



Voting Behaviour and Pattern of Voting in Nigeria's 2015 General Elections: A Narrative in Transition

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Abstract

Elections involve choice. The choice is usually determined and chosen from a set of alternatives known to the voter. The choice could either be picked as a result of the attractiveness of a party's manifestoes, ethnicity or as a result of the personality of one of the contestants among other factors. Yet elections in Nigeria have often been violent, fraud ridden and not reflective of voters' choice. Since independence, empirical research into the political behaviour and voting pattern of Nigerian voters remain scanty, due to the aforementioned violence and fraud. The only pattern noticeable, which was not reflective of the behavioural pattern of voters, is that the ruling party never loses, especially when the incumbent is contesting the election. But the 2015 general elections witnessed some unique specificities in the electoral process. Incumbents lost, opposition candidates won electoral contests and the elections were generally adjudged much freer, fairer and more credible, when compared to previous elections in the country. The question then is what was the predominant vote pattern in the 2015 general election? Using primary data from Interview and V-Dem survey on Nigeria's 2015 elections, the study unravelled the factors that influenced participation and behaviour of voters in 2015 elections which could be used to build a more solid understanding of the Nigerian voter and future poll projection.

Introduction

Elections involve choice. However, the choice is determined and chosen from a set of alternatives set before the voter. The choice could either be picked as a result of the attractiveness of its manifestoes or as a result of the personality of one of the contestants (Erdmann, 2007). Voting therefore is picking a particular choice among a set of choices set before voters either for private or public office. Inasmuch as the above explanation is true, voting is not limited to personality or programme of action of contestants alone. Other factors that could be at play in deciding which of the choices set before the voter is the most suitable and appropriate to receive the voter's confirmation as his/her choice may include ethnicity, religion, group or personal gains, desire for new system, etc.

When voting occurs in an election, it goes beyond being a periodic and ritual cycle that voters go through once in a while (Schumpeter, 1976). Voting could therefore, signify an approval, influence, a determination to change, pledge of allegiance and a disaffection to a particular choice, candidate or political party (Afolabi, 2015). Therefore, for every election that is credible, a pattern of voting recorded in that election becomes discernible. For Nigeria, discernible pattern of change start becoming noticeable since the 2011 general elections. Many unique specificities were recorded in 2011 general elections and more in 2015 elections culminating, for the first time, in Nigeria, a ruling political party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), losing the presidential elections. Is this pattern real, a fluke or a narrative in transition? Before attempting to answer this question, other questions agitating the minds of scholars, journalists and election practitioners are: why

party A lost its seats in state elections and won in council and federal elections and party B won the presidential elections but lost in the state and council elections. Why did party A win some constituency seats and lost in others or why is party C popular in a particular zone and not others? Or why is the difference in numbers of votes so small giving party B the edge over party A and C? What factor(s) are responsible for this? The above questions relate to the unpredictability of votes, voters and the voting process. This is sometimes referred to as the 'certainty of uncertainties' in elections (Mozaffar, 2002; Schedler, 2002). Yet voting

itself, to make a huge statement and be reflective and indicative of the population is dependent on voters' turn-out and citizens' participation in the political and electoral process. Therefore, participation or more appropriately, political participation cannot be overlooked in the electoral process if informed analysis is to be done. But the participation level of Nigerian voters over time has been dropping, tending towards high level of political apathy including the 2015 general elections (Yakubu, 2012, INEC & FES, 2011). Table 1 shows voters' turnout from 1999 to 2015 in the country.

Table 1: Voters' Turnout Figures for 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015 Presidential Elections

Year	Percentage (%)	Voters Turnout	Total Registration
1999	52.26	30,280,052	57,938,945
2003	69.08%	42,018,735	60,823,022
2007	57.49%	35,397,517	61,567,036
2011	53.68%	39,469,484	73,528,040
2015	43.65%	29,432,083	67,422,005

Source: IDEA and INEC, 2015

Therefore, elections in Nigeria have often been violent and fraud ridden (Afolabi, 2017; Nwabueze, 2002). Since independence, not much empirical studies have been done on the political behaviour and voting pattern of Nigerian voters, majorly due to violence and fraud. The pattern mostly noticeable in the Nigerian electoral system, which, in most cases, is not reflective of the behavioural pattern of voters, is that the ruling party never loses, especially when the incumbent is contesting the election. What seems to have mostly dominated discourse and scholarly work over the years are inferences and perceived observations, rather than empirical facts. Successive elections and voting from 1999 to 2007 has also not provided a solid platform to investigate and assess the voting pattern and political behaviour of the Nigerian voters due to the fact that elections from 1999 were not free, fair and credible and therefore, not a reflection of the wishes and votes of voters (Afolabi, 2011; Ikpe, 2000). But the 2015 general elections showed an extremely different pattern in the electoral

process in the country, which has made some people to adjudge the 2015 elections as being a reflection of the true wishes of Nigerians, with contrary opinions expressed in other quarters (Punch, 2015). In any case, incumbents lost, opposition candidates won electoral contests and the elections was generally adjudged free fair and credible (The Vanguard, 2015; The Guardian, 2015). Within the purview of the 2015 credible elections, the Presidential and National Assembly elections took place among candidates fielded by registered political parties in Nigeria. The outcome of the National Assembly elections showed that the ruling party, Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) lost a sizeable number of seats to the opposition in the National Parliament, thereby reducing its numerical strength to become a minority, and at the same time lost the presidential election, though it recorded some gains as well. But given the non-representation nature of politics and elections in Nigeria as noted above, the question then is, what were the intervening variables that determined participation and voting in the 2015

elections? This is more so given that participation, in our view, is more encompassing and explanatory than voters' turnout.

With this question in mind, it is better to quickly state that more problematic was how to determine the voting behaviour of Nigerian voters and associated factors responsible for the behaviour. This hence further begets more questions; what determined and influenced participation, voting behaviour and voters decision during the 2015 elections given its outcomes? Are the internal factors peculiar to the voters (this may vary from voter to voter or similar) or external factors that could vary from institutional (INEC), systemic (electoral rules/system), economic (vote buying/selling) and social structure (class/ethnicity)? Is a pattern emerging or is just a narrative in transition? Finding answers to these questions constitute the task of the study.

Participation and Voting Behaviour: Conceptual Clarification

Political Participation

Political participation is one among few political phenomena which occurs in all political societies irrespective of its system of government (Antunes, 2008). This is not to mean that it occurs at similar pace or degree. Democratic theorists from Rousseau (1913) onwards have either urged or assumed that a proper system of government must provide opportunities for political participation by the ordinary citizen. The opportunity to vote in periodic competitive elections is the minimum conditions that a governmental system must satisfy to qualify as democratic (Birch 2000). Moreover, liberal and contemporary democratic theorists (such as Birch, 2000; Schedler, 2002; Bauer, 2012) have advocated that further opportunities and forms of political participation are highly desirable.

To therefore put in simple terms, Political participation is the involvement of the citizens in the political system or public involvement in decision making. As Riley et al. (2010) have pointed out, political engagement has traditionally been thought of as "a set of rights and duties that involve formally organized civic and political activities (e.g., voting or joining a political party)". Munroe (2002) defined political participation in terms of the degree to which citizens are exercising their right to engage in

political activities. Politics is for people, and active engagement by citizens is vital for a healthy democracy and sustainable development (Falade, 2014). What visibly distinguishes a democracy from other forms of government is the existence of institutional arrangements which permits individuals to take active parts in the decision-making process (Schumpeter, 1976). Without active engagement by responsible citizens, democracy cannot flourish and sustainable development is impossible (Bauer, 2012).

Furthermore, the extents to which people participate in the political system differ among individuals. Political participation can take different forms thus, Falade (2014) identified some types of political participants. These are: The inactive: These are the people that take no part in any political activity. Voting specialists: These are the people that get eagerly engaged only in voting. Besides voting, they are not concerned about other political activities. Parochial participants: These people participate in politics occasionally. They vote or get involved in any other political activity only when it affects their personal interest. The communalist: These are those who get engaged in voting regularly, they also get involved in community affairs but they are not involved in political campaign activities. The campaigners: They are actively involved in political campaign but inactive in other community affairs. Complete activists: They are highly involved in all political activities. They actively participate in voting, political campaign, community activities and make contact with public officials. For instance, three million people in Rome protested against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The demonstration holds the record as the largest ever anti-war rally.

Again, emphasis on citizens participating through votes or voters' turnout might not be sufficient when measuring political participation as studies (such as Antunes, 2008; and Bauer, 2012) have majorly shown in most authoritarian regimes where elections rarely offer the opportunity to change the existing regime. In such authoritarian societies, acts of voter abstention can provide meaningful signals of discontent and voter preference (Roeder 1989). Karklins (1986) opined that studies of voting in the Soviet Union, for example, suggest that non-

voting was seen as an act of protest in which relatively well-educated individuals consciously decided to ignore mandatory voting laws or spoil their ballots in a country where there was no real choice between candidates. In Brazil under military rule, compulsory voting led to high turnout but blank and spoiled ballots were often interpreted as a form of protest against the authoritarian government (Power and Roberts 1995 as cited in Blaydes, 2006).

In spite of the peculiarities in different societies, political participation can be strengthened by promoting decentralization and creating inclusive structures. The latest means by which citizens have resorted to for continually and freely expressing their views, have been through the 'new media' (social media) which in itself have helped reducing scenarios of unwarranted victimization of government antagonists. The German experience in 2009 is worthy of note where 134,015 Germans signed an e-petition in protest at the Act to Impede Access to Communication Networks, which aimed to block access to websites offering certain types of content, making it German's most successful e-petition till date (Bauer, 2012).

Voting Behaviour

Among a number of forms individuals could participate in politics, people engage more in voting, the reason being that voting is usually a less costly and more conventional form of political participation most especially in western or developed democracies (Tessler et al, 2008). Voting behaviour can be described as the scientific study of the voting patterns of the electorates of the constituency in an election; it provides insight into the sociology of the voters, factors that influence their voting patterns and the direction of their votes (Antunes, 2008).

Onah (1997), argued that of all the various forms of participation in the political process in a country, 'voting is perhaps the simplest, cheapest and the most obvious. The analysis of voting patterns invariably focuses on the determinants of why people vote as they do and how they arrive at the decisions they make. What inspires voters to turn out for voting and factors they consider in making choices on candidates or parties greatly varies. For instance, Shi (1999) opined that, in China, voters' behaviour (participation) in local elections tend

to be individuals with a desire to punish corrupt officials.

Voting behaviour is clearly shaped by short-term and long-term influences. Heywood (2007) asserted that "short-term influences are specific to a particular election and do not allow conclusions to be drawn about voting patterns". These short-term influences include but not limited to; state of the economy which reflects the link between a government's popularity and economic variables such as unemployment, inflation and disposable income; another short-term influence is the personality and public standing of party leaders. Major long-term influences are; ideological concerns and the mass media.

The academic and scientific study of voting behaviour (psephology) has been so resounding (Bartels, 2008) and coincided with the rise of the behavioural political science (Heywood, 2007). Through these rigorous studies, perspectives and models have been developed in order to create frameworks for theorizing voting discourses. This scientific study of voting behaviour is marked by three major research schools: the sociological model, often identified as School of Columbia, with the main reference to publication of books like; *The People's Choice* (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1944), *Voting* (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954) and *Personal Influence* (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The central hypothesis of Lazarsfeld et al. (1944) was that the act of voting is an individual act, affected mainly by the personality of the voter and his exposure to the media. The results, however, contradict the main thesis, suggesting that the effect of the media in electoral decision was minimal and that the decisive influence was the social groups to which they belonged (Antunes, 2008). Thus, the sociological model links voting behaviour to group membership, suggesting that electors tend to adopt a voting pattern that reflects the economic and social position of the group to which they belong.

The second major model is the Psychological Model of Voting Behaviour which has its origin in studies conducted by the Survey Research Centre at the University of Michigan during the 1948 U.S. presidential elections. Combined reports from the 1948, 1952 and 1956 presidential elections in USA had led to the book

The American Voter, written by Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes (1960). The central concept of this model is partisanship, which is designed as a psychological affinity, stable and lasting relationship with a political party that does not necessarily translate into a concrete link, namely registration or consistently voting for this party. Voting is therefore a manifestation of partisanship, not a product of calculation influenced by factors such as policies, personalities, campaigning and media coverage (Hyman & Singer, 1968).

The third model which is the rational choice model tries to be distinct from previous theories/models as it gives an economic explanation of voting behaviour (Antunes, 2008). In this view, voting is seen as a rational act, in the sense that individual electors are believed to decide their party preference on the basis of personal self-interest (Kimeyin & Romero, 2008).

Away from the theories discussed, factors that determine voters' preferences also depend on the depth, consolidation and development of democracy in such societies. Therefore, voting behaviour can be said to be explained by socio-structural, socio-psychological, or rational choice models, at least for industrialised societies (Erdmann, 2007), while for African societies, voting is explained predominantly by factors such as personality, ethnicity, personal ties, and clientelism (Hyden and Leys, 1972; Mozaffar et al., 2003).

Methodology

The study employed both secondary and primary data. Data were collected through participatory observation and interview methods. The researcher participated in the last election as an ad-hoc staff in various capacities. Using interviews, key questions were posed to 1200 registered voters in the six (6) geo-political zone that participated and voted in the 2015 elections to determine what influenced their participation and voting preferences. 200 respondents from each zone were selected to have balanced view across Nigeria. While attention has focused on the presidential election where the incumbent lost (PDP), it should also be noted that some incumbents in other parties (APC, APGA) lost their seats as well, making it analytically interesting. Key respondents and stakeholders in

the electoral process including party officials, INEC staff, voters, officials of CSOs and security personnel were interviewed to add to the database. Additional data were sourced from V-Dem survey. The data collected was statistically analysed.

Background to the 2015 General Elections

The 2015 general elections began on an inauspicious footing. Initially, the elections were supposed to hold in a certain format starting from state assembly/gubernatorial to national parliament/presidential elections. However, official release from INEC put paid to that and the order of 2015 elections was National Assembly/Presidential and State Assembly/Gubernatorial elections. The former was scheduled to hold on the 28th March, 2015 and the latter to hold on the 11th April, 2015 respectively. Given the history of elections in Nigeria and the distrust between the people and any Electoral Management Body (EMB); the order of 2015 elections and the dates raised a lot of suspicion and distrust as well as generated a lot of arguments and counter arguments, most especially between the political parties and INEC. The controversy revolves around the alleged fear nursed, especially by the then incumbent party (PDP) that, should they lose the National Assembly/Presidential elections, there were tendencies that there would be a bandwagon effect on the vote pattern/outcome of the State Assembly/Gubernatorial elections. The thrust of this argument was therefore, on the grounds that the order of elections could influence the vote pattern/outcome of the 2015 general elections.

But that was just one of the problems that dogged the 2015 general elections at the initial stage. Other problems surfaced among which were voters' apathy, issue of additional polling units and the use of card readers. Voters' apathy was already a known malaise, principally caused by electoral violence, fraud and frequent incidence of votes' manipulation. New and additional polling units created by INEC were discarded given the controversies, legality and cries of marginalization it generated. But of greater significance to political parties, civil society organizations (CSOs) and INEC was the legality and propriety of the use of card readers. Suffice to say that INEC stuck to its guns citing

relevant constitutional provisions including the electoral act to deploy and use its electronic card readers. Of course, it should be noted that the card readers were introduced to eliminate cases of rigging, ballot box snatching and thuggery and ultimately, make each and every vote count.

The issue of a particular order of elections became a major source of disagreement and tension between the protagonists and antagonists of the idea. Another dimension to the issue was to determine who has power between INEC and the National Assembly to set the order of elections. In any case, the issue was resolved in favour of the Presidential, followed by National Assembly coming first, and lastly, the Governorship and State Houses of Assembly elections. It should be noted that the furore over the order of elections was to position each political party for maximum benefit from a particular order that seems to favour them and avoid a 'bandwagon' effect that is likely to follow such order of elections. This is with the understanding that if the presidential election comes first, whichever party that wins that election (presidency) is likely to influence the choice of voters in the subsequent elections. However, inspite of the order of elections, what the 2015 elections produced did not conform to the 'normal pattern' of the ruling party winning most, if not all the seats in the National

Assemble and the presidency. The presidency was won by the then opposition party (APC) in which the incumbent President (Goodluck Jonathan of PDP) lost as well as the National Assembly elections which produced results that clearly showed that some factors influenced voters' choice and there is a discernible pattern of voting in both elections which took place within two (2) weeks of each other. Table 1 and 2 gives a graphic illustration of the pattern of votes

Data Presentation and Analysis

The respondents were chosen based on their participation in the electoral process, expertise of the issues of votes and voting pattern and interest in the electoral process. All the respondents were literate and able to articulate their positions on the issues of what motivated them to participate and vote as well as what influenced and determined their choice viz internal issues versus external issues. The basic simple question was that 'what influenced and determined your vote and participation and the factors responsible for these'. Other questions compliment the basic question. Figure 1 gives details of what the respondents believed influenced and determined their participation and vote.

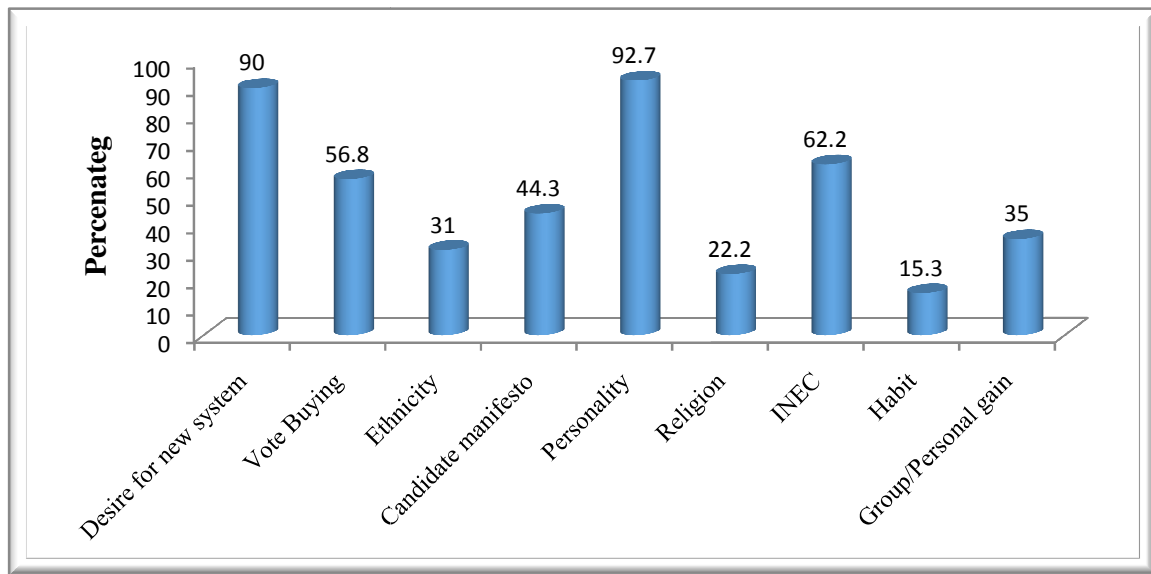


Figure 1: Nigeria Presidential Election Turnout

Source: Field work, 2015

Most respondents including the ones surveyed through V-Dem agreed that the desire for new system or change was the most important factor which made them to vote in the 2015 general elections. For most of the respondents, the need for change was not limited to the presidency but to all levels where competition for public office took place. This would explain why there were upsets across the country both at national and state levels. It also shows that the desire for change affected all parties as seen in Southwest where some House of Representatives election was a mixed bag of fortune for all the parties with varying degree of success and failure. It was win some, lose some for the parties. This same scenario was replicated in virtually all areas of the federation. It is however surprising that ethnicity and religion played a lesser role given the tendency to see these variables as a key determinant in Nigerian politics and electoral process (31% and 22.2% respectively). Voting as a habit and a social factor was noted but not also having much significance because it was not frequently mentioned as important factor (15.3%). However, of significance is the role of vote buying, personality, personal/group gain factors as drivers of participation and vote determinant. On these points identified and discussed, most respondents interviewed agreed that the factors identified above worked for and against all the major political parties and candidates. It is also instructive that all respondents agreed that all, especially the three major parties engaged in vote buying, enticement of voters, encourage/promise of personal/group gain and personality promotion at the expense of policy issues that should have dominated political discourse and serve as mobilization tool (Vote buying 56.8%; Personal/Group Gain 35%). This has served to reinforce the data collected by V-Dem survey on participation, and voting behaviour of Nigerian (V-dem Data, 2015; Ham and Lindberg, 2015). However, it is significant that most of the respondents expressed high

level of confidence in the EMB (INEC) as a factor in participation but not as a factor in voting behaviour. According to a respondent interviewed:

My confidence in INEC to do the right thing and let my vote count is why am out to vote. Even though not perfect, innovations including the card readers have inspired in me that my vote is important (Male, 46).

Another respondent interviewed had this to say:

Unlike before, the EMB (INEC) now makes me confident to cast my vote for whoever I want and I know that more than 70% that the vote would count with the way elections are being conducted (Female, 56).

On what determines that choice of candidate/party, the overwhelming answer was personality. Virtually all respondents (92.7%) of those interviewed maintained that their choice of candidates was based on the candidate personality as opposed to policy or issues positional issues (Berelson, et al, 1954; Kleppner, et al, 1982; Kedar, 2005; Downs, 1957). Therefore, it safe to argue that most Nigerian voters mainly cast their ballots (vote) on the basis of emotions, styles and traits effects (internal characteristics) as opposed to issue effects, policy appeals and rational choice. This is made more pungent by comments of some of the respondents.

One respondent said:

I vote people who can deliver and are morally okay for me. Not somebody who will get to Abuja and be marrying wives (Female, 48).

Another respondent said:

Which party? They are all the same (parties/politicians). But at least I can look at his/her character (candidates) and decide which one of them I will vote for (Male, 26).

But this is not to suggest that issues or policy positions does not matter as the figure below shows (23.3%). But as obtains in

most studies, personality or trait issues is more important to voters (Miller, Wattenberg and Malanchuk, 1986; Glass, 1985). This is in conformity with Cowen and Laakso as well as other scholars who have tried to explain what informs voters' choice

and voting behaviour and distinguish between rational voters' choice and emotional voter choice models (Cowen and Laakso, 1997; 2002; Grose & Globetti, 2000). See Figure 2 below.

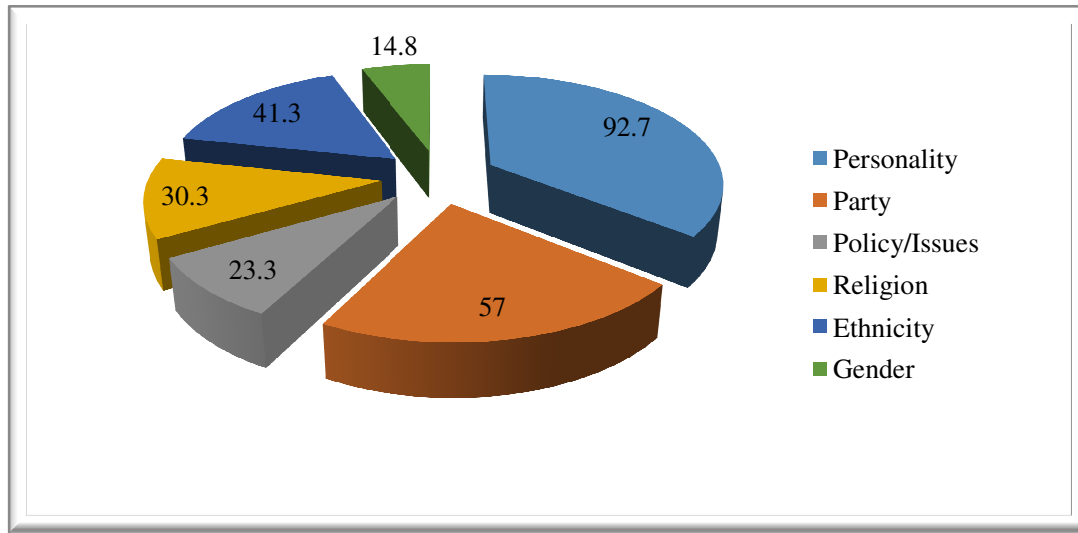


Figure 2: Nigeria Presidential Election Turnout
Source: Field work, 2015

Therefore, the role of personality or non-policy issues should be seen as important in determining and predicting voters' behaviour in Nigeria as well as when engaging poll projection. Whether Nigerian Voters predilection towards personality or non- issues in determining participation and who to vote in elections is beneficial or not is open to debate. What is clear is that a pattern of voting, based on personality and non-policy issues is emerging given the obvious confidence of the electorate in the electoral and voting process which manifested eloquently in the 2015 general elections. The 2015 general elections, at the federal level, therefore witnessed a vote pattern largely influenced by the personality of candidates and non-policy issues.

Conclusion

This study examined the issue of participation, voting behaviour and pattern of voting in Nigeria's 2015 elections. Critical appraisal of what vote is and what factors determine and influence voters' choice and vote were examined. Therefore, this paper presents yet another academic effort at trying to disentangle varying reasons why people participate in the political and electoral process with focus on 2015 general elections in Nigeria. The research findings support the existing viewpoints that most voters are more attuned to personality/non-policy issues in making their choice in the elections. Of course, this is based on the amount of non-issue information and perceived image(s) of the candidates on which basis the voter(s) decides if, when and how to vote. The effects of this line of behaviour by voters in

the 2015 general elections is what caused so much upsets across the length and breadth of Nigeria. Even the incidence vote buying and widespread inducement as reported didn't significantly affect voters' choice as shown in our data. So also are the issues of religion and ethnicity did not play an important role contrary to assumed positions and some literature. Therefore, it is safe to say that the democratization process is progressing and that the Nigerian voters are getting increasingly sophisticated. But for us, voters' choice and sophistication is an emerging culture and reality that could be reversed if the current reforms and innovation is stalled or reversed. This makes us to sound a word of caution here and that is why we see current voting behaviour and pattern for now as a narrative in transition. We think these findings put us in a position to indicate a few things that are relevant for policy and research. Therefore, further research is expected to critically investigate the impact the introduction of the card readers had in checkmating fraud votes. Yet, preliminary evidence from our study and commendations from political stakeholders show that the use of the card reader actually helped the credibility of the 2015 general elections. The argument therefore is: the observed downward slope in voters' turnout, majorly during the 2015 elections which is 44% as compared to 54% in 2011 (see fig.1) could be as a result of the use of cards readers to checkmate voting manipulation, meaning that other elections (i.e. 2003 and 2007) that had higher voters' turnout might have been as a result of high level of unchecked manipulations during election, which could be in form of unaccredited voting, multiple voting etc.

In conclusion, we cannot help but notice that in many parts of Nigeria, attitude is changing and more people are positive about elections and the electoral process. We make haste to claim that in the next general elections, we will be able to forecast and

predict poll results based on respondents' opinions and pre-determined choice among voters in choosing who to occupy governmental position(s). Then it will no longer be a narrative in transition.

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