

**ELECTORAL TRANSPARENCY AND VOTER TURNOUT IN NIGERIA: A
COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE 2019 AND 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

Electoral transparency remains a fundamental pillar of democratic consolidation, particularly in emerging democracies such as Nigeria. Despite numerous electoral reforms, voter turnout in Nigeria has continued to fluctuate and, in recent elections, has declined significantly. This seminar paper examines the relationship between electoral transparency and voter turnout in Nigeria through a comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2023 general elections. The study adopts Rational Choice Theory and Institutional Theory as its theoretical foundation. Using a qualitative research design and relying on secondary sources including official electoral reports, scholarly literature, and election observer reports, the paper evaluates whether improvements in electoral transparency influenced voter participation. The findings suggest that although the 2023 elections introduced notable technological innovations aimed at improving transparency, voter turnout declined when compared with the 2019 elections. The study argues that while electoral transparency is essential for democratic legitimacy, it must be complemented by broader political and socio-economic reforms to significantly enhance voter turnout. The paper concludes with recommendations aimed at strengthening electoral integrity and rebuilding public trust in Nigerias democratic process.

Keywords: *Electoral transparency, voter turnout, democratic participation, Nigeria, elections.*

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INTRODUCTION

Elections represent one of the most important mechanisms through which democratic governance is sustained. In democratic societies, elections provide citizens with the opportunity to influence political leadership and policy direction. However, the legitimacy of elections is closely tied to the transparency and credibility of the electoral process. Electoral transparency encourages public confidence, promotes fairness, and strengthens democratic participation. When citizens perceive elections as transparent and credible, they are more likely to participate actively in the electoral process (Norris, 2014).

Elections serve as a fundamental mechanism for democratic participation, enabling citizens to exercise their right to choose political leaders and influence governance. The credibility of elections, however, depends largely on the transparency of the electoral process. Electoral transparency enhances public confidence, legitimizes outcomes, and encourages political participation. Conversely, opaque and flawed electoral processes often lead to voter apathy and declining turnout.

Nigeria's democratic journey since the return to civilian rule in 1999 has witnessed numerous electoral reforms aimed at improving transparency and accountability. Despite these reforms, introduced by the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Nigeria continues to face significant electoral challenges including vote buying,

electoral violence, administrative inefficiencies, and declining voter turnout. These challenges have raised concerns about the effectiveness of electoral reforms and their impact on democratic participation (Olaniyi, 2020).

The 2019 and 2023 general elections present a unique opportunity to examine the relationship between electoral transparency and voter turnout. While the 2019 elections relied largely on earlier electoral technologies such as Smart Card Readers, the 2023 elections introduced more advanced technological tools such as the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the INEC Result Viewing Portal (IREV). This study therefore examines whether these innovations, improved electoral transparency and influenced voter turnout in Nigeria.

Voter turnout is a measure of political participation, expressed as the percentage of registered voters who cast their ballots in an election. It is often used as an indicator of citizens' confidence in the political system. High voter turnout suggests strong democratic engagement, while low turnout may reflect political apathy, distrust, or dissatisfaction with governance (Blais, 2006).

In the Nigerian context, declining voter turnout has become a major concern for democratic consolidation. Despite population growth and increasing voter registration, the percentage of voters who participate in elections has continued to decline, raising questions about the legitimacy of electoral

outcomes and the health of Nigerias democracy(Olaniyi J.O, 2020).

Electoral violence significantly impacts voter turnout in Nigeria. Acts such as political thuggery, ballot box snatching, and clashes between party supporters create an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. In volatile regions, concerns for personal safety deter many potential voters from visiting polling stations.

Electoral violence manifests before elections, during the electoral process, and after the conclusion of elections. Violence preceding elections may occur during voter registration, campaign trails, primaries, and related pre-election activities. Instances such as the incineration of campaign buses belonging to Goodluck Ebele Jonathan during his 2015 reelection campaign, alongside the tragic fatalities at registration sites in Jos in 2011, serve as notable examples.

In 2023, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) reported 767 violent events and 2,016 in its Nigeria Election Violence Data between February 1 and April 21, 2023. This shows that the series of electoral violence did not stop at the elections; it started before and continued after the elections.

Various socioeconomic factors can influence voter participation. A significant portion of the Nigerian population faces poverty, which may lead to a diminished focus on electoral processes as their primary concerns revolve around survival and fulfilling essential needs. Individuals within the middle-income bracket

may understand the electoral processes yet opt for disengagement, exercising their prerogative to abstain from voting, which may result in diminished voter turnout. A concerning phenomenon of voter apathy has permeated the Nigerian political landscape. This trend frequently indicates that the Nigerian government persists in exclusionary practices rather than fostering inclusion among its citizens.

This study seeks to answer the following research questions: i. To what extent was the 2019 general election transparent? ii. How did electoral reforms influence transparency in the 2023 elections? iii. What differences exist in voter turnout between the 2019 and 2023 elections? iv. Does electoral transparency significantly influence voter turnout in Nigeria? Finally, the prevailing distrust in the electoral system has significantly contributed to the growing apathy among Nigerians during elections. Even with technological tools, the declaration of election results remains plagued by inaccuracies. The absence of trust has significantly affected the diminished voter turnout during elections.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Election

Election is the process of choosing leaders through voting. It is an orderly way of choosing leaders or representatives by people in a democratic society. It takes place in places like schools, clubs, political parties, association etc. Election confers legitimacy and promotes accountability on the part of the political office holders, it is used to measure

public opinion on certain issues of public interest in the society, citizens are educated politically through various activities that are associated with elections e.g electioneering campaign, election promotes healthy competition among political parties and other candidates, it facilitates smooth transfer of power from one government to another(Oseni I.O, 2016)

Election is an action or instance of choosing by voting candidates who will represent the people in Parliament or government through direct voting by the electorates or indirectly through an electoral college(Adebayo, A, 1981)

Electoral Transparency

Electoral transparency refers to the degree of openness, accountability, and credibility in the conduct of elections. It involves ensuring that all stages of the electoral process including voter registration, impartial administration by electoral bodies, voting procedures, credible vote counting, timely announcement of result, and access to information that allows citizens and observers to verify electoral outcomes. All these conducted in a verifiable and accountable manner (Schedler, 2002). Transparent elections help reduce electoral manipulation and increase citizens trust in democratic institutions. Transparent elections are generally associated with higher levels of public trust and democratic legitimacy.

Electoral transparency also involves public access to electoral information, impartiality of electoral bodies, and effective monitoring by

election observers. These components help to strengthen public confidence in electoral outcomes and encourage democratic participation (Norris, 2014).

Furthermore, transparency contributes to electoral legitimacy by ensuring that election outcomes reflect the genuine will of the people. When transparency is absent, electoral outcomes are often contested, leading to political instability and voter apathy.

Voter Turnout

Voter turnout refers to the proportion of registered voters who actually cast their ballots, participate in an election. It is widely used as an indicator of democratic participation and political engagement. High voter turnout suggests public confidence in the electoral system, while low turnout often reflects political apathy or dissatisfaction with governance (Blais, 2006).

In Nigeria, voter turnout has been influenced by several factors including political trust, security concerns, socio-economic conditions, and perceptions of electoral credibility. Electoral transparency is therefore considered an important determinant of voter participation. Voter turnout also reflects the legitimacy of democratic governance. When large numbers of citizens participate in elections, elected leaders are more likely to be perceived as legitimate representatives of the people.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory (RCT) emerged in political analysis in the late 1950s and early 1960s as it sought a more rigorous and systematic way to explain political behavior (Downs, 1957; Riker, 1962). Influenced by neoclassical economics, RCT was developed by scholars such as Anthony Downs, William Riker, Mancur Olson, James Buchanan, and Gordon Tullock. These scholars argued that political actors—voters, politicians, political parties, and interest groups—are rational individuals who make deliberate choices aimed at maximizing utility under given constraints (Buchanan & Tullock, 1962). RCT was therefore used to understand political behavior as purposive and strategic rather than habitual or emotionally driven. Political outcomes such as voting patterns, coalition formation, and policy decisions are explained as the aggregate result of individual cost-benefit calculations. In this sense, Rational Choice Theory introduced a formal, analytical approach to political explanation. Its emphasis on rationality and incentives marked a significant shift in political analysis.

Rational Choice Theory explains voting behaviour as a result of individual cost-benefit calculations. According to Downs (1957), voters participate in elections when they believe that the benefits of voting outweigh the costs. Electoral transparency increases the perceived benefits of voting because citizens believe their votes will be accurately counted.

Strength and criticism of Rational Choice Theory

The theory provides a clear explanation of voter behaviour and highlights the role of electoral credibility in motivating participation. It helps explain why citizens may withdraw from the electoral process when they perceive elections as fraudulent.

Despite its strengths, the theory has been criticized for assuming that voters always act rationally. It often ignores emotional, cultural, and social factors that influence voting behaviour. In Nigeria, ethnic identity, political loyalty, and social pressure may influence voting decisions beyond rational calculations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design using a comparative analytical approach. The research relies primarily on secondary data obtained from official reports of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), election observer reports, academic journals, and scholarly publications.

The comparative method is used to analyze differences and similarities between the 2019 and 2023 general elections. This approach allows for a systematic evaluation of electoral transparency and voter turnout across both elections. The use of secondary data is appropriate because it provides access to verified electoral statistics and expert analyses.

Data analysis is conducted through content analysis, which involves examining

documented evidence and identifying patterns related to electoral transparency and voter turnout.

OVERVIEW OF THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2019 general elections were conducted amid high public expectations but were ultimately characterized by significant logistical and administrative challenges. One of the notable issues was the last-minute postponement of the elections just hours before voting was scheduled to commence created logistical confusion, disrupted electoral planning, discouraged voter participation, questions about the preparedness of the electoral management body and weakened public confidence in the electoral process (INEC, 2019).

Although Smart Card Readers were introduced to enhance credibility, technical failures and operational inconsistencies limited their effectiveness. Reports of vote buying, electoral violence, and manipulation were widespread, raising concerns about transparency. In some cases, these failures led to the manual accreditation of voters, which created opportunities for manipulation, and violence were also widespread in certain regions.

Despite these challenges, voter turnout in 2019 was approximately 35 percent of registered voters. While this figure was low by international standards, it was higher than turnout recorded in subsequent elections. The outcome of the elections reinforced existing

public skepticism about the credibility of Nigeria's electoral process.

OVERVIEW OF THE 2023 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The 2023 general elections introduced major electoral reforms including the use of BVAS and IReV to enhance transparency. BVAS improved voter accreditation while IReV enabled real-time result uploading from polling units (INEC, 2023).

Despite these innovations, the elections faced challenges such as technical failures, delayed result uploads, and inconsistent compliance with electoral regulations. Security concerns and voter intimidation also affected participation. Furthermore, insecurity remained a major challenge during the 2023 elections. Incidents of voter intimidation, ballot snatching, and violence in some regions discouraged participation.

As a result, voter turnout declined to approximately 27 percent, the lowest in Nigeria's electoral history. This outcome raised serious questions about the assumption leads to increased voter participation.

A comparison of the the two elections reveals that although the 2023 elections demonstrated improved institutional transparency, this did not result in higher voter turnout. In contrast, the 2019 elections, despite being less technologically advanced, recorded higher participation. This suggest that electoral transparency alone does not determine voter turnout. Factors such as insecurity, economic hardship, distrust in political elites, and lack

of confidence in post-election accountability play a significant role in shaping voter behaviour.

CRITICISM OF ELECTORAL TRANSPARENCY AS A DETERMINANT OF VOTER TURNOUT

Some scholars argue that electoral transparency alone cannot guarantee increased voter turnout. Socio-economic challenges, political disillusionment, and insecurity often play a more significant role in shaping voter behaviour (Blais, 2006).

Critics also argue that technological reforms may create expectations that, when unmet, lead to greater public frustration. In Nigerias 2023 elections, technical failures of result transmission systems contributed to public distrust despite transparency reforms.

Additionally, transparency reforms often focus on procedural improvements while ignoring deeper structural issues such as corruption, political elite dominance, and weak accountability mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has examined the relationship between electoral transparency transparency and voter turnout in Nigeria through a comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2023 general elections. The findings indicate that while electoral transparency is essential for democratic credibility, it is insufficient on its own to stimulate voter participation.

Despite significant transparency- enhancing reforms in the 2023 elections, voter turnout declined further when compared to 2019. This suggests that broader political, economic, and security challenges exert a stronger influence on voter behaviour than procedural transparency alone. For Nigerias democracy to achieve meaningful consolidation, electoral reforms must be accompanied by efforts to rebuild public trust, improve governance outcomes, and address the socio-economic realities facing citizens. For electoral transparency to significantly improve democratic participation, it must be complemented by effective implementation, strong institutional enforcement, and increased public trust in political leadership.

INEC should ensure the consistent and effective implementation of electoral technologies across all polling units. Electoral laws should be strictly enforced to reduce malpractice and restore public confidence. Civic education programmes should be strengthened and expanded to promote and encourage political participation, democratic values. Security agencies should provide adequate protection for voter safety before, during, and after elections. Political parties should promote internal democracy and present credible candidates capable of restoring public trust.

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