



2022, vol. 9, issue 1, 84-96

RESEARCH ARTICLE

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6794638>

Two Decades of Electoral Democracy: Voter Apathy and Democratization Process in Nigeria

Celestine Ogechukwu Okafor, Department of Political Science, Federal University Wukari,
ocelestineogechukwu@gmail.com

Jude Odigbo, , Department of Political Science, Madonna University Nigeria, judeodigbo@gmail.com

Remi Chukwudi Okeke, , Department of Public Administration, Madonna University Nigeria,
remiokeke@gmail.com

Abstract

Voter apathy is a subdivision of political apathy and has become one of the foremost democracy quandaries especially in developing polities. Participation in politics is an important part of decision making in a democratic setting. Therefore, when voters do not come out to participate in voting, it definitely impacts negatively on the electoral process and sometimes undermines the outcome of an election. It may mean that the majority who did not vote indirectly empowered the minority who voted to make decision on their behalf. This paper argues that the increasing manifestation of voter apathy in the last two decades of Nigeria's democracy leads to a poor democratization process and governance failures in the Nigerian project. It has promoted a condition in which individuals still remain more powerful than institutions. The paper employed documentary methods for data collection, while anchoring its discourses on the decision making theory as theoretical framework. The paper concludes that if the increasing level of voter apathy is not controlled in the country, it will continue to constitute a challenge to democratic consolidation in Nigeria. It recommends among other considerations that the Electoral Management Body (EMB) needs to critically inspire citizens through massive enlightenment and must restore trust and confidence in the electoral process by ensuring that people's verdicts are not thwarted by any means.

Keywords: Voter Apathy, Democracy, Electoral Process, Electoral Democracy, Democratization

Introduction

Globally, voter apathy is a destabilizing and worrisome trend in democratization programmes, especially among the developing polities of Africa and Latin America (Andriani & Escudero-Loaiza, 2021; Bukusi, 2022; Dupuy & Prakash, 2022; Dobbs, 2021; Manoel et al., 2022; Obiagu et al., 2021). As voter apathy spreads globally, so are its tremendous impacts spreading on developing democracies. According to Fagunwa (2015) the decrease in voters' participation appears to be a general phenomenon across the globe. In the same vein, Blais (2000), Gray and Caul (2000) also pointed out that the fall in electoral participation is apparent in most democracies. In fact, Moliki and Dauda (2014) stated that there is a universal confirmation of voter apathy, that is, absence of citizens' participation and passionate unconcern towards civic obligations and political activities.

Election remains meaningful when people massively participate and voter turnout indicates inclusiveness and significant participation. Voters' involvement in politics is an indicator of a healthy

democracy. It also expresses citizens' interest in the political process of a nation and enhances people's indispensability in the development agenda of the state. Thus, election is a means that allows citizens to choose who should represent them in government which is fundamental for development and sustainable democracy. Hence, immense voter turnout is a major prerequisite for the deepening of a democratization process. It measures the rate of inclusiveness and participation of people. Invariably, low turnout may indicate several abnormal signs that may hinder progress in the practice of democracy.

Since 1999, Nigeria's electoral process seems to lack credibility, transparency and highly trapped in controversial unacceptable circumstances. Obviously, from 1999- 2019 general elections Nigeria tend to witness gross decline in voter turnout (Akiyemi, 2019). This could be attributed to the growing inadequacies and unfair conduct of the state officials and crude manoeuvrings that characterized electoral process in Nigeria. Only an unimpressive percentage of the voting population tends to vote. For instance, Nigeria has a population of over 200 million people yet only 84 million voters were registered recently. Only 35% of eligible Nigerians balloted in the recently conducted 2019 general elections. Logically, instead of majority rule, there seems to be minority rule in Nigeria. This is despite the fact that democracy and democratization are hinged on the basic assumption of majoritarianism while at the same time not denying the minority the space to express their views.

Democracy that is not founded on the ultimate will of the people is doomed. Democracy seems to be a failed process when citizens are unconcerned about who emerged victorious in an election (Adekoya, 2019). This simply means that low turnout in 2019 general elections does not only expose the fractured relationship between the government and citizens but it also demonstrates the failure of governance in Nigeria since 1999. This paper therefore seeks to revisit voter apathy and its impacts on the democratization project in Nigeria after two decades of electoral democracy.

Voter Apathy, the Electoral Process and Democracy

Concepts such as voter apathy have acquired huge relevance because of their implications for democracy. Voter apathy which is a subdivision of political apathy has therefore resurfaced as a foremost quandary in developed and developing democracies. Voter apathy aroused the thought of numerous scholars over time due to its increasing unfavourable impact on the democracies of countries within the global village. Voter apathy is a decline in participation of citizens under the electoral system. Voter apathy is a situation when the eligible voters are unwilling and deliberately avoid participating in elections. Crew et al. (1992) in Fagunwa, (2015, p.6) perceives "apathy as deficient response, indifference and nonchalance in electioneering". This involves detachment and dispassion among the voters for reasons best known to them. Election offers the citizens an opportunity to have a say in how they want to be governed in a state.

The nonchalant, uninvolved, apathetic feelings, citizens in a given country express during elections illuminate the level at which representative democracy may be derailing. This is owing to the undisputable fact that without sufficient turnout, there can be no true elections, for elections depict the masses' preference. A low voter turnout reflects, not the preference of the majority of the people but that of a few individuals. This brings into question the legitimacy of the government that comes into power. But a high voter turnout will not only validate the credibility of an election but also the legitimacy of the government.

Thus, democracy means a system of government that serves the interests of the people regardless of their non-participation in political life. However, in the context of elections it entails the participation of the people through their elected representatives. This is to say that a minority may be elected or selected to govern. The representatives must be elected by the people in a well conducted free and fair election (Obiora, 2008). The people must be given opportunity to make choices among contending candidates so that when the winner emerges, he / she becomes the true voice of the people. Obiora (2008:233) pointed out that:

"Democracy allows the voice of all to be heard but the wish of the majority to be implemented. This is because it is the government of the majority. The minority will have their say, but the majority will

have their way. Indeed, democracy is a system of democratic government in which decisions are arrived at by securing the agreement of the majority of the participants”.

This implies that the will of the majority shall prevail. However, in Nigeria's political context, the story appears to be different with the nonchalant, non-involvement and uninterested attitude of citizens in general elections. And as a result, the level at which representative democracy is derailing without consciousness seems alarming. The shallow votes refer to the choice of the few and not the desire of the majority. Democracy guarantees the citizens the right to elect their representatives in government for the function of providing the welfare of the citizens (Idike, 2014). So, when governance fails citizens probably becomes apolitical to political participation.

Election indeed is a process by which members of a political community elect qualified individuals to manage the affairs of the state (Gaub, 2003). According to Nwankwo (2008) contemporary democratic system assumes that significant political decision makers are chosen by the people via competition among multiple candidates. Elections perform an important function that makes democracy the preferred system of governance around the world. In sum, among the functions fulfilled by election, three, namely, legitimization of political power, accountability and representation, are basic to modern democracies. Election confers authorization on the elected representative and it calls on them periodically to review their stewardships. Fagunwa, (2015) explained that elections are necessary for the processes of democratization and democratic consolidation in every developing democracy because it is the benchmarks required to appraise citizens' active involvement.

The electoral process involves all the guidelines and procedures required for the election of the leader of a political community (Odigbo and Okafor, 2019). Akamere (2001) in Moliki and Dauda (2014) defined the electoral process as the legitimate engagements for selecting representative by the citizens. It covers the whole activities before and after elections. These activities include the registration of political parties, voters' registration, review of voters' register, delineation of constituencies, resolution of electoral disputes, return of elected representatives, and swearing-in of elected representatives, among others. A credible electoral process facilitates and enhances free, fair and credible elections through enshrined principles of democracy.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts decision making theory as framework for analysis. Richard Synder (1916-1997) was one of the famous proponents of decision making theory which believes that politics is the process of allocating value through an excellent decision making. Process here refers to the combination of strategies and procedures. Some other decision making theorists are Herbert Simon and Harold Lasswell. Harold Lasswell points out that power as participation in decision making is a process. Decision making theory is widely employed in public policy analysis and in the study of international relations. Decision making is the selection of an alternative course of action from among various alternatives. According to Obikeze and Obi (2004) decision making is seen as a conscious activity to determine, analyze and select the excellent option from many and apply it. Nwokoye (2008) explains that for us to have clear picture of political action, there is need for us to analyse it from the standpoint of the decision makers. Synder (1975) in Nwokoye (2008) also noted that decision making is a mechanism for all political actions and is capable of dealing with dynamic situations. Understanding political action requires the following; examine the actor for making the choice which produced the effect and environmental and educational features that influenced him/her. Other features include competence, flow of communication, personal traits acquired from childhood and motivation of the decision-makers. It is the combined impact of these factors that influence decision-makers and thereby their actions.

Taking a cue from the above, the implication is that in all these, position of the actors in decision making is inevitable. The actors here refer to eligible voters and politicians. Incidentally, the Nigeria 2019 general elections and other elections in the past were entangled with voter apathy. People tend to have lost interest or motivation for electoral democracy particularly in Nigeria. Voting on the

Election Day is an important decision making in any democratic setting. However, when eligible electorates appear unwilling to discharge civic responsibilities by turning up for voting, the democratization process in Nigeria becomes weaker and indeed hijacked by minority participant.

According to Falola and Heaton, (2008) in Sule (2019) violence, hooligans, militarization, destruction, bloodshed among others, are the prevailing characteristics of politics in Nigeria. Other tendencies include manslaughter, shooting, oppression, voting buying, godfatherism, bribery, corruption, snatching of ballot paper and unbridled rigging. The passion to capture power at all costs by politicians is an indication that an election in Nigeria is warfare. Voter apathy thus appears to be a reoccurring event in Nigeria's election. This is as a result of failed promises made to the electorates during political campaigns and the looting of public funds by leaders against the expectation of their initiating purposeful projects (Sule et al., 2017).

Incidentally, the resultant action to these actions of the politicians is the nonchalant, uninvolved, apathetic and unconcerned feelings of many citizens expressed during general elections. Therefore, the people's decision not to participate in voting is caused by failed governance. Avoiding the polling units is simply how the people express their decision against the ugly situation in the country. Indeed, this trend will produce total decline, insufficient voter turnout and lack of legitimacy. For instance, the 2019 general elections recorded 35% voter turnout from 44% in the 2015 general elections and was far down from the 54% turnout in 2011. Voters' lack of interest on Election Day is very injurious to the democratization process in Nigeria. If the increasing level of voter apathy is not stemmed, the survival of democratization process in Nigeria cannot be sustained. Hence, Nigerians need to take a stand on what to do about voters' apathy in the electoral process.

Nature and Dimension of Voter Apathy in the Nigerian State

There are huge scholarly evidences that voter apathy poses threat and danger to the survival of any democracy globally. Moliki & Dauda (2014) believed that voter apathy is a danger ravaging many countries of the world. Several other studies have also pointed out that the issue of voter apathy appeared not to be receiving adequate attention from governments as national security, environmental degradation, economic recession, deadly pandemic and poverty, among others. Voter apathy has been with Nigeria since the introduction of electoral principles in 1922 but got worse when Nigeria returned to democratic rule in 1999, and until today, it has escalated. Unfortunately serious attention has not been paid to it by the Nigerian government. Fagunwa (2015) noted that voter apathy is in two forms; the refusal of the voting population to register during voting registration and refusal of eligible voters to cast their votes. Fagunwa (2015) explained however, that registration of voters does not guarantee voting because many people register for diverse intentions.

Moliki & Dauda (2014) share similar opinion that voters' registration is relevant to the conduct of an election before other electoral processes can take place. Voter's registration is one thing while voting on the Election Day is another thing. Going by the number of eligible voters registered between 1999 and 2019, one would perceive the obvious and significant difference in the figure between Population, voters' registration and total votes cast. Table 1 & figure 1 below show the estimated population and voters' turnout in Nigeria's presidential elections from 1999-2019 and graphic representation of the figures.

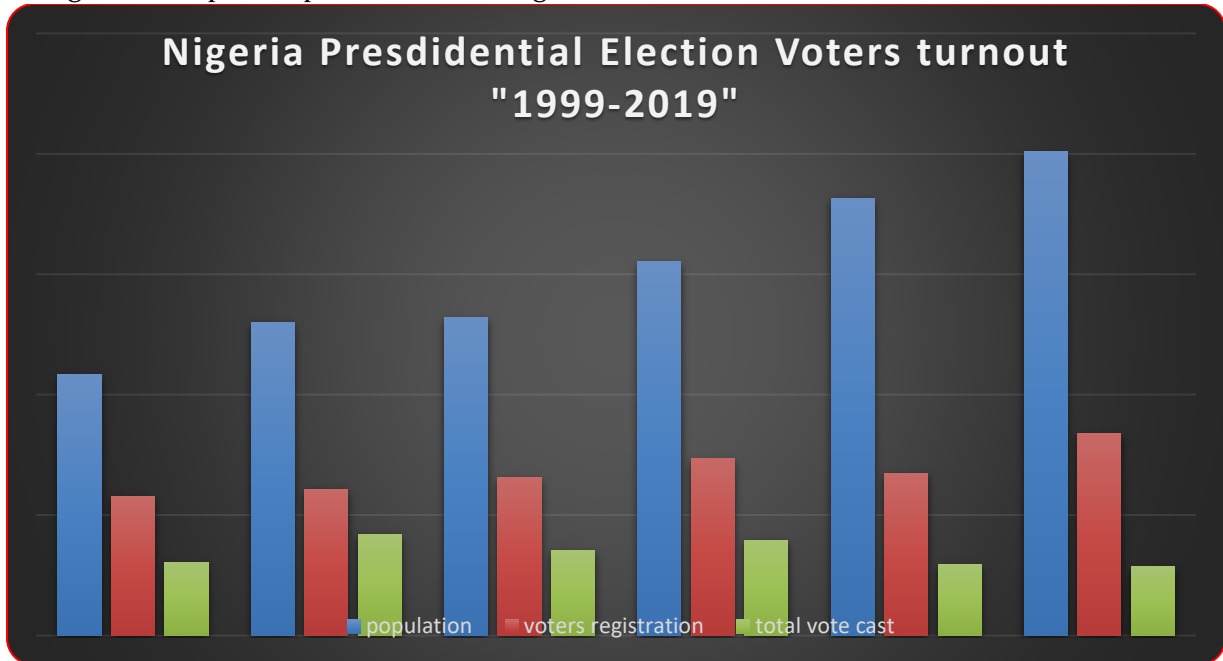
Table 1: Showing the Estimated Population and Voters' Turnout in Nigeria's Presidential Elections 1999-2019

YEAR	POPULATION	VOTERS' REGISTRATION	TOTAL VOTES CAST	PERCENTAGE OF VOTER TURNOUT
1999	108, 258, 350	57, 938, 945	30, 280, 052	52%
2003	129, 934, 910	60, 823, 022	42, 081, 735	69%
2007	131, 859, 730	65, 567, 036	35, 397, 627	58%
2011	155, 215, 570	73, 528, 040	39, 469, 484	54%
2015	181, 562, 052	67,422,005	29,432,083	44%

2019	200,963,599	84,004,084	28,614,190	35%
------	-------------	------------	------------	-----

Source: Compiled by the authors from (Fagunwa, 2015, p. 8; Moliki & Dauda, 2014, p. 14).

Figure 1: Graphic Representation of Nigeria Presidential Election Voters' Turnout 1999-2019



Source: Compiled by the authors

From the above illustrations, the total population in Nigeria by 1999 was 108,258,350 million people. From the above figure, INEC registered 57,938,945, while only 30,280,052 eventually voted representing 52.26% voters' turnout. In 2003 general elections, Nigeria's population increased to 129,934,910 million people. Thus, the entire number of registered voters increased to 60,823,022 million with a marvellous increase in the vote balloted. Total votes cast increased to 42,081,735 million representing 69.08%. In 2007 general elections, the population of Nigeria recorded a progressive increase to 131,859,730 out of which 65,567,036 eligible voters willingly got registered by INEC. However, the whole votes cast decreased to 35,397,627 signifying estimated voter turnout to be 57.50%.

In 2007 general election, Nigeria's electoral process recorded its first voters decline when compared to previous elections. Scholars like Moliki & Dauda (2014); Omotola (2009); Agbu (2015); Nwangwu (2015); Ogbeidi (2010); Yakubu (2012) and among others have submitted that the 2007 general elections were characterised by widespread violence, massive rigging, thuggery, irregularities and other malpractices. It appeared to be the worst election in Nigeria since 1999. For instance, "Former President Musa Yar Adua as at the time of welcoming the Former United Nations Secretary General, Mr. Ban-Ki Moon, admitted that the process through which he became the President of Nigeria was faulty while the immediate past President, Goodluck Jonathan in 2014 stated that the outcome of the 2007 general elections that presented the late Umaru Yar'Adua as President and himself as Vice President has caused him a lot of embarrassment" (Odigbo, 2015).

Certainly, the 2011 general elections also witnessed its share of the phenomenon of "voter apathy". Table 1 above indicates that there was a significant increase in the population of Nigerians to 155,215,570 million people and the whole number of registered voters by INEC was put at 73,528,040 million but only 39,469,484 million total votes were cast, representing 53.68% voter turnout. From the population of registered voters it means that many who managed to register did not vote. Meanwhile, the general election that took place in Nigeria in 2015 was globally seen as one of the best elections Nigeria ever had. The 2015 general election which appeared to be highly credible in the history of elections in Nigeria recorded one of the worst apathy despite the huge success. With a total population of 181,562,052 million people, only 67,422,005 million Nigerians successfully

registered as voters in 2015 whereas only a ridiculous number 29,432,083 million total votes were recorded, representing 43.65% voter turnout.

As at February 2019, Nigeria's population had exploded to 200, 963, 599 million and total registered voters increased by 14 million people through the INEC's Continuous Voters Registration. A total number of 84,004,084 million eligible voters registered for the 2019 general elections but surprisingly only 28,614,190 million people willingly voted in the elections representing about 35.66% voter turnout. The total votes cast in 2019 were the lowest ever experienced since the country's return to democratic rule in 1999. The table below gives more details of voter apathy across the 36 states of the federation and FCT.

Table 2: Showing the Percentage of Voter Turnout in Nigeria's Presidential Elections across the States of the Federation (2015-2019).

S/N	STATES	REGISTERED VOTERS FOR 2015	ACCREDITED VOTERS FOR 2015	TOTAL VOTES CAST FOR 2015	VOTERS TURNOUT (%) FOR 2015	REGISTERED VOTERS FOR 2019	ACCREDITED VOTERS FOR 2019	TOTAL VOTES CAST FOR 2019	VOTERS TURNOUT (%) FOR 2019
1	Abia	1,349,134	442,538	401,049	33%	1,932,892	361,561	344,471	20.90%
2	Adamawa	1,518,123	709,993	661,210	47%	1,973,083	874,920	860,756	48.91%
3	Akwa Ibom	1,644,481	1,074,070	1,028,551	65%	2,119,727	695,677	605,140	35.98%
4	Anambra	1,963,427	774,430	703,409	39%	2,447,996	675,273	625,035	32.59%
5	Bauchi	2,053,484	1,094,069	1,039,775	53%	2,462,843	1,075,330	1,061,955	46.04%
6	Bayelsa	605,637	384,789	371,739	64%	923,182	344,237	316,754	44.73%
7	Benue	1,893,596	754,634	703,131	40%	2,480,131	786,069	763,872	35.02%
8	Borno	1,799,669	544,759	515,008	30%	2,315,956	987,290	955,205	49.36%
9	Cross River	1,144,288	500,577	465,906	44%	1,527,289	461,033	446,046	33.23%
10	Delta	2,044,372	1,350,914	1,284,848	66%	2,845,274	891,647	882,254	36.09%
11	Ebonyi	1,071,226	425,301	393,337	40%	1,459,933	391,747	379,394	30.16%
12	Edo	1,650,552	599,166	522,785	36%	2,210,534	604,915	599,228	35.02%
13	Ekiti	723,255	323,739	309,445	45%	909,967	381,132	393,709	57.18%
14	Enugu	1,381,563	616,112	585,632	45%	1,944,016	452,765	451,063	25.33%
15	FCT	886,573	344,056	316,015	39%	1,394,856	467,784	451,408	45.55%
16	Gombe	1,110,105	515,828	473,444	46%	2,394,393	604,240	580,649	45.25%
17	Imo	1,747,681	801,712	731,921	46%	2,272,293	585,741	542,777	34.41%
18	Jigagwa	1,815,839	1,153,428	1,071,889	64%	2,111,106	1,171,801	1,149,922	72.08%
19	Kaduna	3,361,793	1,746,031	1,650,201	52%	3,932,492	1,757,868	1,709,005	48.18%
20	Kano	4,943,862	2,364,434	2,172,447	48%	5,457,747	2,006,410	1,964,751	42.72%
21	Katsina	2,842,741	1,578,646	1,481,714	56%	3,230,230	1,628,865	1,619,185	51.09%
22	Kebbi	1,457,763	792,817	715,122	54%	1,806,231	835,238	803,755	48.61%
23	Kogi	1,350,883	476,839	439,287	35%	1,646,350	570,773	553,496	39.75%
24	Kwara	1,181,032	489,360	461,01	41%	1,406,457	489,482	486,254	42.56%
25	Lagos	5,827,846	1,678,754	1,495,975	29%	6,570,291	1,196,490	1,156,590	21.63%
26	Nassarawa	1,222,054	562,959	521,641	46%	1,617,786	613,720	599,399	42.55%
27	Niger	1,995,679	933,607	844,683	47%	2,390,035	911,964	896,976	41.96%
28	Ogun	1,709,409	594,975	559,613	35%	2,375,003	613,397	605,938	36.19%
29	Ondo	1,501,549	618,040	582,435	41%	1,822,346	598,586	586,827	40.49%
30	Osun	1,378,113	683,169	663,373	50%	1,680,498	732,984	731,882	57.87%
31	Oyo	2,344,448	1,073,849	928,606	46%	2,934,107	905,007	891,080	41.58%
32	Plateau	1,977,211	1,076,833	1,000,692	54%	2,480,455	1,074,042	1,062,862	51.26%
33	Rivers	2,324,300	1,643,409	1,584,768	71%	3,215,273	678,167	666,585	23.94%
34	Sokoto	1,663,127	988,899	876,369	59%	1,903,166	950,107	851,937	55.02%
35	Taraba	1,374,307	638,578	602,716	46%	1,777,105	756,111	741,564	43.73%
36	Yobe	1,077,942	520,127	491,767	48%	1,365,913	601,059	586,137	47.63%
37	Zamfara	1,484,941	875,049	780,179	59%	1,717,127	616,168	597,224	37.88%
	Total	67,422,005	31,746,490	29,432,083	43.65%	84,004,084	29,349,600	28,614,190	35.66%

Compiled by the authors with data sourced from Sule (2019); Nwangwu, (2015) and INEC

From table 2 one can state that the nature and dimension of voter apathy in Nigeria shows a net increase despite the marginal increase in the voters registration recorded by the Independent National Electoral Commission, INEC. The 2019 general elections appeared to have witnessed massive and unimaginable voter apathy in different states of the federation. Obviously, Rivers state recorded 47.06% decline from the 2015 general elections which is the highest lowest turnout in the country, followed by Delta and Akwa Ibom states, each recording 29.91% and 29.02% voters decline while Zamfara and Enugu had 21.12% and 19.67% decline respectively. Table 3 below shows the state difference in voters decline from 2015 general elections:

Table 3: Showing the voters' apathy difference from 2015-2019 general elections

S/N	STATES	VOTER TURNOUT FOR 2015 (%)	VOTER TURNOUT FOR 2019 (%)	DIFFERENCES IN VOTERS DECLINE FROM 2015-2019 ELECTIONS (%)
1	Abia	33%	20.90%	12.1%
2	Akwa Ibom	65%	35.98%	29.02%
3	Anambra	39%	32.59%	6.41%
4	Bauchi	53%	46.04%	6.96%
5	Bayelsa	64%	44.73%	19.27%
6	Benue	40%	35.02%	4.98%
7	Cross River	44%	33.23%	10.77%
8	Delta	66%	36.09%	29.91%
9	Ebonyi	40%	30.16%	9.84%
10	Edo	36%	35.02%	0.98%
11	Enugu	45%	25.33%	19.67%
12	Gombe	46%	45.25%	0.75%
13	Imo	46%	34.41%	11.59%
14	Kaduna	52%	48.18%	3.82%
15	Kano	48%	42.72%	5.28%
16	Katsina	56%	51.09%	4.91%
17	Kebbi	54%	48.61%	5.39%
18	Lagos	29%	21.63%	7.37%
19	Nassarawa	46%	42.55%	3.45%
20	Niger	47%	41.96%	5.04%
21	Ondo	41%	40.49%	0.51%
22	Oyo	46%	41.58%	4.42%
23	Plateau	54%	51.26%	2.74%
24	Rivers	71%	23.94%	47.06%
25	Sokoto	59%	55.02%	3.98%
26	Taraba	46%	43.73%	2.27%
27	Yobe	48%	47.63%	0.37%
28	Zamfara	59%	37.88%	21.12%

Compiled by authors

The above table shows evidence of declining voter turnouts in 28 states under review. Table 2 further shows the voter turnout for the states of the South-South – Edo, Delta, Cross River, Rivers, Akwa Ibom, and Bayelsa from 2015 to 2019. It shows the turnouts for Akwa Ibom state 65% in 2015, and 35.98% in 2019 with decrease of 29.02% from 2015. It shows the turnouts for Bayelsa state to be 64% in 2015, and 44.73% in 2019 with a difference of 19.27% decline from 2015. The turnouts for Cross River state were 44% in 2015, and 33.23% in 2019, the difference is 10.77% voter turnout decline from 2015. For Delta State, it was 66% in 2015, and 36.09% in 2019 while the difference in voters decrease is 29.91% from 2015. In Edo, the turnouts were 36% in 2015, and 35.02% in 2019 with a difference of 0.98% voters decline from 2015. The turnouts in Rivers state for the period were 71% in 2015, and 23.94% in 2019 while the difference in voters decline is 47.06% from the 2015. The data shows a consistent decline in voter turnouts in all the states within the South-South geopolitical zone.

The tables also show the voter turnouts in the states of the South-East – Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, Anambra, and Abia states. The turnouts for Abia state for the period were 33% in 2015, and 20.90%

in 2019. For Anambra, the turnouts were 39% in 2015, and 32.59% in 2019 while the difference in voter's turnout is 6.41% from 2015. For Ebonyi, the turnouts show 40% in 2015, and 30.16% in 2019 with a difference of 9.84% voters' turnout from 2015. For Enugu, the turnouts show 45% for 2015, and 25.33% in 2019 while the difference in voters' turnout was 19.67% from the 2015. Data for Imo state shows 46% in 2015, and 34.41% in 2019 with a voter turnout difference of 11.59% from 2015. Like the states of the South-South, the voter turnouts declined among the South-Eastern states in 2019 general elections.

The table clearly shows the voter turnouts in the North-West states from 2015 to 2019. The data from table 2 shows that Jigawa state had 64% in 2015, and 72.08% in 2019. Obviously, Jigawa state recorded the highest voter turnout and with an increase of 8.08% in the 2019 general elections. Turnout for Kaduna was 52% in 2015, and 48.18% in 2019 with a difference of 3.82% voters turnout from 2015. The turnouts for Kano state were 48% in 2015, and 42.72% in 2019 while the difference in voters' turnout was 5.28% from 2015. For Katsina state, 56% in 2015, and 51.09% in 2019 hence, the voters turnout difference was 4.91% from the 2015. Kebbi state turnout was 54% in 2015, and 48.61% in 2019 with a difference of 5.39% voter's turnout from 2015. In Sokoto state, the turnouts were 59% in 2015, and 55.02% in 2019 while the difference in turnout was 3.98% from 2015. For Zamfara state it was 59% in 2015, and 37.88% in 2019 with a turnout difference of 21.12% from 2015. From the 7 states, only Jigawa recorded higher voter turnout in 2019. The other six states – Kaduna, Kano, Kebbi, Katsina, Sokoto, and Zamfara – show evidence of declining voter turnouts in the period under review.

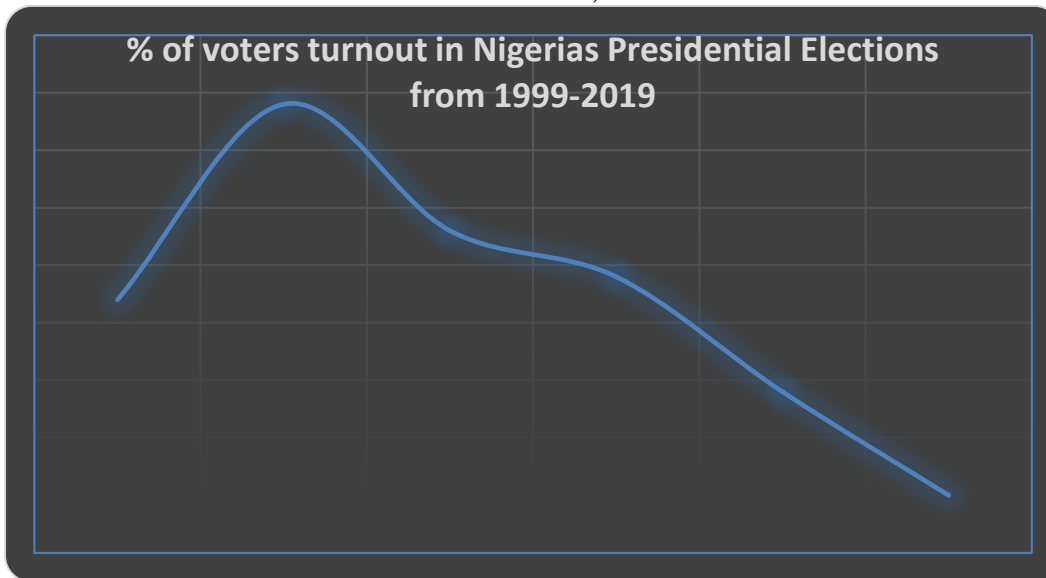
Likewise, the table under reference shows the voter turnouts in the North-East states. The data for the geopolitical zone reveal that Adamawa state had turnouts of 47 % in 2015, and 48.91% in 2019 with a little increase of 1.98% in 2015. For Bauchi state, there were turnouts of 53% in 2015, 46.04% in 2019 while the difference was 6.96% in 2015. For Borno state, there was 30% in 2015, 49.36% in 2019 and the state also witnessed an impressive increase of 19.36% in 2015. For Gombe state, there was 46% turnout in 2015, 45.25% in 2019 with a difference of 0.75% in 2015. In Taraba state, there was 46% turnout in 2015, and 43.73% in 2019 while the difference is 2.27% was 2015. For Yobe state, there was 48% turnout in 2015, and 47.63% in 2019 while the difference was 0.37%. In the geopolitical zone, both Adamawa and Borno states recorded higher turnouts in 2019 despite being faced with the challenge of insurgency. The other states had a decline in their voter turnouts.

Similarly, the table shows the turnouts of votes in the South-West geopolitical zone from 2015 to 2019. The turnouts per state show Ekiti had 45% in 2015, and 57.18% in 2019 while the marginal increase was 12.18% for 2015. Lagos had 29% in 2015, and 21.63% in 2019 with a decreasing voter turnout difference of 7.37% in 2015. Ogun had 35% in 2015, and 36.19% in 2019 with an increase in voter's turnout of 1.19% for 2015. Ondo had 41% in 2015, and 40.49% in 2019 while the difference in voter turnout was 0.51 in 2015. Osun had 50% in 2015, and 57.87% in 2019 with an increase in voter turnouts 7.87% in 2015. Oyo had 46% in 2015, and 41.58% in 2019 while the difference in voter turnout was 4.42% in 2015. Among the states, only Lagos had a consistent decline in turnouts in the period regardless of being among the most populated cities in the country. Meanwhile, states like Ogun, Ekiti and Osun recorded improvements in their levels of voter's turnout with Ekiti topping with 12.18% followed by Osun 7.87%.

In the same way, the voter turnouts for North-Central states were presented. The data per state show that Benue got 40% in 2015, and 35.02% in 2019 while the difference in voters' turnout was 4.98% in 2015. For Kogi, turnouts were 35% in 2015, and 39.75% in 2019 with an increase of 4.75% in 2015. In Kwara state, it was 41% in 2015 and 42.56% in 2019 with an increase of 1.56% from 2015. For Nassarawa stste, turnouts were 46% in 2015, and 42.55% in 2019 while the difference was 3.45% in 2015. Niger had 47% in 2015, and 41.96% in 2019 while the difference was 5.04% in 2015. Plateau state had 54% in 2015, and 51.26% in 2019 while the difference in voter turnout was 2.74%e from the 2015 position. FCT had 39% in 2015 and 45.55% in 2019 with an impressive increase of 6.55% voter turnout from the 2015. In the geopolitical zone, all the states had a consistent decline in voter turnout during the period under review. Despite its sharp decline, FCT recorded the highest turnouts in the 2019 elections followed by Kogi and Kwara states.

Thus, this implies that the eligible voters appear not to be interested in the processes that produce political leaders in Nigeria. Consequently, this is a clear indication of how the people have been disconnected and separated from the government. This is a dangerous trend that must be a source of serious concern to all genuine stakeholders in the polity. Figure 2 below gives a vivid illustration of the graphic representation of percentage voter turnout in Nigeria's presidential elections between 1999 and 2019.

Figure 2: Graphic Representation of Percentage of Voters' Turnout in Nigeria's Presidential Elections, 1999-2019



Source: Compiled by the authors

Voters Apathy: A Recurring Trend in Nigeria's Electoral Democracy

From the above graph, it is obvious that the whole people who registered for 2019 general elections were 84 million. However, when we assess past elections in Nigeria the number of registered voters for 2019 appeared to be the largest. In 2015, we had 68 million eligible voters; 73 million in 2011; 61 million in 2007; and 60 million in 2003; whereas in 1999 was 57 million registered voters. The next question to ask is: where are the voters? Does it mean that Nigerians are only interested in registering as voters and are not interested in the actual process of selection? Or, does it correlate with the popular saying that, votes don't count in Nigeria? Akiyemi (2019) identified the following possible important factors discouraging Nigerians from participating in their country's electoral processes. They are:

Bad governance: The practice of politics and governance in Nigeria appears disappointing. Generally, governance could arouse or kill the interest of the eligible voters. First, the fundamental duty of every government is to provide security for citizens within its province. Odigbo and Okafor (2019; p.4) noted that the safety of lives and personal property of the citizens assumed top priority position in the government agenda. It implies that nothing must distract government from performing this responsibility. It is anticipated that government will make available a favorable political environment which is free from any form of intimidation, harassment and bullying.

However, this appeared to be absent in the Nigerian state as so called political sponsors and leaders force their will on the people (Onwuama, 2019). According to Odigbo and Okafor (2019) and Onwuama, (2019) the negative attitude of do or die affair of politicians accounted for the reasons why security agencies appeared to be used for the abuse of the electoral law. For instance, the militarization of elections in Nigeria encouraged violence, killings, intimidation and rigging for selfish ambition. This has led to lack of interest and apathetic attitude of eligible voters to the democratic process.

Economic security and social welfare are other aspects of governance which consists of establishing employment opportunities, reducing inflation, eliminating hunger and starvation and

improving the standard of living. As common to other expectations of the state, provision of welfare (quality medical facilities, sound education, motor-able roads, portable water supply, and constant power supply among others) in Nigeria has been a mirage. Apathy results from the inability of the government to meet the needs of the citizens.

Justice system in Nigeria: Ordinarily, the judicial arm of government is regarded as the light at the end of the tunnel for the less privileged citizens. The reverse is the case in Nigeria where the judiciary is seen as highly corrupt. Laws made in Nigeria seem to be for the common citizens while the politicians appear to be living above the law. Non obedience to the rule of law is in the nature of Nigeria's political system. Voter apathy possibly can come from the inability of the government to offer justice for all and sundry. For instance, the Supreme Court on Tuesday 14th January, 2020 nullified the election of Emeka Ihedioha of the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) as the governor of Imo State and at the same time the apex court declared Hope Uzodinma of the All Progressives Congress (APC) as the winner of the March 9, 2019 governorship election in the state. Incidentally, the judges did not provide the details of the new votes scored by each of the candidates after the addition of the results from the 388 polling units. This controversial judicial decision appeared not to be generally accepted by the citizens of Imo State hence, the name tag "Supreme Court Governor".

According to a report from INEC, Mr Ihedioha polled 273,404 ahead of his closest rival and candidate of the Action Alliance, Uche Nwosu, who the electoral body said scored 190,364 votes. By the INEC result, the candidate of the All Progressives Grand Alliance (APGA), Ifeanyi Ararume, came third ahead of Hope Uzodinma of the All Progressives Congress (APC) with 114, 676 while the latter polled 96,458 (Yahaya, 2020).

Lastly, the unfulfilled promises of politicians at campaign rallies and inability to perform as soon as they assumed office encourage lack of trust in elected officials. This is due to high level of corruption and greed associated with politicians and other government officials and as a result apathy becomes the outcome.

Electoral violence: Undeniably, elections in Nigeria are characterized by uncertainties, as a result of fear of election-related violence. According to Atuobi (2013) in Ekanem and Okafor (2018), election-related violence can take place in various stages of the electoral process. It could occur, before, during or after elections and this has always ignited voters' apathy. Burchard (2015) explained further that it includes any intimidation or threatening action that emanate from the electoral process. It could occur before, during and after the elections, especially when the outcome of the election is being announced. By extension, electoral violence includes series of behavior that ranges from the exchange and distribution of hate-speech leaflets, the forced displacement of specific group of voters, political assassinations, protests, riots and targeted violent attacks.

During the 2015 general elections, hate speeches and provocative statements were associated with campaign across the nation. A Northern Nigerian group warned the people on 14th October, 2014, to desist from supporting President Jonathan and the People's Democratic Party, PDP in 2015 general elections otherwise such supporters would be regarded as enemies of the North. Edwin Clerk, Ijaw Ethnic Leader (Jonathan's ethnic group) replied the Northern Elders Forum that "we cannot continue to feed this country and we are not ruling the country." Asari-Dokubo, former militant leader and founder of Niger Delta Peoples' Salvation Front (NDPSF) threatened violence if former President Jonathan was not re-elected. Asari warned that "2015 is more than do-or-die. It is our very survival that is being challenged, and we must tell them. You are a man and I am a man we are going to meet in a battlefield" (as cited in International Crisis Group, 2015:4). Ekanem and Okafor (2018) added that in May, 2012, current President Buhari threatened the nation 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." Tinubu, the APC leader also added that, "the APC is prepared to thrust the PDP and Jonathan out from powerfor every action there is an equal reaction" (in International Crisis Group, 2015, p.7). Akpabio, the then Governor of Akwa Ibom State reacted that "the APC and its agenda to take over power by all means will die! And PDP is determined to continue (Thisday, 25 July 2014 as

cited in International Crisis Group, 2015:7). All these violent statements by unscrupulous politicians scared eligible voters away from the pooling units.

In the 2019 general elections, most persons stayed away from the elections because of the anticipated bloodshed, anarchy and destructiveness witnessed in most polling units and collation centers in Nigeria. Hoodlums and soldiers were seen disrupting the electioneering process in 2019 general elections. According to Nwankwo (2019) in Odigbo and Okafor (2019) no fewer than 58 Nigerians were reportedly killed during the elections, with Rivers State accounting for 30 of this alarming number.

Weak Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs): The weak EMBs foster voters' apathy and encouraged lack of trust in INEC. Ekanem and Okafor (2018) defined the electoral management bodies as those agencies involved in the administration of elections. Here in Nigeria, it comprises the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), Security agencies, as well as the tribunals. Ende (2013) in Ekanem and Okafor (2018) lamented that the bottom line of the problem is simply poor management typified by lack of independence, political attachment, corruption, ingrained Nigerian culture and inadequate capacity. Experience indeed reveals that successive electoral commissions in the country have either been pro-ruling party or they engaged in the manipulation of election result in favour of the highest bidding contestants. In most cases, it is feared that INEC officials collaborated with politicians to rig election. This presented the citizens with the impression that their votes do not count and as such going to the polling unit viewed as waste of time.

Politics of election postponement: On 16th February, 2019, INEC suddenly announced the postponement of scheduled elections. The general elections was rescheduled for 23rd February (presidential and legislatures) and March 9th (governorship and state legislators) respectively. The electoral commission cited logistics as the reason for the postponement. This contradicted INEC's earlier position that the system was adequately prepared to host the election as planned. Nigeria's electoral history is replete with poll postponements since the military era. For example, under Ibrahim Babangida, Nigeria's military president from 1985 to 1993, multiple elections were postponed in 1991 and 1992. The annulment of the June 1993 elections by Babangida in June 1993 led to a series of events that culminated in the collapse of Nigeria's third republic.

Under Attahiru Jega, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) postponed elections twice in 2011 and 2015. In 2011, the reason given was the late deployment of electoral materials. As a result, the National Assembly Elections scheduled for April 2 were postponed by two days, after voting had already commenced in some states. They were subsequently delayed again, which led to presidential and state elections also being pushed back. While in 2015, INEC delayed elections by six weeks from the originally scheduled date of February 14 citing security challenges posed by the Boko Haram insurgency.

Indeed, the implication of this election postponement is that it appears to have produced voter fatigue and apathy, especially among those who traveled long distances within and outside Nigeria to cast their votes. For instance, citizens living abroad travelled to different states just to vote only for them to wake up in the morning to hear about the ugly news. This action of INEC without apologies angered many eligible voters and the resultant effect is total decline in 2019 general elections. Many could not afford to travel again for voting. According to Kazeem (2019) the postponement will affect international election observation missions already in the country. The United Nations, ECOWAS, the European Union as well as the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) all election observers were disappointed after being on ground. The sudden postponement of the election was a cankerworm that shook the nation from the micro to the macro economy.

Implications of voter apathy on democratization project in Nigeria

Democratic system encourages decision-making in line with the principle of majorities. Decision making in a democratic setting is indispensable and necessary. Obiora (2008) noted that democracy is a system of democratic government in which decisions are arrived at by securing the

agreement of the majority of the participants. This implies that the purpose of the majority will always triumph. Without a doubt, Nigeria has successfully transitioned from non-democratic regime to a democratic administration for two uninterrupted decades. However, it is illogical when majority of the citizens decides not to cast their votes and sit-back at home on Election Day. This action of the citizens appears to be a threat to the democratization process which negates the very principle of democracy. When majority of eligible voters do not exercise their civic duty they invariably do so by empowering the minority to make that decision on their behalf in a country of over two hundred million citizens. Minority rule in Nigeria contradicts democratic principles and as such the democratization project in Nigeria suffers from debilitations.

Abraham Lincoln believes that democracy is the government composed of the people, established by the people and for the benefits of the people. This refers to the selection of government from among the people and to provide the essential needs of the citizens. This corresponds with the view of Franklin D. Roosevelt, former American President who said: "Let us never forget that government is ourselves and not an alien power over us. The ultimate rulers of our democracy are not a President and senators and congressmen and government officials, but the voters of this country. Hence, the people have spoken with their vote, the type of government they want and should never be victimized for casting their vote; either they voted for or against the current government at the federal or state levels. Just like Frenchman, Joseph de Maistre said, "Every country has the government it deserves". The dominance of voter apathy in Nigeria is an indication that there is a disconnection between the people and the selected government. Persistent apathy makes the government an alien power over the citizens.

This development will lead to lack of legitimacy on the path of government and as well as produce weak institutions. A poor voters' turnout is a sign that the outcome of the election does not represent the choice of the majority but the minority. Probably, Salau (2019) underscore that democracy is a game of numbers. As such, the government draws its power and legitimacy from the number of votes cast in an election. An undeniably fact is that voter apathy is weakening the democratization process in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This paper examined voter apathy in Nigeria's electoral democracy and how this development has impacted on the democratization project in the country after two decades. The paper concludes that if the increasing level of voter apathy is not controlled, the democratization process in Nigeria may not be sustained. This is evident from the magnitude of low voter turnout during elections in Nigeria from year to year. The paper recommends that the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) should endeavour to inspire citizens and restore confidence in the electoral process.

References

- Adekoya, R. (2019). Democracy has failed in Nigeria when voters no longer care who wins. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/mar/01/democracy-failed-nigeria-turnout-presidential-election>
- Agbu, O (2015). Elections and governance in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, CODESRIA, Dakar.
- Akiyemi, S. (2019). Voter apathy: a threat to democracy in Nigeria. Retrieved from <http://democracyinafrica.org/voter-apaty-threat-democracy-nigeria/>
- Andriani, L., & Escudero Loaiza, M. M. (2021). Institutional trust and corruption: Evidence from Latin America. *Revista Debates*, 15(1), 247-274.
- Bukusi, A. D. (2022). Why you must vote in an African democracy. *American Journal of Leadership and Governance*, 7(1), 19-28.
- Burchard, S. (2015). *Electoral violence in Sub-Sahara Africa: Cause and consequence*. USA, First Forum Press.
- Dobbs, K. L. (2021). Active on the street but apathetic at the ballot box? Explaining youth voter behaviour in Tunisia's new democracy. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1962243>

- Dupuy, K., & Prakash, A. (2022). Why restrictive NGO foreign funding laws reduce voterturnout in Africa's national elections. *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 51(1), 170-189.
- Ekanem, E.A & Okafor, C.O (2018). Technology and electoral administration in Nigeria: A study of 2015 general elections. *FUDMA Journal of Politics and International Affairs*,1(1), 181-201
- Fagunwa, T.C. (2015). Voter apathy and Nigeria's electioneering process: A synopsis on the 2015 general elections. Paper submitted for the Two - Day National Conference on–The 2015 General Elections in Nigeria: The Real Issues|| scheduled for June 17 - 18, 2015 by The Electoral Institute (TEI), of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC).
- Gauba, O.P.(2003). An introduction to political theory. New Delhi: Macmillan India ltd
- Idike, A.N (2014). Political parties, political apathy and democracy in Nigeria: Contending issues and the way forward. *Kuwait Chapter of Arabian Journal of Business and Management Review* 4(3), 17-31.
- International Crisis Group (2014). Nigeria's Dangerous 2015 Election: Limiting the violence Africa Report No 220.
- Kazeem, Y. (2019). The postponement of Nigeria's elections will have major human and economic impact. <https://qz.com/africa/1552459/the-postponement-of-nigerias-elections-will-have-major-human-and-economic-impact/>
- Manoel, L., Costa, A. C., & Cabral, P. (2022). Voter turnout in Portugal: a geographical perspective. *Papers in Applied Geography*, 8(1), 88-111.
- Micheal, O.E. (2018). Politics and governance: A critique of the 2019 Nigeria presidential election. *International Journal of Academic Research in Public Policy and Governance*, 5(1), 48-67.
- Moliki, A.O & Dauda, K.O. (2014). Political apathy, electoral process and Nigeria's democracy: A study of the 2014 Ekiti governorship election. *TASUED: Journal of Applied Education and Vocational Research*, 12 (1).
- Nwangwu, C (2015). 'Biometric voting technology and the 2015 General Election in Nigeria', paper presented at the 'The two-day national conference on the 2015 General Election in Nigeria: The real issues', 27 - 28 July.
- Nwokoye, A. (2008). Methods/approaches in the study of political science. In Nwankwo, O.B.C, (ed). *Fundamental issues in political science*. Enugu: Quintagon publishers.
- Obiagu, U. C., Udeji-Okpalaku, C. O., & Udeh, C. O. (2021). The Undermining Consequences of Inconclusive Elections on Democratic Consolidation in Africa: Interrogating Nigerian Elections, 2011-2019. *African Journal of Democracy and Election Research*, 1(2), 7-40.
- Obikeze, O.S & Obi, E.A. (2004). *Public administration in Nigeria: A developmental approach*. Onitsha: Bookpoint Ltd
- Obiora, C.A. (2008). Structural framework of modern democracy. In Nwankwo, O.B.C, (ed).
- Odigbo J. (2015). Instituting electoral uncertainty and untying elitist grip on Nigerian elections: An assessment of 2015 elections on democratic consolidation in Nigeria. *South East Journal of Political Science*, 1 (1), 136-148.
- Odigbo, J & Okafor, C.O (2019). State militarization of election and management of electoral process in Nigeria's 2019 general elections. *Kwararafa Journal of Contemporary Research*, 7 (1), 69-83.
- Omotola. S. (2009). 'Garrison' democracy in Nigeria: The 2007 general elections and the prospects of democratic consolidation. *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 47 (2), 195-221.
- Sule, B. (2019). The 2019 presidential election in Nigeria: Analysis of the voting pattern, issues and impact. *Malaysian Journal of Society and Space*, 15(2), 129-140
- Sule, B., Mohd Sani, M. A., & Mat, B. (2017). Political behaviour and voting pattern in Nigeria: A study of 2015 presidential election. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts and Sciences*, 4(4), 1-13.
- Yahaya, H. (2020). Why Supreme Court sacked Ihedioha, declared APC's Uzodinma winner in Imo. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/news/headlines/372652-why-supreme-court-sacked-ihedioha-declared-apcs-uzodinma-winner-in-imo.html>
- Yakubu, Y. A. (2012). Democracy and political apathy in Nigeria (1999). *European Scientific Journal*, 8(20), 38-48.