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Review

The frustration of political choice and voter anguish in recent elections in Nigeria

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Voters are essential to democracy, as they wield the authority to select government leaders through their choices during elections. Election in Nigeria is usually marred by issues that hinder the smoothness of the electoral and voting process, constituting a cause of dissatisfaction and anguish for voters. Relying on an extensive review of literature and secondary sources of data, this article exposes problems that frustrate Nigerian voters in making their political choices during elections and the implications of such challenges for democratic growth. The findings reveal that ecological factors, such as religion and ethnicity, institutional factors, such as electoral body, election logistics, the courts, and others, like electoral violence, political intimidation, etc., impede voters from making their preferred choices at the polls. It concludes that there is utmost need to sanitize the political space, through the appropriation of substantial political and economic issues, as against ethnic and religious sentiments that disadvantage some sections of voters, adequate preparation by the electoral regulatory body, impartiality of the court, the provision of sufficient security apparatus, to curb disenfranchisement and encourage voters to make their preferred choices at the polls.

Key words: Elections, Nigeria, electoral turnout, political choice, sustainable democracy, voter frustration.

INTRODUCTION

Voters are vital to elections and modern democracy, as the power to choose the state's leadership resides with them. Voters play essential roles in sustaining democracies through periodic elections, wherein they exercise the power to revoke or renew the leadership mandate of political officeholders depending on their performance, while also enforcing political accountability through approval or disapproval of the activities of government (Wojtanski, 2013). Since Nigeria transitioned from military to democratic rule in 1999, seven general

elections including the 2023 elections have been conducted, five presidents elected, thus reinforcing voting as a foundational element of democracy (Douglas, 2013).

Apam (2011) opines that a critical component of a democratic state that guarantees accountability and responsiveness of elected officials to citizens is the conduct of regular, accessible, and fair elections, through which the will of the electorates manifests without disruption. However, according to Osaghae (2019), elections in Nigeria and their results go well beyond the

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democratic and electoral choices made by the people to determine who rules, as elections are stage-managed. Results are not based on how voters cast their ballots but are manipulated, cooked up, and even predetermined, raising the possibility that elections may be fake and very different from what they're intended to be (Osaghae 2019). This argument reinforces the prevalence of electoral malpractice, as elections are often flawed, characterized by ethnic and religious tension, lackluster preparation by the electoral governing body, poor security, all of which undermines the democratic desires of the citizens. As a result, the outcomes of Nigeria's elections stoke political tension, violence, and conflicts (Isma'ila and Othman, 2015; ZhiZhi and Nasiru, 2020). Likewise, Oyegun (2021) adds that these challenges hamper voters' confidence and create disillusionment with the voting process.

The debate on voters' political choice has been contested on the premise that voters do not wield much power in the practical sense. Koleoso (2003) reiterates that voters only have the right to vote and not the right to choose. Citizens rarely have a voice in selecting candidates for public offices; at best, rather than choose, they merely endorse or reject candidates made by the competing political parties (Phillips et al., 1999). Therefore, voters only have a choice to vote for candidates presented to them by political parties, especially in countries that do not allow independent candidates, such as Nigeria (Koleoso, 2003). The real preference of the voters in a democracy, according to this logic, is often subverted.

The impact of this is that the quality of elections is frequently compromised throughout Africa, particularly in Nigeria, prompting concerns about the crucial roles played by electoral stakeholders, including the electorate, and the election management body (EMB), all of which have significant consequences on the exercise of franchise and the selection of voters choice at the polls (Idowu, 2023) and thus Haruna and Enikanselu (2021) reiterate that the involvement of the populace in political activities, particularly elections, and the expression of their voter's choice is crucial for the consolidation and sustainability of democracy, making it one of the critical components of the democratic process.

The sum of these issues is its impact on electoral integrity. Electoral integrity is a novel theoretical and methodological framework created by the Electoral Integrity Project (EIP), a team of scholars from Harvard University (United States) and Universities in Sydney Australia, to measure the pristine conduct of elections in any country. It assumes that the quality of elections affects citizens' perception of electoral integrity and malpractices, which influences voting participation, protest, and political legitimacy (Valdés, 2016). James et al. (2019) contend that numerous determinants of electoral integrity have been identified, ranging from structural factors like historical experiences with

democratic elections and socioeconomic characteristics of societies to institutional explanations centered on electoral systems and the presence of institutional checks and balances to more immediate explanations that center on the actors involved in electoral manipulation and oversight.

Given this foreground, this article attempts a comprehensive examination, using data from secondary sources, including books, newspapers, and online journals retrieved from academic search engines such as google scholar and Scopus, searched by keywords and themes, systematically and logically analyzed to achieve the aim of the study which is to examine factors that frustrate and hinder voter's choice and its implications for democracy in Nigeria. This article is divided into six sections. The introduction, conceptual clarification, and theoretical issues, electoral process and elections in Nigeria's fourth republic, ecological and institutional factors of voter frustrations in Nigeria's elections, the implications of voter frustrations and the sustainability of democracy in Nigeria. The final section gives conclusion and recommendation.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION AND THEORETICAL ISSUES

Election and electoral process

Dowse and Hughes (1986) define election as a procedure recognized by the laws of an organization (a state, a club or a voluntary organization) where members choose a smaller group of people to occupy offices of authority within that organization. Similarly, Awopeju (2011) sees election as a procedure that allows community members to choose representatives who will occupy positions of authority. It is an act of choosing public officers to fill vacant offices by vote and which may be conducted on a regular basis (Omoniyi et al., 2007). Election is a process administered by the government for selecting the officers or representatives of a group by vote of its qualified members. Elections could be direct or indirect. Direct election is a process of choosing office holders in which the voters directly cast ballots for the person, persons, or political party they wish to see control the government. Indirect election on the other hand is a process of voting for a group of people (Electoral College) who will select a candidate. Different voting methods offer people a greater or lesser say in who is elected. In most cases, the government creates and funds an election management body to conduct elections (Dumoye, 2010).

Electoral process on the other hand relates to all activities and procedures involved in the election of people into public offices, from pre-election to post-election activities. These activities constitute an entire cycle starting from the announcement of the intention to

conduct of election, the provision of voters' education and political parties' registration, registration of voters, delineation of constituencies, electoral campaigns, voting, counting of votes, announcement of results, return of elected contestants, resolution of electoral disputes and swearing-in of those elected, among others.

The electoral process includes rules guiding the conduct of elections and any conduct that threatens the electoral process (Elekwa, 2008; Nnamani, 2014).

Constitutional provisions regulate the agency in charge of the electoral process, and in contrast, the electoral law which is non-constitutional, covered by an Act of parliament regulates the voting process. And according to Nwabueze (1993), the non-constitutional aspects of the electoral process are more malleable than the constitutional aspects, and, therefore, easy to change when the need arises. Thus, in sum, elections and the electoral process allow people to exercise their voice and aggregate their preferences or choices (Sisk, 2017).

Political participation and political choice

Political participation refers to the involvement of individuals with suffrage rights in the state's political life in either representative positions or voting process (Zvulun and Harel, 2018). It is the essential core of democracy. Explaining political choice, in the context of voters' choice at elections, refers to the preference of individual voters for a political candidate contesting any political post. Voters choose individual candidates of their choice from a multiplicity of candidates, and this is done with the rationale and the option of choice that democracy avails to citizens. This is exemplified in multi-party systems where candidates are represented on the platform of various political parties, and factors such as individual sentiments and preferences, political partisanship, economic rationality, and institutional arrangements (Crigler and Hevron, 2017) all determine the choice of electorates in elections.

The electoral process and elections in Nigeria's fourth republic

The electoral process in Nigeria encompasses various stages, such as suffrage, voter registration, and electoral competition, the nomination of candidates, voting methods, and settling election disputes. These stages are crucial for conducting elections and ensuring the smooth functioning of democracy in the country (*cf.* Odusote, 2014). Nigeria's electoral system is based on single-member constituencies and a competitive multiparty system, with the Open Ballot System since 1983. The electorate, political players, electoral officials, and government, all play distinct roles in the electoral process (Uwadia et al., 2010). The reality in Nigeria's Fourth

Republic is that electoral malpractices have become ingrained in the electoral process, stifling freedom of choice and democratic growth (Ezeani, 2004).

Detailing these anomalies, the 1999 general election was contested by three major parties, with the People's Democratic Parties (PDP) Olusegun Obasanjo emerging as the winner. However, voter participation was low due to widespread disinterest (Odusote, 2014), and international observers noted significant electoral irregularities and fraud in many states, such as vote box stuffing, fraudulent thumb printing, and inflated results primarily favoring one political party. These irregularities distorted the voters' choice in the election (Yamanga, 1999). In the same vein, Roberts and Obioha (2015) assert that the 2003 Nigerian elections was more corrupt than the 1999 elections, characterized by rigging, violence, which ultimately did not reflect the people's preferences (Awopeju, 2011).

In the 2007 elections, political power changed hands from one civilian to another for the first time since independence. Despite this, the election was plagued by voter intimidation, violence, and widespread irregularities, leading to European Union observers describing it as the worst election ever conducted (Odusote, 2014). This opinion was also publicly reiterated by winner of the election, Umar Musa Yar'Adua, stating that the election was a sham of political exercise.

The 2011 general election was relatively peaceful and credible, but tarnished by irregularities and post-election violence that claimed about 800 lives (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The 2015 general election shifted power from an incumbent party to the opposition. The election had some incidents of violence, underage voting, and inflated results, but was adjudged to meet acceptable standards for credible polls (Mwangi, 2015; Ndujihe and Kumolu, 2015). Though, the successes of the election was aided by investments in new technology to improve the voting process, some hiccups around the use of it frustrated voters at the polls (IFES, n. d.).

The 2019 Nigerian elections were won by the All Progressive Congress (APC) and Muhammadu Buhari's, nonetheless, there were mixed reactions due to perceived voter intimidation and violence. The states of Bauchi, Benue, Kano, Sokoto, Plateau, and Rivers were particularly affected by violence during the gubernatorial elections (IFES, n. d.).

There were also lapses, such as election postponement, security and logistical challenges, failure of smart card readers, and unethical behavior of political parties (Ojukwu et al., 2019; Sule et al., 2020). The recently concluded 2023 general elections, also displayed characteristics of the previous elections before it, with mass reports of electoral irregularities, voter intimidation, etc.

In sum, Nigerian elections have a recurring pattern of electoral malpractices evident even in the relatively credible elections of 2011 and 2015. As Madunagu

(2003:63) argues, "every election in Nigeria since independence, has tried to perfect electoral malpractices or forms of election rigging employed in the proceeding election while introducing new ones".

DISCUSSION

Voter frustration in recent Nigerian elections

In Nigeria, the zero-sum nature of elections means that different tactics, foul and fair are deployed to render the electoral process vulnerable to abuse and gain maximum electoral advantage which is often at the expense of voters and their desired choice, and thus liable to their rejection (Roberts and Obioha, 2005). Some of the factors that frustrate voters' choices in elections have been mentioned in the above discussions. Broadly, these factors can be categorized into ecological and institutional factors. A few examples of each category was discuss.

Ecological factors

The ecology of an election refers to the environmental context within which the election takes place. Studies have noted that some of the ecological factors that affect turnout include political attitudes of the population, including the mobilization of ethnic values, the mobilization of religious sentiments across Nigeria's religious divide, inflammatory statements, and hate speech by the media and key opinion leaders and politicians; political or electoral violence and communal tension, regionalism and the long-standing power sharing problem, injustice and associated culture of impunity; economic vulnerability of participants in the electoral process, particularly voters which underlies the phenomenon of vote selling; electoral malpractices and even the weather (Phillips et al., 1999; Nnamani, 2014). The context does not simply *offset* the effects of demographic or socio-psychological factors on turnout. However, it *determines* whether these factors will significantly affect participation (Phillips et al., 1999:17). The weaponization of these factors tends to limit the efficient accumulation of the desired preference of citizens to influence electoral outcomes.

Socio-cultural elements such as ethnicity and religion influence political outcomes (Nwankwo, 2019). The multi-ethnic composition of Nigerian society is a divisive tool wielded by the political class to influence voters' choice during elections. Ethnic and religious considerations usually determine voters' behavior in the Nigerian political environment, wherein voters cast their ballots for candidates who share their ethnic, religious, and regional sentiments, even if the other candidate has a better potential to excel in governance or actual record of governance success (Sule et al., 2017). This has profited

candidates of the larger ethnic groups at the expense of minority groups. Religion and ethnicity thus play a vital role in the emergence of candidates while limiting voters' inputs in the emergence of their desired candidates and, therefore, affects the choice they can make during elections.

Social identification particularly ethnicity, and religion, thus have a significant impact on voting decisions (Olusola, 2015). The political elite's weaponization of these two factors often tilts electoral public opinion and choice in their favor.

This has been a prominent feature in the political history of Nigeria even before independence, where the nationalist leaders mobilized ethnic sentiments to derive maximum political advantage at the polls. Since the beginning of the Fourth Republic, most especially at the presidential level, political choice has been primarily influenced by ethno-religious and regional cleavages. The root of the post-election violence that attended the 2011 presidential election can be traced to ecological factors particularly ethnicity, religion, and power rotation.

The mobilization of ethnicity and religion operates in tandem with the deployment of hate speech, a phenomenon rooted in intolerance, especially in plural societies, which ultimately leads to political violence. Ezeibe (2015) defines hate speech as "any speech, gesture, conduct, writing or display which could incite people to violence or prejudicial action." This is particularly visible among the dominant ethnic groups, the Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. A former governor of Kaduna State in 2010 was reported to have said that "the North would make the country ungovernable if President Goodluck Jonathan wins the 2011 polls... Anything short of a northern president is tantamount to stealing our presidency". In 2013, a prominent politician from the South-West is also known to have made a very derogatory statement to the effect that: "The Igbos is collectively unlettered, uncouth, uncultured, unrestrained and crude in all their ways. ... Money and the acquisition of wealth is their sole objective and purpose in life". In another statement from the north, a presidential candidate in the 2015 elections stated that: "God willing, by 2015, something will happen. They either conduct a free and fair election or they go a very disgraceful way. If what happened in 2011 should happen again in 2015, by the grace of God, the dog and the baboon would all be soaked in blood" (Ezeibe, 2015). Hate speech such as these rob their target of dignity has damning consequences on the aggregation of voter's choice during elections. The proliferation of unruly campaign words and slogans directed to other ethnic components of the federal society not only increases voters' anguish in elections and consequently frustrates their choice but angers them, which can easily lead to violence.

Violence has always been part and parcel of Nigeria's electoral process, which impedes the constitutional right of the people to vote. Electoral violence, and the

intimidation and fear it foments, is usually used by incumbents to prevent supporters of the opposition from turning out during elections (Hafner-Burton et al., 2014). For example, during the August 2017 Gombe by-election for Dukku North State Constituency, political thugs disrupted voting (Awofadeji, 2017).

Similar incidents happened in by-elections in Nassarawa State in May 2017, where thugs violently disrupted voting and hijacked electoral materials and during the Lagos State council election in July 2017, where thugs invaded some polling units, scaring away some residents, voters, journalists, and other officials while hoodlums shot continuously to disrupt the polls.

Another expression of violence that affects voters' choices in Nigerian elections is the assassination of political actors. Embu and Igomu (2016) and Durotoye (2014) cite numerous examples of politically motivated and high-profile killings in Nigerian politics, which send frightening signals to politicians and intending voters of likely occurrence if they get involved in the electoral process. It has the potential to raise general disaffection and voter withdrawal, especially considering that it eventually strips some voters of their options. The spate of political assassinations in the country has seriously threatened democracy.

Using state security forces to carry out brutal acts of intimidation and harassment also affects the choice of voters (Jega, 2012). The militarization of the polling environment through the deployment of well-armed soldiers in addition to the police and other security agencies is officially trumpeted as serving to secure the field from the activities of party thugs and other miscreants that disrupt the voting process. When electoral candidates and voters cannot campaign without fear of reprisal, the election cannot be deemed inclusive, participative, and competitive, let alone reflect the people's choice. And when the victims of partisan or state political violence seek to oppose tyranny through protests, rioting, and other mass action, this exacerbates the crisis. This creates a paradoxical double effect in the deployment of armed forces. Their presence may scare or discourage individuals from voting for their preferred candidate even if their deployment is required to ensure peace in election hotspots. It is a distinct type of electoral manipulation that ostensibly influences and frustrates voters' choices.

The effects of violence by Boko Haram, an Islamist jihadist terrorist insurgency, particularly in the North-East axis of the country, are evident not just in the disruption of citizens' economic activities but also in their political engagement. The mass displacements of persons heavily affect their electoral engagement. With a third of the estimated 3.3 million IDPs in 2014, almost two percent of the population eligible to vote, it was likely that millions of voters would be disenfranchised in the 2015 elections, thereby severely undermining the validity of the democratic process (Odita and Akan, 2014). The Boko

Haram terrorist insurgency was, therefore, a catastrophe for voters in the affected areas. In light of this challenge, INEC, in December 2014 created a Task Force on IDP voting ahead of the 2015 elections.

Violence, whether by partisan or security agents or insurgents, differs from other kinds of electoral malpractice by virtue of the fact that it creates the dread of bodily damage and death, and, therefore, has psychological consequences for individuals as well as the wider community. Violence tends to reduce participation and thereby helps perpetrators win elections by distorting popular choice (Rosenzweig, 2017).

Institutional factors

From the institutional viewpoint, immediate causes of anguish for voters in the electoral process relate to the inefficiency of the electoral governing body to design a seamless electoral cycle that makes it easy for citizens to participate in the process. The institutional factors, hence, include the nature and roles of the electoral governance agency, the structure of the electoral program it designs, the electoral rules of the game, including the registration laws and procedures, the kind of election and its competitiveness, the shape and solidity of the contesting political parties, the state of mobilization of the electorate by the relevant institutions, and the role of the institutions in reshaping the prevailing political culture in which they are immersed.

An analysis of institutional arrangements shows that voters are frustrated by the challenges of the electoral process, from pre-election through election proper to post-election. The challenges are mainly associated with the operations of INEC and other election stakeholders, such as political parties and their candidates. For instance, beyond the problems associated with the agency of the election management body, such as counting the votes and letting the votes count, there is also a lack of internal party democracy and a lack of confidence in election tribunals to contend with.

To start with, voter registration is challenging in Nigeria. The unreliability of identification documents, lack of systemized records on births and deaths, and limited population registration, among others, often frustrate the voter registration exercise. Since 2017, prospective voters' challenges while trying to register have included malfunctioning Direct Data Capture (DDC) machines, inadequate personnel to attend to voters, and inaccessibility of registration centers, especially for potential registrants in rural communities (Ibrahim, 2017).

The voter registration exercise heralding the 2018 Ekiti State gubernatorial election was marred by the lateness of INEC officials, materials to registration centers, and irregularities by INEC officials. It was reported that officials at some registration centers in Ado Ekiti, the state capital, were unfriendly and unruly; some

demanded bribes from prospective voters. At the same time, others favored some voters at the expense of others. Frustrated by the exercise, some did not return for the exercise (Isah, 2018). Similarly, eligible voters in Ibadan were known to have complained about bad publicity about registration points for the registration exercise for the 2019 elections. Most of them needed help locating registration centers. In other areas, eligible voters got to the centers very early but still needed to register at the end of the day. In Zamfara State, prospective voters spent days at registration centers before registering (Polycarp, 2018).

Before the 2015 elections, INEC introduced Permanent Voters Cards (PVC), including a chip containing voter's biometric data. A card reader was also introduced to check the biometric data of individuals to avoid multiple voting experiences in the previous elections. PVC is mandatory, making its distribution by INEC and collection by voters a crucial pre-election exercise (EU Election Observation Mission, 2015). Unfortunately, in November 2014, the PVC collection was reportedly marred by some hiccups, mainly on the part of INEC. Reports from Lagos State indicated that INEC officials were absent at some distribution centers. Some prospective voters claimed to have waited in vain all day at various centers without getting their PVCs, forcing many to leave in disgust after waiting long hours. All these eventually led to a non-violence protest. Similar experiences were observed in other states, such as Edo, Ogun, Kano, and Imo (Gabriel, 2014). As a result, 16.8 million cards were not collected as at February 14, 2015, the original date for the commencement of the general election before its postponement. The postponement allowed for more card collection, leading to 81 percent card collection as of 21 March, 2015. But about 100,000 PVCs were not produced a day before the 28 March election (EU Election Observation Mission, 2015). The inept process of registration and collection of PVCs thus led to huge numbers of unclaimed PVCs as citizens got frustrated and discouraged. This means prospective voters who could not get voter cards were disenfranchised and denied the right to vote and hence, the right to choose.

The lack of internal party democracy is another pre-election institutional constraint to voters' choice in Nigeria. Political parties are fundamental to democratization and the modern electoral process (Ojukwu and Olaiifa, 2011). However, political parties in Nigeria since the Fourth Republic have been bewildered by party activities that do not conform to the principles of democratic governance. First and foremost is the lack of internal party democracy among them. Internal party democracy is democracy within a political party, the extent to which a party subscribes to and upholds universal democratic ideals (Ojukwu and Olaiifa, 2011).

The lack of internal democracy amongst Nigeria's political parties of the Fourth Republic is pervasive. Ononogbu and Okoroiwu (2019) maintain that the

capacity of the political parties to offer electorates clearly acceptable candidates has remained an insurmountable challenge during elections. There have been more examples of candidates being imposed than properly selected through party primaries. Candidates who competed in and won primaries were frequently replaced. The lack of clear party ideology, godfatherism, cross carpeting, etc. that have come to characterize especially the dominant Nigerian political parties, PDP and APC, have contributed to a decline in internal party democracy with consequences for the choice and preferences of the electorates. For example, godfatherism in party politics played out in the 2015 gubernatorial elections in Ondo State in the APC, when the national party leader imposed his candidate as the party's gubernatorial candidate against the will of the state party leadership and other party members. A similar case of anti-democratic party politics in the PDP is evident in Obasanjo's imposition of Umar Musa Yar'Adua as his successor in 2007 (Aleyomi, 2013). These instances demonstrate how the absence of internal party democracy can throw up candidates in an election that does not give the electorate good alternatives, thus limiting and restricting their choice at the polls.

Apart from the frustrations voters face during the pre-election exercise, many issues frustrate voters on Election Day or during the voting exercise. For instance, in the 2018 Ekiti gubernatorial election, there were reports that although the voting process was relatively smooth, in some polling units, the smart cards could not read the fingerprints of voters correctly, sometimes including those of contesting candidates, while some voters were initially rejected for invalid biometrics (Ameh, 2018). The same outcome was the case during the 2015 Bayelsa gubernatorial election, where the card reader failed to recognize the incumbent governor and the former president, Goodluck Jonathan (Nigerian Press Council, 2016). In addition, INEC officials were absent at some polling units in Ekiti West in the early hours of Election Day while voters were waiting for them. In addition, ballot snatching in the Ekiti State capital disrupted the voting exercise (Ameh, 2018). Late arrival of INEC officials and materials, stolen result sheets, and cases of malfunctioning card readers were also reported during the 2017 Anambra gubernatorial election in which INEC officials had to resort to manual accreditation to get people to vote (Sahara Reporters, 2017).

And finally, after all the shenanigans that compromise voters' choice at pre- and during elections, the results are declared, which to all intents and purposes, hardly reflect the aggregation of the voters' preferences, disputes arise, and losers go to court, is, the election tribunals. Nwagboso (2011) asserts that the electoral tribunal is designed to resolve apparent flaws in Nigeria's tumultuous electoral process. The hope in approaching electoral tribunals for electoral dispute resolutions is that justice will be served and voters' predilections will be

restored. But this is only sometimes the case.

After the 2003 elections, about 527 election petitions were received in respect of the elections (Enweremadu, 2011). The tribunals and courts lived up to widespread expectations, reversing some clearly obnoxious decisions by the electoral governing body, especially in the gubernatorial elections. However, this came at an enormous cost, including prolonged delay in serving justice, as in Anambra, Ondo and Oyo States (Theophilus and Justin, 20014). The judicial process has yet to record such a feat concerning petitions on presidential election results, which have always been contested, save for the results of the 2015 election, where the losing candidate decided against approaching the courts, despite the willingness of his political party to do so.

From the examples highlighted above, the long process to finally get a verdict is a major problem that indirectly influences voter apathy and frustration. The election tribunals did not fare better in subsequent elections to restore voter confidence, including the 2007 elections, which had about 1250 petitions, double those of 2003. All too often, the technicalities of the judicial process prevail over the substance and merit of electoral disputes, which leads to further frustrations and anguish. This underlines the apparent lack of faith in the election tribunals. For perpetrators of election malpractices and sabotage of the electoral process, the maxim seems to be: 'rig first and be declared the winner; let them go to court'.

The perceived lack of trust and corrupt nature of election tribunals have contributed to their loss of legitimacy and capacity to assert the people's will in post-election verdicts. Tukura and Tukura (2020) observe that since the Fourth Republic, decisions by Election Petition Tribunals and courts of competent jurisdiction on election petitions have always impacted the country's democracy with their exasperating effects on the behavior of voters and political parties while also weakening Nigerian jurisprudence. The effect on voters is that voters who support these candidates bear the brunt in some ways, especially the loss of enthusiasm in the electoral process and the continued decline of trust in election tribunals. This reflects the decline in participation during subsequent elections that accounts for low voter turnout, as we shall see shortly in respect of the presidential elections conducted in the Fourth Republic. For political parties, the result is a weakened willingness to follow through till the end of the tribunal process.

Voter frustrations, electoral turnout and sustainable democracy

The challenges that frustrate voters' participation in elections in Nigeria include ecological issues relating to the influence of ethnicity, religion, and violence and institutional concerns like poor management of the electoral process, the voting process, and diminishing

confidence in the electoral dispute resolution process, among others. The after-effect of these challenges is disenfranchisement, voter apathy, and low voter turnout during elections (Agaigbe, 2015). This outcome has specific consequences that assume the forms of withdrawal, anger, and aggression, which translate, in political behavior terms, into key pathologies of democratic frustration, including powerlessness, inefficacy, alienation, and lack of interest in the electoral process, and distrust and cynicism of citizens towards the political system. A rising sense of discontent has been known to lead to a drop in turnout and party memberships, as well as a rise in populist and extremist behavior and huge protest movements (Bertsou, 2018). This undermines the degree of public engagement in the democratic process as an essential core of democracy.

Electoral democracy is based on the assumption of full citizens' participation in the electoral process. This is why voter turnout is one of the most critical indicators of citizens' participation. While it is generally agreed that higher voter turnout is a vital sign of democratic development, lower turnout is usually associated with voter apathy, mistrust of the electoral process, and loss of faith in the people in their government (Phillips, 2005; Solijonor, 2016). The importance of voter turnout for sustainable democracy and development is that a high turnout of voters for an incoming government, positions it to undertake significant reforms and initiate policies with popular support and legitimacy, while a low voter turnout will put an incoming government in a position with no such support.

Political apathy is the ultimate expression of the anguish of voters and voter frustration in political choice-making. Nigeria's experience indicates that political apathy has taken the following forms: refusal to register as a voter, refusal to vote, failure to oppose election manipulation, and failure to provide helpful information to security officials (Idike, 2014). If any systematic evidence is needed to prove voter apathy, it is in the evidence from the presidential elections conducted in the Fourth Republic. Nigeria has experienced a decline in the total number of votes cast during presidential elections over the years. As shown in Figure 1, voter turnout fluctuated between the first presidential election in 1999 and 2011, rising from 30,280,052 in 1999 to 42,018,735 in 2003 and declining to 35,401,045 in 2007 before rising again in 2011 to 39,469,484. After that, turnout declined successively to 29,432,083 in the 2015 presidential election and 28,614,190 in the 2019 presidential election. On the other hand, the number of registered voters has risen consistently from 57,938,945 in 1999 to 82,344,107 in 2019, save for 2015, which recorded 67,422,005, a decline from the 73,528,040 qualified voters who registered in 2011.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of voter turnout relative to the actual number of registered voters. Beyond the initial 1999 presidential election, when turnout stood at

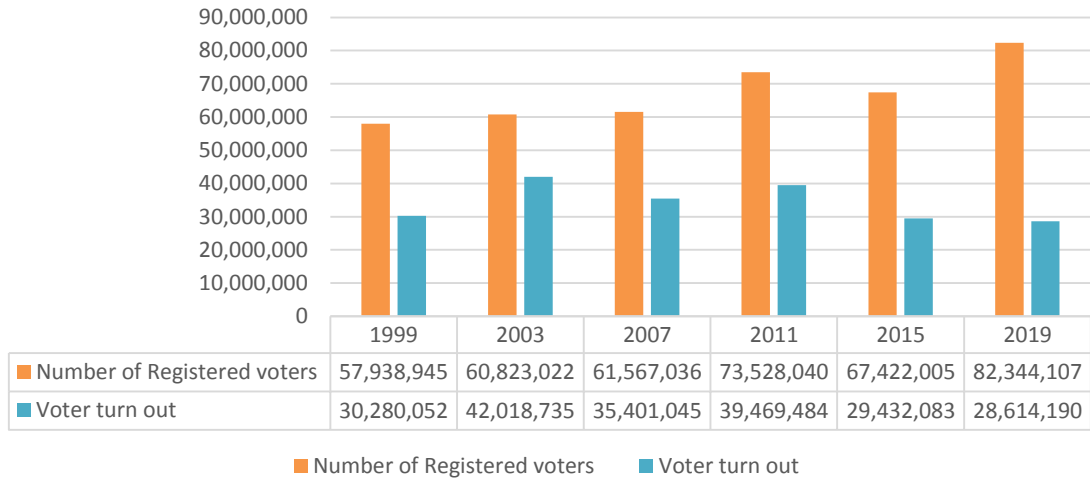


Figure 1. Voter turnout in presidential elections in the fourth republic.
 Source: Underlying data are sourced INEC (cf. Vanguard News (2011) and inecnigeria.org.

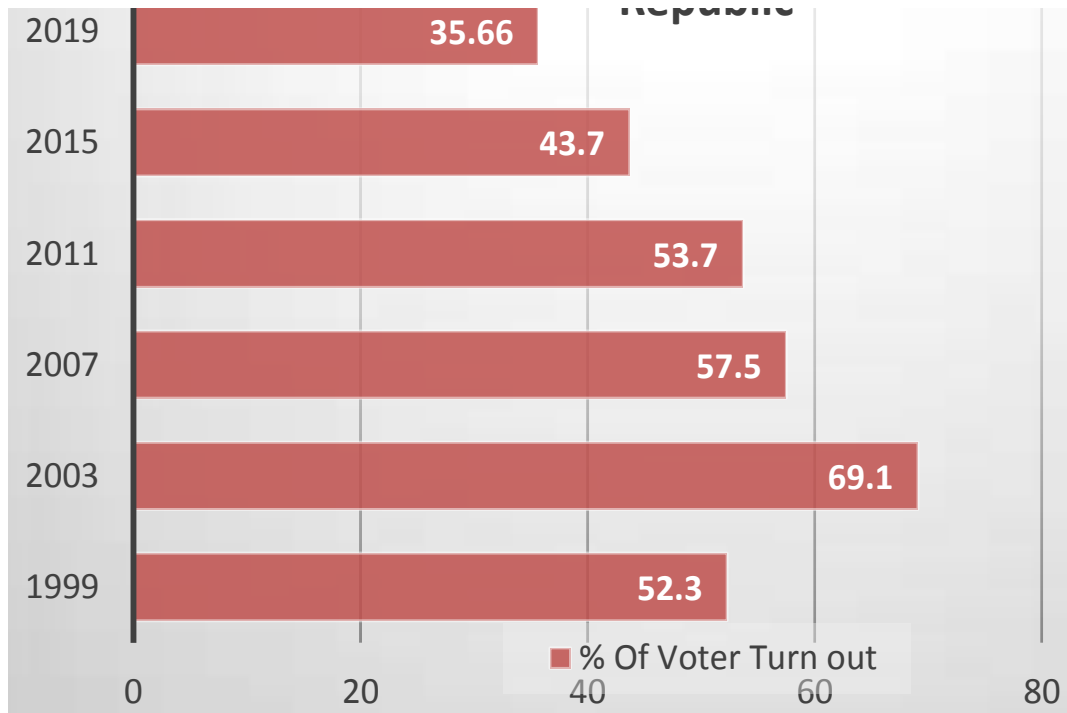


Figure 2. Percentage voter turnout in presidential elections in the fourth republic.
 Source: Underlying data are sourced INEC (cf. Vanguard News (2011) and inecnigeria.org.

52.3%, the evidence is that the percentage turnout has been decreasing consistently from its peak in the 2003 presidential election (69.1%) through the next elections to its lowest ebb at 35.66% for the most recent 2019 presidential election. By this trend, there is concern about a further decrease in turnout in subsequent general elections as voter frustration with the electoral process persists.

The evidence confirms increasing apathy on the part of the Nigerian electorate as a result of parallel frustrations with the electoral process. Voter apathy in Nigeria reflects a lack of trust in the electoral process that belies the belief that election outcomes are predetermined and votes do not count (Ogunbiyi, 2017).

Voter apathy, disenfranchisement, and low voter turnout, which result from the frustrations voters face in

the process of exercising their voting rights, have negatively affected the sustenance of democracy in Nigeria. First, low voter turnout raises questions about the legitimacy of electoral results and the health of democracy. A government cannot claim to represent the people and claim to be legitimate when huge numbers of eligible voters did not participate in the voting process. What this means is that a minority of voters get to elect the government, thus negating what democracy stands for, which is the rule of majority. Second, Berelson et al. (1954) argue that voter apathy helps to create elite political parties by preventing fragmentation of votes towards smaller parties, which would otherwise gain popularity from greater participation. This is the case in Nigeria where only two political parties, the PDP and APC get stronger daily at the expense of the many smaller political parties. Third, voter apathy as a subset of political apathy indicates a decline in the political involvement of the citizenry in the political process. When there is a decline in the overall political participation of a people for a long time, democracy declines and the government stops being responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of the people (Tan, 2012). In Nigeria, successive governments have shown less concern about the needs of the people amidst supine response of the electorate in making the government accountable and responsive.

CONCLUSION

This article identified the challenges of electoral process and politics that frustrate Nigerian voters in recent years. The nature of Nigerian politics, particularly the weaponization of social and religious sentiments, institutional encumbrances and electoral logistics often subverts the choice of electorates for the benefit of the choice of the elites which reemphasizes the debate that citizens only vote but rarely in the actual sense of it choose their preferred leaders. The implication of these challenges is that it has led to disenfranchisement, voter apathy and low voter turnout in recent elections in Nigeria with decline in political participation as a whole. These issues stagnate the growth and consolidation of democratic tenets in Nigeria, as the most common and available means of citizen's participation in the political process is stunted thus endangering democratization within the country's political space.

RECOMMENDATION

To address these issues, there is the need for sanity in the Nigerian electoral space, through the appropriation of substantial political and economic issues, as against ethnic and religious sentiments that disadvantages some sections of voters, adequate preparation by the regulatory electoral body, through a two year electoral cycle plan,

impartiality of the court, the provision of sufficient security apparatus through the deployment of every military and paramilitary institution, to curb disenfranchisement and encourage voters to make their preferred choices at the polls. Improving the ecological and institutional conditions surrounding Nigeria's electoral process will curtail the challenges that frustrate voters and minimize their anguish in political choice making.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflicts of interests.

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