

Voters' Turnout and Democratisation in Nigeria: Interrogating the 2023 Presidential Election

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Abstract

The persistent trend of voters' apathy in Nigeria remains an issue of concern to advocates of democracy and its sustenance in the country. Democracy is inherently dependent on the will of the people. The acceptability of a democratically instituted government is (to a large extent) measured by the popular support given by the people through periodic elections. This presupposes that elected representatives must regularly face the voters to seek or renew their mandates. Be that as it may, citizens' participation in the election of their representatives underscores the substance of representative democracy. The legitimacy of emerging governments in a democratic political system is therefore hinged on the extent to which eligible voters come out to vote for them during elections. However, a worrisome phenomenon in Nigeria's electoral history, most especially since the re-democratisation of the polity in 1999, is the declivity of voters' turnout in both general and off-season elections. Specifically, voters' turnout during the 2023 general elections was abysmally low. Of the 87.2 million Nigerians

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who collected their permanent voter's card (PVC) out of 93.4 million who registered to vote, only 24.9 million (26.74%) actually voted during the presidential election. It is on the premise of this factuality that this paper interrogates the causes and implications of voters' apathy for democracy and democratisation in Nigeria. Using qualitative approach, the paper examines the historical dynamics of voters' turnout in Nigeria and its implications on democratisation, with specific reference to the 2023 presidential election.

Keywords: Election, Voters' Turnout, Voters' Apathy, Legitimacy, Democracy, Democratisation.

Introduction

In contemporary times, democracy has gained ascendancy as the most preferred form of government by most countries of the world. It is believed that this system of government has the greatest capacity of not only ensuring popular sovereignty but also engendering development (Diamond, 2005). A major appeal of democracy is its emphasis on citizens' participation in governance. The impracticability of direct democracy (where all eligible people gather at a spot to make decisions on issues that affect their lives) has institutionalised indirect or representative democracy (where eligible citizens periodically elect those who represent them in government and make decisions on their behalf). Consequently, periodic elections have emerged as a basic feature of democracy. It reinforces the necessary link between popular preferences and public policy (Budge, 2005, cited in Okoko, 2019).

In the modern democratic system, the most profound means of citizen participation in governance is election. As perfectly submitted by Mesfin, "... the *founding pillars* of any democratic political system ... remain *undoubtedly elections*" (emphasis mine) (Mesfin, 2008:1). Election, as opined by Madubuegwu *et al.* (2020), is an ideal of democracy. To them, the participation of citizens in the process of leadership recruitment underscores the substance of representative democracy beyond symbolism. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN UDHR,

Article 21) emphasises the invaluable position of elections in democracy by stating that, “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures” (UN, 2015).

As such, representative democracy is hinged on the will of the majority of a state’s citizens which is transferred to a few representatives during periodic elections. Thus, the essence of elections is to ensure that government is built on popular support. This is often the case in countries with participant political culture where a high number of eligible citizens actively participate in political activities, most especially voting. Countries where a high number of people are with apathetic political disposition, as reflected in a non-challant attitude to voting during elections, often find it difficult to institute government on popular or majoritarian electoral pillar.

Most importantly, election serves as a means through which citizens participate in the signing of social contract between themselves and the government. It symbolises a mechanism of ensuring that government is anchored on majoritarian pillar. However, electoral experience in Nigeria, most especially since re-democratisation of the polity in May 1999, seems to suggest that most of the governments have been instituted by the minority rather than majority, judging from the actual voters that came out to vote during the elections that produced them compared with the voting age population (VAP) on one hand and total registered voters (TRV) on the other hand. Notably, VTO during the 2023 general elections was abysmally low. Out of 93.4 million citizens that registered to vote, only 24.9 million eligible voters (26.72%) actually cast their votes during the Presidential elections.

Be that as it may, concerns about the eroding participation of Nigerians in electing their political leaders is being expressed widely. This concern also informs this paper. The paper tries to examine the dynamics of VTO in Nigeria with the aim of interrogating the causes and implications of voters’ apathy, most especially during the 2023 Presidential Election, on democracy and democratisation. Historical-descriptive-qualitative approach is adopted with heavy reliance on documentary evidences and personal experience. Structurally, the paper is in six sections, this introduction being the first. In

the second section, attempt is made to set conceptual and theoretical basis for the discourse. The third section presents the historical trends and patterns of VTO in Nigeria while the fourth presents the dynamics of VTO during the 2023 Presidential Election. The penultimate section interrogates the implications of low VTO recorded during the 2023 presidential election on democracy and democratisation in Nigeria. The last section concludes and offers suggestions on how to rekindle the voting interest of Nigerians.

Conceptual and Theoretical Discourse

The participation of citizens in the determination of government under which they would be governed remains a cardinal element of democracy. This informed the Lincolnian popular perception of democracy. Abraham Lincoln, in his 1864 Gettysburg Address, perceives it as the “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Quoted in Heywood, 2007:3). Although, there are various ways through which citizens participate in governance, their participation, as voters, in the elections is a key determinant of the extent to which a government/regime is built on people’s consent. Kapsa (2020:154) aptly captures this by submitting that, “participation in elections is the most common and at the same time the most basic form of democratic participation.” As such, VTO has been adjudged as an important barometer of participatory democracy, and foundation of the credibility and legitimacy of the regime that emerges from an electoral process (Pateman, 1970, Patterson, 2009, Manin, 2010). As Mahmud (2015) submits, voters turnout offers a clue to whether a regime has the support base to govern a state. It is one of the crucial indicators of democraticness of a government. In most cases, high voters’ turnout symbolises vitality of democracy while low voters turnout indicates citizens’ dissatisfaction and mistrust of the political system (Solijonov, 2016).

VTO is described as the extent to which eligible voters use their voting power during elections (Solijonov, 2016). It is usually measured as the percentage of either the voting-age population or registered voters that actually cast their votes during an election. In this paper, VTO is conceived as the percentage of the registered voters during the 2023 General Elections in Nigeria that actually cast their votes during the February 25, 2023 Presidential Election. It means the percentage of Nigerians who came out and voted during the election; it includes both valid and invalid votes.

A plethora of perspectives have been advanced to explain electoral behaviour and voters' turnout. Notable among these perspectives include rational choice, cultural modernisation and motivational attitude. Rational-choice theorists argue that institutions, rules, and regulations set the context for citizens' participation in the electoral process and voters' turnout; institutional and legal arrangements are important for electoral activism. To them, political, institutional and legal system, such as the type of electoral system, compulsory voting laws, age qualifications for suffrage, registration processes, the distribution of polling stations etc. determine peoples' participation in the electoral process (Norris, 2004). To Norris, citizens can be influenced directly by these factors thereby shaping the costs and benefits of voting.

Several researches have established a strong correlation between political institutional cum legal arrangements and voters' turnout. Bingham Powell established severally that compulsory voting laws boosted voters' turnout in established democracies (Powell, 1980, 1982, and 1986). The study of Jackman and Miller (1995) also affirmed that electoral law and system in countries do determine VTO. The work of Blais and Dobrzynska (1998) identified factors- compulsory voting law, tender eligibility age, competitive party system, and the level of political development as main determinants of VTO. In the same vein, Franklin's (2003) explanation for the declining rate of voters' turnout in recent years revolves around political and institutional factors, such as the disappointing performance of political leadership, electoral maladministration, and strenuous registration requirements.

In essence, given that every individual has a rational side, institutional and legal arrangements with high potential of diminishing their utility from voting might adversely affect turnout. As opined by Downs (1957), voters do weigh the cost of participating in the electoral process *vis-à-vis* the potential of their participation positively impacting the system. Where the potential of the individual vote in determining the outcome of elections is negligible, the individual assessment of the expected benefit of voting may be more than the costs and could serve as a disincentive to vote (Farber, 2009).

Cultural modernisation theorists have argued that emerging socio-cultural trends, such as rising affluence, the growth of the service sector, and

increased educational opportunities do shape citizens' voting behaviour in most democracies (Bell, 1999, Dalton, 2002, Inglehart, 1997). To these theorists, human capital development is critical to citizens' political activism as the cognitive skills bred by education is a factor that most strongly gingered people to vote (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady, 1995). As such, to the cultural modernisation theorists, the desire to vote or abstain from voting is a product of socialisation rather than the cost and benefits of voting as argued by the rationalists. They are of the belief that voting habit is cultivated through early life socialisation process; it is learnt alongside other civic values and attitudes (Norris, 2004). As Norris poignantly puts it, "in this view, some people will turn out to vote through rain or shine because they are interested in public affairs, they believe it is their civic duty to vote, they want to express support for a particular party, or they want to express disapproval of the incumbent's performance, irrespective of whether they believe that the vote 'matters' by influencing which particular candidate or party gets elected" (Norris, 2004:154-155).

Similarly, from the angle of motivational attitude, it is argued that voting during elections is propelled by motivation and possession of resources that facilitate civic engagement (Almond and Verbal, 1963). From this perspective, emotional devotion to the political system which engenders voting habits is acquired at a tender age from family, school, age mates, and other agents of socialisation. Central to attitudinal motivation is resources. Possession of financial resources and civic skills makes the exercise of franchise leisable for people (Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980).

Lower turnout, as observed by Kapsa (2020), is not always an indication of diminishing political participation. He buttressed his point with Edelman Trust Barometer (2019), that shows that most democracies are moving toward "engagement and action". This corroborates Solijonov's (2016) International IDEA published report which found that diminishing VTO denotes that many people have lost faith in election as the main instrument for legitimising political power. As such, low VTO is not always an indication of political apathy. On the contrary, it may mean loss of confidence in the electoral system by the majority of the populace, most especially if there is a rise in other forms of political participation, such as protests and demonstrations, active engagement in public discourses, and conventional

and social media activism (Kapsa, 2020). This kind of shift from the conventional form of political participation (i.e. voting), to apathetic activism, signifies the public discontent for election as the means of instituting political leadership.

VTO in Nigeria: Historical Trends and Patterns

The unique significance of the 1922 Clifford Constitution in Nigeria's political development is the introduction of the elective principle. With the enshrinement of election principle in the Constitution, the first election in Nigeria was conducted in 1923. However, popular participation was constrained by the restrictive franchise of male adult who earned a gross income of 100 pounds per annum residing in the three provinces of Lagos and one province at Calabar. The restrictive franchise introduced by the constitution set the basis of voters' apathy in Nigeria (Madubuegwu *et al*, 2020). The first general election conducted in Nigeria was the 1954 Election Central Legislative Council (Dudley, 1973, Nnadozie, 2005, Hassan, 2014). Although the 1954 Lyttleton Constitution which provided for universal adult suffrage prevailed in the Eastern and Western regions, there were other requirements such as payment of tax or rate and residency that discouraged many from voting. In the Northern region, the constitution made provision for male-adult suffrage where only the male tax payers were eligible to vote. These provisions militated against people's participation in the electoral process (Madubuegwu *et al*, 2020). Accurate number of Nigerians who registered to vote and those who actually voted during the 1923 and 1954 elections are hard to come by.

The December 12, 1959 general election represents an important landmark in Nigeria's political history as it recruited the first set of leaders that succeeded the British colonialists after granting the country political independence on October 1, 1960. As shown in Table 1, the election recorded an impressive VTO of 79.5%. Out of 9,043,404 eligible voters that registered to vote, 7,189,797 cast their votes. This turnout is attributed to "social and political pressures as well as administrative action by the regional governments and local authorities which exhorted the voters to go to the polls" (Post, 1963, quoted in Omotola and Aiyedogbon, 201259), and general euphoria for political independence (Madubuegwu *et al*, 2020).

Table 1

Voters' Turnout in Nigeria's Parliamentary and Presidential Elections: 1959-2019

Year & Type of Election	Registered Voters	Total Votes Cast	Voter Turnout Rate (%)
1959 Parliamentary Election	9,043,404	7,189,797	79.50
1964 Parliamentary Election	NA	NA	-
1979 Presidential Election	48,633,782	16,846,633	34.64
1983 Presidential Election	65,304,818	25,430,096	38.94
1993 Presidential Election	37,826,460	14,321,963	37.86
1999 Presidential Election	57,838,494	30,280,052	52.35
2003 Presidential Election	60,823,022	42,018,735	69.08
2007 Presidential Election	61,567,036	35,397,517	57.49
2011 Presidential Election	73,528,040	39,469,484	53.68
2015 Presidential Election	67,422,005	29,432,083	43.65
2019 Presidential Election	82,344,107	28,614,190	34.75

Source: Compiled from various sources including: African Election Database, www.africanelectionstripod.com, INEC, www.inec.gov.ng, International IDEA, www.idea.int/vt/countryview.cfm?CountryCode=NIG, Omotola and Aiyedogbon (2012), Madubuegwu *et al* (2020) and Ngara and Udefuna (2021).

The turnout during the 1979 presidential election was less impressive. Only close to 17 million out of 48.6 million registered voters representing 34.64% voted during the election. This might not be unconnected with the crises that trailed the 1964 federal and 1965 regional elections (Omotola and Aiyedogbon, 2012). The irregularities, boycotts and violence that characterised these elections doused the glowing flame of voters' enthusiasm and brought alive the culture of electoral distrust in many Nigerians (Madubuegwu *et al*, 2020). VTO rate improved slightly in the 1983 presidential elections to 38.94%. This was not too good for an election with more than 65 million registered voters. The 1993 Presidential Election recorded a downward trend in both registered voters and votes cast. The

registered voters reduced from 65.3 million in 1983 to 37.8 million, while votes cast reduced from 25.4 million to 14.3 million translating to 37.86% turnout rate. The low turnout, according to Omotola and Aiyedogbon (2012), is attributable to the inconsistency and endless transition programmes of Babangida military junta which further eroded the confidence of most Nigerians in future elections.

The 1999 Presidential election recorded more than 50% VTO. Though this was impressive, it was not so good for a country where the majority were yearning for a transition to democratic rule from authoritarian rule. The turnout rate during the 2003 Presidential Election remains the highest since the transition to democracy in 1999. The election recorded 69.08% turnout. After four years of democratic rule, many Nigerians started developing an interest in participating in the process of leadership recruitment, most especially as they envisaged improvement in the election administration (Omotola and Aiyedogbon, 2012, Madubuegwu *et al.*, 2020). There was a downward trend in turnout in the 2007 Presidential Election from 69.08% in 2003 to 57.49%. The 2007 Presidential Election (as well as other elections) was fraught with high incidences of intimidation, infraction, thuggery and blatant violation of electoral laws. The outgoing president declared the election as a 'do-or-die' exercise and deployed all resources at his disposal to ensure victory for his chosen successor (Omotola and Aiyedogbon, 2012, Madubuegwu *et al.*, 2020, Ngara and Udefuna, 2021). This created and sustained a sense of distrust among registered voters. Even the validity of the declared turnout rate is doubtful given the torrents of manipulation unravelled after the election.

VTO rate declined further during the 2011, 2015, and 2019 general elections. In the 2011 Presidential Election, 53.68% voters' turnout was recorded. The figure deteriorated to 43.65% in the 2015 Presidential Election and decreased to 34.75% in 2019. Since the 2007 General Elections, Nigeria's elections have been characterised by VTO's unimpressive records. The deepening culture of voting apathy is not limited to the presidential election alone; it also afflicts the national assembly, governorship, state house of assembly, and off-season/bye elections. The culture is becoming deeply entrenched as the 2023 general elections recorded the worst case of VTO in spite of high optimism that the elections would make a difference in

terms of VTO. The abysmal rate of turnout recorded during the elections, most especially during the February 25 Presidential and National Assembly Elections, shows the endemic nature of apathetic disposition of the large segment of Nigerians.

The 2023 General Elections: Dynamics of Voters' Turnout During the Presidential Election

The 2023 Presidential Election recorded the lowest VTO rate in Nigeria's election history. As shown in Table 2, over 93 million eligible Nigerians registered to vote during the 2023 general elections, but only about 25 million of them actually came out to vote during the presidential election translating to 26.74% turnout rate. This is in spite of the strong engagement in the run-up to the election, particularly among the youths who constitute more than 70% of the newly registered voters. In none of the 36 states of the federation and the FCT was 50% voters' turnout rate recorded. Jigawa State had the highest turnout rate of 40.61%, while 9 states (Plateau, Osun, Adamawa, Gombe, Kaduna, Bauchi, Ekiti, Kastina and Niger) and FCT recorded more than 30% rate. In the remaining 25 states, voters' turnout hovered between 15% and 29% with Rivers State having the lowest turnout rate of 15.66%. Though Lagos State has the highest number of voters registered, it is among the states with poor rate of turnout (18.92%).

Table 2
Voters Turnout Across the 36 States & FCT in the February 25, 2023 Presidential Election

State	Registered Voters	Total Votes Cast	Voter Turnout Rate (%)
Abia	2,120,808	381,683	18.00
Adamawa	2,196,566	761,621	34.67
Akwa Ibom	2,357,418	587,417	24.92
Anambra	2,656,437	624,612	23.51
Bauchi	2,749,268	882,548	32.10
Bayelsa	1,056,862	173,111	16.38
Benue	2,777,727	797,762	28.72
Borno	2,513,281	519,431	20.67
Cross River	1,766,466	441,576	25.00
Delta	3,221,697	654,650	20.32
Ebonyi	1,597,646	337,341	21.11
Edo	2,501,081	600,395	24.01
Ekiti	987,647	314,472	31.84
Enugu	2,112,793	468,891	22.20
Gombe	1,575,794	533,778	33.87
Imo	2,419,922	469,685	19.41
Jigawa	2,351,298	954,805	40.61
Kaduna	4,335,208	1,401,376	32.33
Kano	5,921,370	1,746,410	29.50
Kastina	3,516,719	1,091,187	31.03
Kebbi	2,032,041	591,475	29.11
Kogi	1,932,654	476,038	24.63
Kwara	1,695,927	496,683	29.29
Lagos	7,060,195	1,335,729	18.92

Nasarawa	1,899,244	556,937	29.32
Niger	2,698,344	813,355	30.14
Ogun	2,688,305	611,448	22.74
Ondo	1,991,344	570,017	28.62
Osun	1,954,800	756,744	38.71
Oyo	3,276,675	851,956	26.00
Plateau	2,789,528	1,111,164	39.83
Rivers	3,537,190	553,944	15.66
Sokoto	2,172,056	607,890	27.99
Taraba	2,022,374	517,818	25.60
Yobe	1,485,146	397,331	26.75
Zamfara	1,926,870	519,431	26.96
FCT	1,570,307	478,652	30.48
Total	93,469,008	24,989,363	26.74

Source: Compiled from INEC’s Released Registered Voters and PVCs collected for the 2023 General Election (www.inecnigeria.org) and national dailies’ reports on the 2023 Presidential Result as declared by State Collation and Returning Officers in the 36 states of the federation and FCT.

The analysis of the turnout based on 6 geopolitical zones (see Table 3) shows that North-West has the highest number of voters’ turnout (31.10%), followed by the North-Central (30.80%). In spite of the fact that the South-West has the second largest registered voters, turnout in the zone was among the lowest in the country (24.73%). Overall, the turnout rate in all the geopolitical zones was unimpressive, as none of the zones recorded up to 40% turnout rate. However, the turnout rate in the North is better, compared with that of the South.

Table 3
Voters' Turnout in the 6 Geopolitical Zones

State	Registered Voters	Total Votes Cast	Voter Turnout Rate (%)
North East	12,542,429	3,612,527	28.80
North West	22,255,562	6,912,574	31.10
*North Central	15,363,731	4,730,591	30.80
South East	10,907,606	2,282,212	20.92
South West	17,958,966	4,440,366	24.73
South South	14,440,714	3,011,093	20.85
Total	93,469,008	24,989,363	26.74

*Including FCT

Source: Compiled from INEC's Released Registered Voters and PVCs collected for the 2023 General Election (www.inecnigeria.org) and national dailies' reports on the 2023 Presidential Result as declared by State Collation and Returning Officers in the 36 states of the federation and FCT.

Expectedly, series of explanations have been advanced on the abysmal rate of voters' turnout recorded during the election. Given the complex dynamics of the electoral process, it is somehow difficult to attribute the apathy displayed by majority of registered voters to a single factor. To fully comprehend the situation, a confluence of factors needs to be x-rayed.

The 2023 presidential election turnout rate consolidates declining trend that started in 2007. Some analysts draw a link between low VTO and the introduction of technology in election management (Adebayo, 2023, Zuhumnan, 2023). In 2007, the INEC moved from manual voters' registration to electronic registration. This transition is believed to have helped in preventing multiple voting. Further application of technology by the Commission in 2011 election resulted in reducing incidents of over-voting. The introduction of Smart Card Reader (SCR) in 2015 electoral process helped to reduce drastically multiple voting by authenticating Permanent Voter's Cards (PVCs) and accrediting voters. However, the provision for the use of incident forms, which allowed manual accreditation in cases of

SCR's technical hitches, was exploited by some politicians to over-vote. The elimination of incident forms in 2019 further sanitised the process and led to further decline in VTO. The adoption of Bimodal Voter's Accreditation System (BVAS) in 2023 elections further helped in cleaning up the system of sharp-practices. As such, it is believed that the pre-2007 announced VTOs were not credible and reliable as the application of technology is rooting out voting by proxy and multiple voting.

Even with improved voters' registration process and the application of BVAS that helped, to some extent, in preventing multiple voting and voting by proxy, the credibility of voters' register released by the INEC is questionable. It was observed that the INEC could not adequately clean-up the register by removing the number of registered deceased persons and elimination of double/multiple registration. Lack of proper database makes it extremely difficult for the Commission to remove deceased registrants. It only detected cases of multiple registration (Habib, 2022). However, there was allegation of manipulation of voters' register in some states by INEC staff (Sam-Duru, 2022). Since the voters' registers in some states were manipulated, VTO rate is made less accurate (Situation Room, 2023).

There were cases of voters showing up at the polling booths but unable to vote due to logistical issues and technical glitches, (such as late arrival of electoral officers and materials). In many parts of the country, some polling units opened extremely late while some did not open at all due to logistics problems on the part of INEC. In these polling units, voters waited endlessly before giving up. For instance, the EU Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) observed late opening of polling units in 44 out of the 50 polling units, while electoral officers were not available in 18 polling units monitored (EU EOM, 2023). The Mission observed that in some states, there was late opening of polling stations which discouraged many voters. The same scenario was reported by most observers that monitored the election (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023, IRI/NDI Election Observation Mission to Nigeria, 2023).

Late arrival of polling officials and commencement of polls led to prolonged voting beyond the terminating time of 2.30pm in many polling units. As reported by the Situation Room, more than 65 per cent of polling units observed did not end voting as scheduled at 2.30 pm (Nigeria Civil

Society Situation Room, 2023). The late opening of polling stations prolonged voting till night in many states while voting extended to 26 February in some polling units in six states. There were also cases of voters (who were reassigned to new polling units) finding it difficult to locate their polling units (Nigeria Civil Society Situation Room, 2023). As such, there were Nigerians who actually wanted to cast their votes but were systematically disenfranchised (Adebayo, 2023) by the INEC's delay in opening the polling booths and technical hitches.

Another major contributing factor is the milieu of violence and voters' intimidation in some parts of the country, most especially in Lagos, Anambra and Abia States. There were incidences of organised voters' suppression in many parts of the federation such as Lagos, Anambra, Abia states among others. As reported by the EU EOM (2023), the use of violence during the 2023 electoral process obstructed campaigns and suppressed voters' turnout on the days of election. The Mission's report shows instances of violent attacks on polling units and intimidation of voters in some states, with Rivers, Kano, Lagos and Imo recording the highest incidences. The EU EOM's observation was corroborated by the IRI/NDI EOM which reported that the 2023 election process recorded 586 electoral violence incidents in 274 local governments with 348 fatalities (IRI/NDI EOM, 2023:23).

It was largely due to concern about security threats posed by the elections that the federal government directed the Vice Chancellors to close public universities from 22 February to 14 March 2023. Two weeks before the presidential election, a civil society organisation, CLEEN Foundation, had a press conference where some risk factors that might affect the election were released. These include:

Access to unsecured polling units as a good number of polling units in Nigeria will require special security arrangements to enable election to take place; abduction of election officials and voters; snatching and destruction of election materials; diatribe and inciteful statements; proliferation of small arms and light weapons, and activities of state and non-state security actors (CLEEN Foundation, 2023 cited in Situation Room Report on 2023 General Elections).

Almost all these threats manifested during the election. As the threats were not localised, many expressed fears that security agencies might not be able to secure the process (Civil Society Situation Room, 2023). As such, most voters were scared off the polling booths.

As such despite the high interest and curiosity generated by the electioneering process and the visible popular support base of the three main contenders, i.e. the All Progressive Congress (APC) candidate, Bola Ahmed Tinubu; the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate, Atiku Abubakar; and the Labour Party (LP) candidate, Peter Obi, there existed a pervasive fear of violence that discouraged voters from exercising their civic duties. The nationwide cash crunch as a result of the Central Bank's Naira redesigning and the fuel shortage preceding the election also affected mobility of many Nigerians, thereby preventing them from going out to vote, most especially voters whose polling units were not within walking distance from their houses.

Implications for Democracy and Democratisation

The conception of free, fair, inclusive and participatory election is among the most important elements of democracy. Democracy must be people-driven, both in terms of ascension to power by the political leaders and governance i.e. meeting people's needs and satisfying their expectations. This is the main intention of Abraham Lincoln, cited earlier, by submitting that democracy is "the government of the people, by the people and for the people." Democracy is about people, not passive people but active ones. It comes alive through participation by the people, as they are both the subject and instrument of democracy (Oladipo, 2022). The most common and basic form of public participation in politics in democratic states is election (Kapsa, 2020). The extent of democraticness of any democratic political system is mostly measured by the degree of popular support for the government during and after elections. Without a commensurate VTO, no election's outcome can reflect people's preferences. The percentage of votes received by a candidate or political party is important in setting the initial support base for the government. Low VTO rate is an indication of lack of public confidence or trust in the electoral process to transparently produce political leadership, on one hand, and in the emerged leaders to initiate and implement policies that can positively impact their lives.

The real value and essence of election is to enable the people exercise their power of choice and indirectly participate in governance and political process (Madubuegwu *et al*, 2020). It therefore follows that election is the most popular indices of participatory democracy where people express liberty of choice. With persistent low voters' turnout, it means that majority of Nigerians do not participate in determining those who govern them. As such, the extent to which the elected representatives are *by the people* is minimal. More so, the credibility of the outcome of an election characterised by massive voters' apathy is doubtful. The implication is that candidates who are 'elected' through the process are bereft of popular trust and support. This has adverse effects on the process of deepening democracy institutionally and attitudinally. When a large segment of the voting population persistently absconds from voting, it implies that majority of the people in the state have not developed trust in democracy and its ability to impact positively on their existence. In this instance, internalising democracy and entrenching democratic institutions, values and practices may take a very long period of time.

Conventionally, democracy is a majoritarian system and of popular support base; the absence of which breeds legitimacy crisis. By the provision of Section 14 (2) of the 1999 Constitution (as amended): "*Sovereignty belongs to the people of Nigeria from whom government through this Constitution derives all its powers and authority*" (emphasis mine). In essence, the foundation of legitimacy of any democratic government is laid by the popular support given through election. Be that as it may, legitimacy of a government that is a product of elections marred by voters' apathy can be said to be questionable. As regards 2023 presidential election, an implication of the low VTO is that President Tinubu's mandate (with 8,894,726 votes) flows from less than 10% of Nigeria's registered voters. This, as observed by Chatham House (2023), is a worrying trend, that both the government and political class need to reflect upon. There is urgent need to improve the quality and relevance of Nigerian democracy.

Concluding Remarks

The analysis in the paper establishes an instance of progressive voters' apathy in Nigeria, most especially since 2007 general elections. The 2023

presidential election consolidates the dwindling rate of VTO during elections in the country. The turnout rate (26.74%) during the election was not very encouraging and fell far below international benchmark. This turnout rate is the lowest in the annals of elections in Nigeria. Though the dwindling trend of VTO in Nigeria is attributable to a confluence of factors, most Nigerians' loss of trust and confidence in the political class largely explains the entrenched apathetic disposition in the country. As such, to reverse the decreasing trend of VTO, there is the need to boost the confidence of Nigerians and build their trust not only in the electoral process but, most importantly, in the efficacy of democracy to impact their lives positively.

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