

ELECTORAL FRAUD AND VOTERS' APATHY IN EDO STATE 2023 HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY ELECTION

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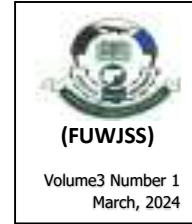
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Abstract

This study analyzes voters' apathy in the Edo State House of Assembly election held on March 18th, 2023. The paper compares the unexpectedly high turnout for the presidential election with the significantly low turnout rate of just 16.63% for the House Assembly election. The research methodology employed in this study involved a thorough review of various secondary sources such as journals articles and newspapers. The study results identified electoral violence, fraud, and intimidation which were witnessed in the presidential election as the factors that generated voter apathy in the State House of Assembly election in Edo State, Nigeria. The study concludes that it is imperative to increase voter participation in subsequent elections in Edo State, Nigeria. The study recommends that electoral institutions should take proactive measures to ensure a peaceful and transparent voting process, while voters should be encouraged to exercise their democratic rights by participating in the electoral process.

Keywords: Voter apathy, electoral fraud, democracy, house of assembly

Introduction

A flourishing democracy is dependent on the active participation and passionate involvement of every sane adult in a given state, regardless of the level of participation. However, when many begin to shy away from the electoral process, not only can it result in a loss of faith in government institutions but also a feeling of detachment from the political process. If the electoral system is perceived as flawed and the election outcomes fail to align with the voters' preferences, it can breed skepticism and disinterest, ultimately weakening democracy. Fraud during the pre-election, election

day, or post-election period is calculated to influence election results which has the tendency to undermine democracy as it strips democracy of the bearing of its basic values, uniqueness and meanings. Electoral fraud is a direct attack on the people's electoral rights and the act is often in the form of vote buying and selling, bribing of electoral officials, hoarding of election materials and adoption of other crude and cunning methods of cheating political opponents (Adeola, 2012; Shelly, 2019). Electoral fraud is a threat to democracy and voter's participation in the nation's electoral process. In Nigeria, politicians, electorate, security agents and the electoral body engage in the unscrupulous act of electoral fraud, (Oshin, 2013) notes that the judiciary, that supposed to be the hope of the cheated is at times used by the perpetrators to uphold the atrocities they have committed during elections. As a result of this challenge, choosing leaders at different levels of government in Nigeria through a free, fair and credible election has become a difficult task (Adeola, 2012). Even when the 2011, 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria have been perceived to be "somehow" better compared to the 1999, 2003 and 2007 general elections, yet elections and electoral processes in Nigeria cannot be said to be credible as to determine Nigeria's transition of power. Crises from electoral malpractice have culminated in the form of electoral fraud resulting from orchestrated violence and hooliganism, and in the long run, have a retrogressive effect on the participation of citizens in subsequent elections.

In Nigeria, violence arising from electoral fraud is inimical to the development, progress, unity and peaceful co-existence, and further drains the purse of the country. In 2007 in Edo State, allegation of electoral fraud between the Action Congress (AC) gubernatorial candidate, Comrade Adam Oshiomhole and Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) counterpart, Prof Osariemen Osunbo heralded protests from AC supporters after the alleged loss of the election to PDP. As observed by Aghemelo (2012), the cars of some notable PDP leaders were burnt as a result of electoral fraud perceived to have been used to scheme out the major opposition party; the AC, away from power. Upon the AC's victory at the Appeal court in Benin City, where its candidate was declared winner of the 2007 gubernatorial election, the party's supporters took to the streets not only in celebration but to also seek revenge on the PDP's leaders and supporters with many beaten with bodily injuries (Vanguard Newspaper, 11th November 2008). Another dimension of electoral fraud is the issue of 'inconclusive election'. New terminology in the country's electoral system dates back to the April 11, 2015 gubernatorial elections in Abia, Imo and Taraba States which was declared inconclusive sequel to alleged political manipulations and unprecedented violence that greeted the election exercise and culminated in the cancellation of the votes earlier cast in some polling units (Abah,

2016). The polling units that were cancelled and marked for a fresh election were places with major violence eruption, votes cast in those locations with major violence were not only cancelled but marked for a rerun election. As announced by the country's electoral body, INEC, it becomes necessary for a rerun when the total number of cancelled votes is more than the total number of 'lead votes', such an election is declared inconclusive. It is therefore a basic requirement for a winner to emerge, the electoral body must have seen the election to have satisfied all the requirements even if a rerun had to be announced after declaring an election inconclusive. This, however, has a cost implication on the country's economic activities as businesses within the areas for a rerun are often deprived of their business activities. Unfortunately, Nigeria is yet to have elections where those not affected by any rerun will be civil. In fact, most rerun elections with earlier colouration of electoral fraud are held in apprehension which further erupts to voter apathy (Shelly, 2019).

The 2023 House of Assembly election in Edo state was expected to be keenly contested by the participating political parties in the election, due to the large number of registered voters and the massive media sensitization of voters prior to the election, however, reverse was the case. The election was below expectations as polling units were not only observed to be scanty, but a drop in total number of vote cast as was observed in the presidential election. A development alluded to election fraud that was perpetuated in the presidential election earlier held in February 2023 as perceived by eligible voters in the state. Out the one million, nine hundred and ninety-six thousand and eight one(1,996,001) eligible voters in the state, only three hundred thirty-two thousand and twenty-one (332,021) persons turned up to cast their votes. Voter apathy not only has a negative multiplier effect on representative government, but it also breeds undemocratic principles and a 'frail democracy' that is tantamount to an insecure political system. The paper voyage on voter apathy is to determine the extent of voters' apathy in the Edo State House of Assembly election in 2023 vis a vis why there was more turnout in the 2023 presidential election in Edo State as against the number of votes cast in the state house of assembly election. The harm done by electoral fraud to Nigeria's democracy cannot be overemphasised as it has a bearing in deciding voters' turnout in subsequent elections due to distrust in electoral institutions, particularly when the election outcome is alleged to be against the expectation of the electorate. A vibrant democracy is possible when the elections conducted by the electoral body are seen to be credible and have all it takes to attract voters to polling units. It is not enough for eligible voters to decide a candidate's victory, but the large turnout of the registered eligible voters that voted in an election makes a democracy robust. This paper, besides the

extent of the voter apathy that was experienced in the Edo State House of Assembly 2023 election it sets to also examines the connectivity of electoral fraud and voter apathy and spark a research voyage for student of politics and government institution. The election may have come and gone, but how representative are the elected members of the Edo State house of assembly.

Electoral Fraud in Nigeria's Political History

This is the process of committing all forms of electoral irregularities before, during and after the election period. It may include but is not limited to vote buying and selling, voter intimidation, ballot snatching, rigging and involving *illegal interference with the process of an election*. In some cases, the voting process may be nothing more than a sham, to the point that officials simply announce whatever results they want, sometimes without even bothering to count the votes, as experienced in Adamawa State (Punch Newspaper, April 2023) Electoral frauds undermines democracy and has the tendency to bring voter apathy in any democratic setting. When there is electoral fraud, it is a direct attack on citizens' basic fundamental rights and freedoms such as the freedom of association, freedom of assembly, freedom of expression and the right to elect one leader amongst several others important rights and freedoms that are universally recognized and protected today as fundamental characters of modern democracy (Adesanyan, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Public choice theory was deployed in this study to provide an in-depth understanding of the reason behind electoral fraud and voter apathy. The theory was first developed by a group of economists in 1950 under the leadership of Nobel laureate James Buchanan. As a theory, it was originally developed to provide understand into the process of government decision making, and have since been applied to other areas including electoral fraud and voters apathy.

This theory states that humans are rational actors who seeks to maximize their own self-interest, within the context of electoral fraud and voters apathy, the theory suggest that people engage in fraud or abstained from voting because they feel its in their own best interest to do so.

Relating this to the voters apathy that was witness in the Edo State House of assembly election, citizens believed that the interest of the political elite is best served with the various form of electoral fraud committed by the politicians and because the masses (Citizens) are limited in the knowledge of how their votes can influence or manned elite decision.

Research Methodology

The methodological choice for this article is the quantitative method of data gathering. Besides textbooks, journals articles and online materials relied on, election result and voters turnout figure as published by Independent Electoral Commission (INEC) to identify patterns and trends in the election under review.

Causes of Electoral Fraud in Nigeria

Over the years electoral fraud has become part and parcel of Nigeria politics, and Edo state in particular, there have been different report of violence, ballot box snatching, vote buying, underage voting and over voting and just recently inconclusive election one begin to wonder while all these irregularities in a contest, has election become a must win? However some reasons deduced to be the potential causes of fraud are thermalized below

Weak Electoral Institution

The electoral umpire independent National Electoral commission saddled with the responsibility to conducting free fair and credible election for the country is so weak that political gladiators are able to manipulate her to earn their self-gains

Exorbitant amount spend in Political Contest

Another reason while electoral fraud as become the order of the day in state is based the fact that political office seekers spent exorbitantly while vying for position, at such they make sure to win the election by engaging in all forms of electoral fraud that bring about victory no matter how its earned.

Wide Spread Corruption

due to the wide spread corruption that has ravage the country in the most recent past staff of the electoral empire adhoc staff inclusive are willing to collect financial inducement to manipulate election results with recourse to conscience

Types of Electoral Fraud

Since the return to democracy in 1999 political gladiators have constantly improve on ways of committing the atrocity of electoral fraud, the six different election that been held Nigeria have in fact witness different type and techniques of perpetuating electoral fraud for the purpose of this research we shall categorised and explain electoral fraud seven different ways.

Vote Buying

In the last 6 general elections conducted, vote buying has been reported at each election. Vote buying, which is the act of offering of money or other goods or favours in exchange for the vote of a voter in elections, has grown steadily with each successive election despite its criminalization in Section 130 of the Electoral Act, 2010. This act takes place at multiple stages of the electoral cycle; from the voter registration period to campaigns up to the election day. Cash, foodstuff, clothes and other souvenirs are some of the commonest items used. According to Onuoha and Ojo, vote buying is more predominant during election day, either shortly before or during vote casting. For keen observers, this is a common trend during elections in Nigeria. In fact, in every election cycle, pictures and videos of politicians buying votes from citizens surface online. Hunger and increasing poverty in the country have provided a loophole for politicians to weaponize. YIAGA Africa reported that in 2019, some voters in Bayelsa and Kogi states traded their permanent voters' cards (PVC) for as low N500 and N1,000 ahead of the governorship elections in the states. While vote buying is very common today in Nigeria, Onuoha and Ojo explained that the act predates Nigeria's return to democracy in 1999. The duo stated that vote buying was rife during the Social Democratic Party (SDP) presidential primary in Jos in 1992 and the 1993 presidential poll. They even highlighted it as one of the reasons for the annulment of the 12 June 1993 presidential poll. The act of vote buying is still very much around as seen during the recent governorship elections conducted in Anambra and Edo states, there were media reports of voting buying.

While vote buying transcends locality – urban and rural areas, it is however more prevalent in rural areas. A survey conducted on the 2019 election by the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) showed that a larger share of people living in rural areas are offered money or a favour in exchange for their vote than in urban areas. The prevalence is also higher in men than women. The same 2019 NBS survey revealed more men (23.1%) were offered bribes for their vote in 2019, while it was 18.8% for women. Surprisingly, those who are self-employed with dependent employees, self-employed without employees and private and public sector employees are more targeted for vote buying than unemployed people.

Underage Voting

While this may not be so common in urban areas, it is rampant in the rural areas with zero or minimal media attention. In many remote places in the country, politicians sometimes intimidate and bribe electoral officials to allow children who are ineligible to cast their vote.

Several cases of this have been reported in many parts of the country. It was reported in the 2021 Kano local government elections, in Osun and Ekiti state in 2014, in Plateau state local government elections held in 2014 and other parts of the country.(punch newspaper 2022)

Voter/Electoral Officials Intimidation and Ballot Snatching

Another common way electoral fraud happens in Nigeria is through voter intimidation; a strategy that has been employed over the years by politicians in keeping those likely to vote for opponents away from the polls. While in most instances political thugs are the ones that perpetuate this act, security personnel have also been fingered to carry out this act. In instances where this is pulled off successfully, (intimidation of voters and INEC officials), the ballot boxes are often snatched and taken away with INEC officials running for their lives or sometimes whisked away with election materials to undisclosed locations. Several reports of this abound. There is hardly any election in Nigeria where such acts have not been reported. It happened in the 2011 and 2015 elections. In the 2019 general election, and most recently in the 2023 presidential election in Edo state

Ballot Box Stuffing

This a method which politicians started with in 1999 get the prototype of the ballot papers and get their agents to thumb print on them after which they get them ready and ask their political thugs to start shooting sporadically to scare unsuspected voter, who at the sound guns will run for their dear life then the ballot box is loaded with the thumb print ballot papers

Bribing of Electoral Officer

Bribing electoral officers another dicey of electoral fraud which is seriously making way. Currently it involves a situation where by an electoral officer can be given money to announce a result that is not true this the case in Adamawa state were Aisha Dahiru winner. Was declared winner even while collation of results was still on going

Over Voting or Multiple Voting

This involve an electoral fraud pattern where some individuals allowed to vote multiple time by the electoral officers after collecting tips from politicians

Deliberate De-Enfranchisement

This is type of electoral fraud where some politicians do all with their capacity to make that the strong hold of their opponents are de-enfranchise,

type always done through non or late arrival of voting materials, this was a common experience in the 2023 house of assembly election in Edo state while citizens such place are waiting endlessly for voting materials announcement of results will be going on in television stations

Voing and Voters' Apathy in Nigeria

Voter apathy is a term used to describe the lack of interest among eligible voters when it comes to participating in elections or the electoral process of a country. Apathy has its source in Greek, plainly meaning "without feelings." Voter apathy simply refers to the lack of enthusiasm of the people towards the electoral process, particularly voting. While there are various perceptions of what apathy means, it generally connotes the absence of feeling. In the general sense, voter apathy refers to the absence of interest in an election. According to Yakubu (2012:40), "voter apathy is the indifference on the part of electorates as regards their attitude towards electoral processes such as voting." Cloud (2010:12) similarly states that "voter apathy occurs when eligible voters do not vote in public elections." However, Agaigbe (2020) suggests that voter apathy goes beyond just a lack of interest or passivity; it is the insensitivity of voters to electoral processes, particularly voting, caused by dis-enfranchisement with the political system, ignorance, and a lack of proper education. It is important to note that voter apathy is not self-dis enfranchisement, but rather an outward stimulus from the fraudulent electoral process, such as electoral fraud or a lack of electoral education.

The resultant effect of voter apathy is poor voter turnout. Statistics show that voter turnout has continued to take a downward curve since the 2003 election which has recorded the highest number of voter turnout since Nigeria returned to democracy in 1999. The 2003 elections had a 69 percent turnout, with the 2007 elections having 58 percent in 2007, 54 percent in 2011, 43 percent in 2015 and a further reduction in the 2019 election with just 35 percent. In the last off-season election held in Osun, out of over 1,955,657, just over 800,000 turned out on Election Day. Ahead of the elections, politicians, political observers, and leaders of thought continued to call on Nigerians to shun their political antics, and brickbats on media and come out on Election Day to vote for their choice of candidates, in accordance with their conscience. Ahead of the 2023 general elections, Nigerians were highly sensitized to come out and actively participate in the election. Registration periods were extended to allow the citizens to register for their Personal Voter's Card (PVC) so as to participate in the election. All these were done to get a larger political engagement or voter turnout for the election. This is in Plato premised that: "One of the penalties for

refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors.”

Looking at the political history of Nigeria, various reasons have been put forward for voter apathy and some of the identified reasons include the view that votes do not really count, that the outcome of most elections is pre-determined, that the electoral process is replete with violence, that the political class is undeserving of its time because of their perceived insincerity to electoral promises, the consistent failure of political parties and candidates to deliver on their promises. Nigerians even got more disillusioned, and hopeless about the current state of things in the country and lacked enthusiasm to turn out for elections. Nigerians are disappointed that the government seems not to understand the hardship faced by the common Nigerian. Just before the 2023 elections, Nigerians were treated to another round of hardship having to grapple with the effect of the naira-redesigned policy that resulted in the cash crunch experienced during the pre-2023 elections and a little after, intermittent fuel scarcity, and insecurity epitomized by cases of kidnapping, killing, armed robberies. The woes of the country were evidenced by the continued exit of Nigerians, especially professionals, in what is now popularly called “Japa.” this angered many Nigerians, particularly the youth who defied all odds to make sure they registered and collected their personal voter's card (PVC) in participation for the elections. The 2023 presidential election in Nigeria witnessed a new wave of political engagement where the most especially youth mobilized themselves to garner support for a particular candidate in what was captured as the ‘Obedient Movement’, a development the political commentator referred to as ‘The Third Force’. This wave for the first in the political history of the country, sends shivers down the spine of the political heavyweights. Not comfortable with what could result from the development, most of the polling stations were alleged to have witnessed harassment in the form of violence. In Oredo Ward, particularly Wards 4 and 6, there were reported cases of electoral violence. In Ward 4, which has the polling station where the Governor votes, there was serious electoral malpractice, thugs were reported to have beaten up the people who were believed to be the ‘Obidient Movement’ supporters. This was also reported in many parts of the country. It was therefore alleged that the wide marginal votes that the ‘Obedient Movement’ would have garnered for the candidates of the Labour Party (LP) were thus reduced as a result of the reported electoral violence in many parts of the country. When the presidential results were announced that the candidate of the All Progressive Congress (APC) won the election with the Labour Party candidates coming third behind the candidate of the People democratic party (PDP) that took a second position, the citizens were convinced enough

that no matter the vote cast, the country's electoral institution is not fair enough to conduct an election that will not be favourable to the ruling class. What was noticed in the Edo State House of Assembly election that followed up was a higher level of distrust in the electoral process as a high level of political apathy was witnessed election. Eligible registered voters neglected the election as voter turnout in that election was recorded to be lower as compared to the presidential election that was held three weeks apart. A further statistic showed that it is one of the lowest since the history of the House of Assembly elections in Edo state, compared to the presidential election turnout, of the one million, nine hundred and ninety-six thousand and eight one (1,996,001) eligible voters representing 100%. ready to vote, only three hundred thirty-two thousand and twenty-one (332,021) persons representing 16.63 % turned up to cast their votes. Such a high level of voters apathy was witnessed. Some observers argue that Nigerians should channel this displeasure at the present situation by turning out en-masse on days of election to vote for candidates that will engender the desired turnaround. Moreover, elections offer an opportunity for Nigerians to change leadership that they displeased with and vote in the one they believe will deliver.

Relationship between Electoral Fraud and Voter Apathy

The connectivity between electoral fraud and voter apathy cannot be over-emphasized in that the level of free and fairness of any electoral contest leaves an impression in the mind of the electorate. Since the return of democracy in 1999 to Nigeria voter turnout has continued in a 'nose dive' movement, due to the different forms of electoral fraud perpetuated by politician and their agents, and their ability to easily get away without being penalized. This creates in the mind of people the impression that their votes do not make any difference. Some of them may ask, why bother to vote when the results have already been decided? For example, in the just concluded presidential election, in spite of the various measures and increased calls for participation, the turnout in the 2023 election was even further downward trend. Statistics of turnout show that voter apathy has worsened from 35 percent in the 2019 election. The statistics show that the turnout in the 2023 election has oscillated between 20 percent and 30 percent across states. In Niger State, registered voters were 2,698,344 while accredited voters on Election Day were 827,416 voters. In Benue, registered voters were 2,777,727 while accredited voters were 804,189. In Akwa Ibom, registered voters were 2,357,418 while accredited voters were 594,450. In Oyo, the number of registered voters was 3,237,310 voters while number of accredited voters was 854,439. In Kaduna, the number of registered voters was 4,335,208 while accredited voters are 1,418,046. For

Kebbi, the number of registered voters is 2,032,041 while voters accredited on Election Day were 599,201. In Kano, registered voters were 5,921,370 while accredited voters were 1,769,525. In Zamfara, registered voters were 1,926,870 while valid votes in Saturday's election were 502,923. In Sokoto, registered voters were 2,172,056 while accredited voters were 619,492. Scholarly articles have observed that apathy in an election is largely due to the electorates' belief that their votes do not count, that the outcome of most elections is pre-determined, the electoral process is replete with violence, that the electoral body (INEC) Cannot be trusted to conduct an election that is free of fraudulent practice and that the political class is undeserving of its time because of their perceived insincerity election guidelines and rules. As such, most registered voters see the days of elections as an opportunity and possibly follow proceedings on television stations. The male youths seize it as an opportunity to play football in the street even when an election is ongoing. A reason not farfetched from the level of distrust the citizens have in the election process and government institutions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

After conducting extensive research on the cause of apathy during the Edo State House of Assembly Election in 2023, it was discovered that the root cause of the apathy was linked to electoral fraud that occurred during the 2023 presidential election. The analysis revealed that there were cases of intimidation of voters and vote buying during the presidential election, which subsequently led to the apathy observed during the Edo State House of Assembly Election. These fraudulent activities created a sense of distrust in the electoral process among the citizens, which resulted in voter apathy during the subsequent election. Electoral fraud has been identified as the major reason behind voter apathy in Nigeria. To effectively tackle this challenge, Nigerians must join hands and work towards defying all odds of electoral fraud. One way to achieve this is by turning out in large numbers to vote for their preferred candidates and protecting their votes. When eligible voters participate actively and vigilantly in the electoral process, the incidence of electoral fraud can be significantly reduced. In addition to the efforts of citizens, institutions such as the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) must also play their part in upholding their mandate to conduct free and fair elections. Institutions saddled with the responsibility of persecuting people involve in electoral fraud must investigate and prosecute all individuals involved in electoral fraud. When perpetrators of electoral fraud are brought to justice, it will restore public confidence in the electoral process and encourage citizens to actively participate in future elections. During the last House Assembly election, a

total of three hundred and thirty-two thousand and twenty-one voters turned out to cast their votes. This underscores the importance of sensitizing and mobilizing citizens to participate in the electoral process, as it is only through active participation that the voices of the people can be heard and their interests effectively represented.

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