratic culture and democratization of rule... thus when democracy is consolidated, it becomes legitimate in the perception and estimation of the citizens. However, Odo and Aro’s views failed to make explicit the specificities of what is institutionalized in reference to culture, and the attributes of what the masses conceived as “legitimacy”. In an attempt to dissect the significance of legitimate attribute in democratic consolidation, Ikpe (2011) stressed that the consolidation of democracy is obviously, the process of achieving broad legitimization, such that all significant political actors of both the elite and mass believe that democratic regime is better for their society than any other realistic alternative they can imagine. However, Ikpe’s perspective is depleted with ambiguity.

Succinctly, Bretton (1981) conceived democratic consolidation as involving the widespread acceptance of rules to guarantee political participation and political

competition. According to him, elections remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments, but as a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation. The regularity, openness and acceptability of elections signal whether basic constitutional foundations are being laid for sustainable rule. This perspective indeed underscored the imperative of "election" as a veritable process that advances democratic consolidation.

Corroborating Bratton's assertion, David (1990) averred that the consolidation of democracy involves the institutionalization of rules that fully guarantee political participation and political competition. For him, elections which empower ordinary citizens to choose candidates of their interest guarantees democratic consolidation. In critics of David's view, it is however, argued that institutionalized rules which guarantee freedom and participation may be violated when the right orientation and attitude is lacking.

More elaborately, Payne and Nasser (2003) argued that the consolidation of democracy is a long term process that continued after countries have made transition to democracy. It therefore involves behavioural, attitudinal and institutional changes. Behaviourally, a democratic regime is consolidated when there is no significant effort to change the government by force. Attitudinally, democratic regime is consolidated when a strong majority of the population believes that democratic institutions and procedures are the most appropriate for their society. Institutionally, a democratic regime is consolidated when society as a whole including the government, believes that, there are certain laws, procedure and institutions that must be used to govern the society.

In implicit sense, the Payne and Nassar conception ostensibly illuminates certain illusion and reality underlying the challenges of Nigeria's type of democracy. The absence of intermittent military usurpation of political power (as seen in the twenty-nine years of military rule) in the current democratic dispensation (which had existed for twenty-one years) does not essentially implied that the country's democracy has been consolidated. This is because the democratic process is bedevilled with institutional and procedural deviances as exemplified in the undemocratic tendencies of institutions and political process that satisfy the inordinate interest of the political elite in violation of democratic norms and public interest. To this extent, we have laws, procedures and institutions that are weak and susceptible to authoritarian tendencies of the political elite.

Curiously, for democracy to be consolidated, certain conditions are expedient: (a) A condition must exist that make it relatively easy for a civil society to develop. To protect their interests, inform the public and challenges the government through acceptable processes. (b) Specific arrangements must be made for groups and individuals to compete for political power. This usually means the development and functioning of core institutions such as political parties, interest groups and an electoral system. (c) Society must respect and uphold the rule of law and an independent judicial system must exist to determine what the law is. (d) There must be an institutionalized economic society on significant degree of market autonomy and the right of individuals to own property (Payne and Nasser, 2003, p.238).

Fundamentally, democratic consolidation is characterized with the following indices: (a) it is a phenomenon that precedes democratization or democratic transition. (b) it reflects

in the capacity of government and governance to respond promptly and proficiently to the anxieties and expectations of the masses. (c) it reflects in institutionalized and efficient system of checks in governance and state institutions against abuses, infractions and corruptions. (d) it reflects in reasonable extent of patriotism, awareness and enthusiasm among the citizens to identify with the affairs of the state and engage constructively with the persons in government on issues of public importance. (e) it reflects in the existence of an independent and efficient judicial system in the process of administration of justice. (f) it reflects in transparent, credible and free election process at the level of state, and within political parties and other social institutions where the values of liberty, rule of law, discipline and tolerance were upheld. (g) it reflects in the existence of state institutions that were accountable, effective and responsive in its conduct and service to the state. (h) it reflects in the civility and sensitization of civil society organizations to advocate on issues of public interest. (i) it reflects in inclusive and participatory process of state policies in deference to the socio-economic realities and expectations of the state. (j) it reflects in foreign policy options and diplomatic engagements that protect rights, guarantee safety and explore potentials of the citizens within the country and across various continents of the globe. In reference to varied perspectives of scholars and assumptions of this discourse, election remained one of the fundamentals of democratic consolidation.

In reference to elections, voting and voter apathy, we note that elections are considered extremely vital to the process of democratization and democratic consolidation because they are widely recognized as only legitimate form of transfer and exercise of power in modern states. They have thus become the main theatre of political participation whereby voters actively exercise their rights to participate democratically by electing representatives in periodic, free and fair elections (Ballington, 2001 and English, 2005). In this vein, elections and voting are basic attributes of democracy.

The two concepts share certain affinities in process and essence. Technically, there are obvious disparities. Hence, election may be defined as the process of choice agreed upon by a group of people. It enables them to select one or a few people out of many to occupy one or a number of authority positions (Nnoli, 2003, p. 220). In similar sense, Held (1999) viewed election as the competition for votes among political parties. In this regard, election is a process where people decide between competing candidates and political parties for authority positions of the state. Significant to these definitional views of election is the "people and choice". Election is therefore the mandate of the people to decide on the array of promises and ideologies by the political parties, which will better meet the expectations of the people (Yorons, 2017, p.251). To this end, Adejumbi (1998) underscored the import of symbolism of elections within the context of popular sovereignty and the expression of the social pact between the states and the people as elections are seen as the kernel of political accountability and the means of ensuring reciprocity and exchange between the govern, and the governed. The Adejumbi's view establishes the inextricable nexus between election and democracy as people-driven type of process. In other words, election reinforces the democratic process. Election is a necessary condition for democracy even if it may not be a sufficient condition.

Accordingly, Conteh (2013) remarked that a free and fair election are sovereign and have the right to keep or vote out government. Also, it reveals the true will of the people

and is, therefore the only legitimate entrance to democratic leadership. And, by exercising their vote freely, the people choose and give legitimacy to their leaders while free and fair election mirror the extent of freedom in a society (Nwankwo 2018, p.4). Similarly, Yorons (2017) further establish the nexus between elections and democracy obvious under the following: (a) elections are the part of democracy. Therefore, if it is misused then the entire democratic process loses its credibility. (b) elections provide opportunity for the electorate to decide in the next round of elections a more credible candidate or party if the incumbent does not govern well.

Cursory observation of the election showed that voting is central in the process. Kwon-Ndung,etal (2014) held that voting is widely and commonly used in contemporary democratic politics in choosing leaders for various electoral positions. Thus, Zahida and Younia (2014) viewed voting as the function of electing representatives by casting votes in an election. In this vein, Okolie (2003) stressed that voting in elections into public offices is usually conducted using the ballot boxes. Voting therefore takes form of thumbing in the ballot paper provided. Establishing the essence of voting, Hari and Choudhury (1997) stressed that it exert influence over leaders through pressure. The leaders adjust their policies in order to gain votes. Since the vote determines who will hold elective office. The vote, however, does neither clearly communicate the citizen's preference to leaders nor convey explicit information.

Invariably, voting undoubtedly accentuates the significance of people's participation in the election process. In other words, it is the legal right and civic obligation of the citizens in a state. In this sense, voting is the legal, political and social mechanism through which the citizen is able to express their preferences in elections, exercise their interests and needs to their interests and needs to their leaders. It shows the level of political consciousness and participation of the citizenry (Ejue and Ekanam, 2011, p.286).

Furthermore, Ejue and Ekanam (2011) enunciated that Article 21 of the United Nations Charter on Human Rights indicates (a) everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country directly or through freely chosen representatives. (b) the will of the people shall be the basis of authority of government. Beyond the global recognition of civil liberty, the Nigerian Federal Republic Constitution of 1999 (as amended) in sections 77(2), 117(2), 132(5) and 178(5) also identified the conditions of voter eligibility and essence of participation in election process.

Essentially, voting as a right and civic responsibility is propelled by the need or interest to participate in democratic process. Thus, when such need or interest fails to exist for participation in the democratic process of election then voter apathy occurs. In this sense, Anderson (2017) defined voter apathy as lack of interest in participating in elections by certain group of voters. One side-effect of voter apathy can be low voter turnout on election day if voting is non-compulsory. Also, Voter apathy occurs when eligible voters do not vote in public elections. Outside of election time, voters may seem disillusioned with the political process or politicians in general (Cloud, 2019, p.1). In other words, voter apathy is invariably reluctance of eligible voters to vote in an election.

In more explicit sense, Hari and Choudhury (1997) highlighted forms of voter apathy obvious in: (a) voter alienation conceived as induced voter apathy among the proportional percentage of voters. For instance, it was organizational failure of Independent National

Electoral Commission, INEC that led to the disenfranchisement of 12 million eligible Nigeria voters who could not obtain their PVCs before the 2015 Presidential and National Assembly elections (Madubuegwu, 2015, p.172). (b) voter distrust is also conceived as voter disenchantment which reflects in the loss of confidence in the political system and process.

As earlier noted, the phenomena of voter apathy is a global trend observed in developing and industrialized economies. In reference to United Kingdom, Verrall (2016) argued that,

possessing the freedom to vote is considered a corner stone of political democracy. However, for the last half of a century, voting has declined. In the 1950 UK General Election, the voter turnout was 84 percent, where as in the 2015 General Election the turnout was 66.1 percent. In the 2015 UK General Election, the Conservative party won with a slim majority vote of 36.9 percent (11.3 million votes). This means that 11.3 million people voted for the interest of a total UK population of 64.7 million people, ie 17 percent of the remaining 83 percent of the country. There was closeness between those who were eligible to vote but didn't vote (15 million) and those that couldn't vote (18 million). This worries our politicians because it undermines the legitimacy of the incumbent government as well as acting as an indirect indicator of distrust and disbelief in democracy as a political idea.

Furthermore, Election Survey report (2019), examined five causes of voter apathy in the UK to illuminate reasons people don't vote: (a) lack of interest. Why people don't vote is simply because they are not interested. (b) lack of knowledge. Many people who don't vote believed that they don't have enough knowledge about the government, the election process or individual party policies. (c) Disillusionment. It is clear a large proportion of the British public have had enough of the "political elite", who they neither trust nor relate to. (d) Safe seat residents. Many people who don't vote are nonetheless interested in politics and even support a political party, but don't vote because they feel their vote would be wasted. (e) They can't. Some people don't vote because they simply are not allowed to. Groups of people who are not eligible to vote include members of the House of Lords, most prisoners, and foreign citizens from outside UK, Ireland, or the Commonwealth. Perhaps, the most disenfranchised group, however, are those under 18. The move to lower the voting age has been gaining momentum since it was first put before Parliament in 1999. YouGov research from 2018 shows that public support for 16 and 17-year-olds's right to vote has increased from 20 to 34 percent since 2013, but still does not enjoy widespread favour.

Interestingly, voter apathy otherwise known as voter non-participation in the electoral process is measured by the index of voter turnout. Thus, voter turnout has been identified in the extant literature as one of the core ways of measuring the level of participation in any election (Blais and Dobrzynska, 1998). What then is voter turnout? Voter turnout is the extent to which eligible voters use their vote on electionday. It is measured as the percentage of votes cast at an election including invalid votes (Abdurashid, 2016, p.1). Voter turnout is the percentage of registered voters who actually come out to vote in an

election. In democratizing societies, voter turnout is the most common form of political participation (Mahmud, 2015, p.4). It therefore implied that voter turnout determines the index of eligible electors who actually voted in an election. Similarly, voter turnout is usually measured as a percentage of registered voters who vote. The assumption is that the higher the level of voter turnout the higher the level of voter participation and, by extension, the greater of democratic quality of the election (Omotola and Aiyedogbon, 2012, p.57). To this extent, the lower level of voter turnout is a reflection of apathy among the electorate. Nigeria represents a peculiar case of reference as regards the phenomena of voter apathy. As a developing economy, it has its history and challenges of voter apathy.

The Conditions Underlying the Historical Dynamics of Voter Apathy in Nigeria

Elections are not novel in the history of Nigeria's political development. The first election was held in 1923, though its process and representational relevance were exclusively limited to provinces in Lagos and Calabar which constituted the cradle of British colonial administration in Nigeria. The civil liberty of the first election was constrained with reference to male adult and income suffrage. To this end, voter alienation was obviously widespread among the adult Nigerians (who were not male) and male adults who cannot earn a gross income of 100 pounds per annum residing in the three provinces of Lagos and one province at Calabar. Logically, this situation marked the first historical incidence of voter alienation and apathy in Nigeria elections.

Furthermore, the promulgation of policy of regionalism in 1946 relatively devolved power and influence from the central authority to the sub-national levels of government. In this sense, the policy of regionalism invariably underscored the imperative of regional legislature and election. Thus, regional elections were held in 1955 to form regional governments. The universal suffrage prevailed in the Southern regions (East and West) while the North preferred the male-adult suffrage. However, in the South, there were conditions which undermine the regional enthusiasm to identify with the elections as documented by Adigwe (1975), in the Eastern region where there was direct election and universal suffrage, a voter was required to pay his tax or rate for one financial year of he lived in the Division in which the constituency was situated, and for two financial years, if he did not live there. In the first case, he was in addition required to have ordinarily resided in the particular Division for two years. In the Northern region, it was the only the male tax payer who possessed the franchise and the election to the regional House of Assembly was indirect otherwise known as the Electoral College.

It is therefore instructive to note that voter participation in pre-independence Nigerian electoral process was militated against by stringent conditions of franchise in the south, absence of uniformity in electoral law and procedure and, the non-existence of election management mechanism and administration occasioned with alienating ethno-religious practices in the North as regards the non-involvement of Muslim women in the political process. In the December 12th, 1959 election, the voter enthusiasm overwhelms (inspite of restraining conditions prevailing in the north). This positive development reflected in the voter turnout of 79.5 percent from the registered voters of 9,043,404(see in table 1). This stride was indeed unprecedented in the history of Nigerian elections. Hence, the

remarkable performance of the voter turnout in the 1959 national parliamentary election was a function of the following factors: (a) the euphoria for political Independence of 1960. The election was widely seen and celebrated as one of the fundamental processes that would ushered in political freedom of the country from imperial control. (b) the emergence of ethno-regional political parties such as the National Council of Nigeria and Citizens, Northern Peoples Congress and Action Group which fervently mobilized their respective regional electorates to the historic election. (c) the existence of central election management body to drive the process of electioneering as regards to voter awareness and civic obligation. In this regard, Madubuegwu (2017) noted the establishment of the Electoral Commission of Nigeria (ECN) entrusted with the responsibility to enfranchise eligible electors, stipulate the conditions for the eligibility of the candidates and organize a credible election. Mr. R.E. Wraith and Mr. J. J Warren were appointed as the Chief Electoral Commissioner and Executive Secretary of the Commission respectively. Furthermore, four Nigerians were appointed by the British Colonial authority to assist the expatriates as electoral commissioners for North, East, West and South Cameroon.

Tragically, the irregularities, boycott and violence that trailed the first national election in 1964 and western regional election in 1965 reversed drastically the growing trend of voter enthusiasm and consequently led to thirteen years of authoritarian rule (1966-1979). Sadly, the ugly events of the two successive national and regional elections entrenched the culture of voter distrust among the Nigeria electorate. Furthermore, the military regime of Gen. Murtala / Obasanjo, 1975–1979, introduced certain measures to reawaken the optimism of Nigerians towards democratic process after intermittent bloody mutiny and devastating effects of thirty months' civil war, 1967-1970. Thus, these measures were obvious in the inauguration of Constitutional Drafting Committee, CDC; creation of states, local government reform, establishment of Constituent Assembly to review the 1979 constitution draft and lifting of ban on partisan politics. Significantly, the era led to the introduction of United States' presidential democracy-model as enunciated in the promulgated 1979 Constitution. As expected, the first Nigerian Presidential election was held on August 11th, 1979. Surprisingly, the historic election was marred with widespread voter apathy which reflected in 35.25% voter turnout (**seen in table 1**) from 48,499,091 registered Nigerian voters. The incidence of voter apathy in the 1979 presidential election may be attributed to the following factors: (a) The irregularities and arson of 1964 national parliamentary and 1965 western regional elections. (b) The phobia of Nigerian civil war, 1967-1970 occasioned with Eastern regional suspicion and resentment. (c) The candidature of first republican political elite as the frontline presidential contenders or aspirants. (d) The electoral malpractices that were witnessed in the July 1979 national assembly, state house of assembly and gubernatorial elections.

The four years experiment of American proto-type presidential system at national and sub-national tiers of government however failed to meet the myriad expectations of national development. The political elite in the ruling and opposition political parties were desperate to clinch and consolidate power at the expense of public plights. And, the height of this desperation was seen in the violence and apathy of August 1983 national elections. In addition, Nigerian voters were disillusioned in the failures of the government and

unabated spate of violence across the federation. Again the military struck on 31st December 1983.

Interestingly, the optimism of Nigerians towards election was again rekindled by the series of democratic and constitutional reforms initiated by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida military regime, 1985 -1993. The 1987 political Bureau report, the promulgation of 1989 constitution, the national-enthused awareness driven by the Directorate for Mass Mobilization, Social and Economic Justice and Self-reliance and reformed election management were symbolic indices that spurred sense of patriotism and civic responsibility among the Nigerians to identify with the transition process. Variably, the annulment of the presidential election makes mockery of the relevance of the reforms initiated and optimism shared.

The 52.26 percent voter turnout out of the 30,280,052 registered voters (**see table 1**) in the February 1999 presidential and National Assembly elections was impressive. It also represents a paradigm shift from the trends of voter participation in the successive presidential elections. Nigerians were enthused to vote on the basis of the underlined factors: (a) The protracted 14 years of chequered democratic transition experienced successively under Gen. Ibrahim Babangida and Gen. Sani Abacha military regimes. (b) The desire of democratic rule after 16 years of authoritarian rule. Again, the voter enthusiasm was sustained by the genuine and sincere steps taken by the Gen. Abdusalam Abubakar regime in 1998 and 1999 respectively. The plausible measures that endeared Nigerians to the regime were the cancellation of Gen. Abacha's transition programme, re-constituted election management body, constitutional review and time table for democratic transition to power.

In 2003 presidential election which uniquely represents the first democratic transition to power under a civilian government, voter turnout rose rapidly to 16.8 percent with 69.08 percent from 60,823,022 registered voters (**see table 1**). It was indeed a remarkable period with reference to voter enthusiasm and participation. Perhaps, this stride was prodded by the unflinching belief of Nigerian voters in the democratic process amid crises of governance and politics. Adversely, the 2003 national elections were fraught with high incidences of infraction, thuggery and arson in flagrant violation of the electoral law and safety of Nigerian voters. This torrents of events further created and sustained sense of voter distrust among the Nigerian electors. Impliedly, there was a sharp drop of 11.04 percent in voter turnout in the 2007 presidential election with 57.49 percent from 61,567,036 registered voters (**see table 1**).

Unfortunately, this trend of lower voter turnout persisted unabatedly in the three recent presidential elections as aptly illustrated in 53.68 percent voter turnout from 73,528,040 registered voters in the 2011 presidential election, 43.65 percent voter turnout from 67,422,005 registered voters in 2015 presidential election and 35.66 percent from 84,004,084 registered voters in 2019 presidential poll (**see table 1**). This sharp downward trend of low voter turnout in the country's national elections indeed constituted serious threat to the country's electoral democracy.

Table 1: VOTER TURNOUT IN NIGERIAN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTARY AND PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 1959-2019.

Year	Voter Registration	Voter Turnout
1959 National Parliamentary Election	9, 043, 404	79.5%
1979 Presidential Election	48, 499, 091	35.25%
1983 Presidential Election	Not Provided	Not Provided
1993 Presidential Election	Not Provided	Not provided
1999 Presidential Election	30,280,052	52.26%
2003 Presidential Election	60, 823, 022	69.08%
2007 Presidential and National Assembly Election	61, 567,036	57.49%
2011 Presidential Election	73, 528, 040	53.68%
2015 Presidential and National Assembly Election.	67,422,005	43.65%
2019 Presidential and National Assembly Election	84,004,085	35.66%

Source:Adapted from Omotola and Aiyedogbon (2012, p. 59), Madubuegwu, 2017, p.123 and International IDEA: <http://www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=NIG>.

Basically, the recurring decimal of voter apathy in Nigeria is not exclusive to national elections but has over the years reflected in sub-national elections such as gubernatorial and local polls. The widespread of voter apathy or low voter turnout observed in the recent 2019 general elections has elicited serious concerns, as earlier noted, among Nigerians and international election observers on what it portends to the country’s fledgling democracy and way forward.

The foregoing analysis notably showed that the perennial crisis of voter apathy in Nigeria is exacerbated by conditions under listed: (a) Undemocratic attitude of Nigeria politicians and murky party politics which has over the decades undermined the civility and stability of the political process. Many Nigerians have lost interest in politics and elections because of the irregularities of Nigerian political process. (b) Institutional failures of Nigeria election management body, with regards to voter education, voter eligibility (issuance of voter cards) and credibility of the election process. (c) Thuggery and violence of Nigerian elections where lives have been lost has over the years created sense of fear and apprehension among many Nigeria voters to participate in the process (d) Centrifugal tendencies of regional suspicion and resentment. (e) Failed governance is one of the fundamental causes of voter apathy in Nigeria. Many Nigeria voters are disillusioned with failure of government and governance which has undermined the enthusiasm to participate in the election process. (f) Insecurity obvious in Boko Haram insurgency in the North East and banditry in the Middle Belt of Nigeria had displaced millions from their home. Today, millions of these vulnerable Nigeria voters are living in ID Camps with no prospect of livelihood. (g) Weak state institutions, poverty and recessive economy have also over the years entrenched culture of voter distrust among the millions of Nigeria electorate.

Table 2: REGIONAL VOTER TURNOUT IN NIGERIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 2011 AND 2015.

Zone	2015 approximate	2011 approximate
North Central	43.47	49
North East	45.22	56
North West	55.09	56
South East	40.52	63
South South	57.81	62
South West	40.26	32

Source: Araba and Braimah, (2015, p.6).`

Beside these systemic failures, the heterogeneous social background of Nigeria is also susceptible to the country's voter orientation and participation. In this regard, the cleavages of regionalism, ethnicity and religion are more pronounced in national elections as illustrated in varied statistics of regional voter turnout among the six geo-political zones in the successive presidential elections in 2011 and 2015 respectively.

The Effects of Voter Apathy on Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

It is established that election remained one of the fundamentals of a democratic state and process. And, the real value and essence of election is the right, freedom, choice and participation of the people in governance and political process. To this extent, election is the most popular indices of participatory democracy where people expresses liberty of choice. However, voter apathy is in contrary to the norms and expectations of democratic process. It therefore violates the civil liberty of the eligible voters of the state. Hence, when the Nigeria Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC failed to provide efficient administrative and organization framework for the distribution and issuance of card technology, otherwise, known as PVC for citizen's eligibility in the election then civil liberty has been alienated and violated. Again, democracy has failed to consolidate in the event of widespread voter alienation and disenchantment created by the failures of the election management body, and violence of the election process.

Also, the widespread non-involvement of eligible citizens in the elections affects to an extent the credibility of the exercise. It therefore implied that political parties and candidates that emerged victoriously through the process characterized with widespread apathy do not enjoy popular trust and mandate of the voting population. To this extent, democracy has failed to consolidate in the event when the elected managers or administrators of the state lacks the overall mandate and confidence of the electorate. Impliedly, the representatives or political parties elected by the fraction of the voting population to serve in government shall certainly pursue unpopular policies in the state. We may likely see policies (from this type of government) that does not reflect the plights of citizens and development priorities of the state. To this extent, democracy again has failed to consolidate in the event where voter apathy stimulates unpopular policies in government and state.

Subsequently, voter apathy alienate the citizens form civic enlightenment and obligation. In this vein, voter apathy excludes adult citizens from values, information and

facts, expressed and shared during electioneering events and party campaigns. Citizens conventionally become politically socialized through these informative channels to develop civic orientation and attitude towards participatory events of the state. This is because the viability of democracy or democratic process is measured or assessed by the constructive involvement of the citizens in the political process. In other words, democracy fails to consolidate when the citizens' sense of civic responsibility is eroded by the widespread incidence of voter apathy.

Furthermore, apathy widens the gap between the governing elites and the citizens. In this vein, as earlier indicated, it creates sense of distrust and suspicion between the citizens and the constituted authority. And, such absurd situation stifles the process of governance and leads to events of unrest (in form of popular protest against ill-advised policies and actions of the government) which undermines the political stability of the state. In the event of failed process of social contract (stimulated by voter alienation) between the people and constituted authority then democracy has failed to consolidate.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Voter apathy is endemic in Nigerian elections. As earlier noted, it represents one of the daunting challenges of Nigeria's electoral democracy. And, it is a plague and function of many variables which has persisted unabatedly in Nigeria's history, dynamics and process of elections. Hence, it is established that voter apathy has continue to militate against efforts towards democratic consolidation in Nigeria. In this sense, it becomes pertinent to make recommendations in reference to the findings of this study.

Basically, voter apathy is a menace which can be managed and reversed through plausible measures streamlined in long-term and short-terms. On the aspect of long-term measures (a) The need to entrench culture and practice of accountability and responsiveness in governance. To this end, prevailing atmosphere of accountability in public sector service and responsiveness in governance towards sundry challenges of poverty, insecurity, youth unemployment may gradually reverse the sense of voter distrust and disillusionment among millions of adult citizens towards state institutions and elections. (b) Transparent and prudent election management system is also very critical to reinforce citizens' trust and confidence in Nigerian elections. The decisiveness and transparency in driving the process of electioneering beyond the antics of the opposition political parties and interference of ruling political party and elites shall certainly elicit public trust and confidence in election management and elections in Nigeria. (c) Decentralized structures and process of voter education will also bolster voter's sense of confidence and enthusiasm to identify with the election process. The Independent National Electoral Commission, Media Civil Society Organizations and Election Advocacy groups should shift from voter information to engage the citizens constructively on the essence of voter participation. The content of such education should also shift from the essence of elections to implications of non-involvement in the election process. (d) A mechanism of monitoring and sanctioning political parties involved in undemocratic or unconventional practices has not only become necessary but extremely expedient to bring sanity for healthy competition which will further encourage citizen's identification with party politics and election process. (e) The intense campaign for national consciousness

and rebirth. This task should be undertaken by the National Orientation Agency and National Media Channels to inculcate sense of patriotism and civic responsibility among Nigerians. This is also extremely important in view of euphoria of regional nationalism and suspicion.

These long-term measures can be sustained through the following short-term measures: (a) Voter education and advocacy towards elections. (b) Neutrality and de-politicization of the security agencies before during and after elections. Emphasis on rules of engagement neutrality, sanctions erring personnel and infiltration should be topical issues in Nigerian election security management. (c) Review of certain provisions of the Electoral ACT in response to the voter plights and civility of the political process.

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