

A Review of Voter Apathy, Political Decay and Political Development in the South East

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Abstract

This paper examined voter apathy, political decay and political development in the South East region of Nigeria. Political development is a change over time in political institutions. Voting is a veritable exercise in democracies that enables the masses to participate in the decision making process, choose their preferred leadership and enhance political development, while on the other hand political decay refer to internal political contradictions that lead to stagnation of political institutions. Regrettably, from 2015-2023 voters apathy had dominated the general mood of South East voters; and political development emasculated. The electoral processes are married by thuggery, voters harassment by thugs and security personnel in connivance with political gladiators, assassination of political opponents, snatching of ballot boxes, announcing fake results by the electoral umpire, etc. Unfortunately, voter apathy in the zone has led to discount between government and the masses, bad governance, dearth of infrastructure and poor political development. The decision making theory was deployed for this study which emphasized the selection of the best among alternatives, and making the process participative. It was recommended that the electoral processes should be made more democratic and the stagnation of political institution should be stopped. Voting should be seen as the constitutional right of voters to participate in decision making and choosing their preferred representatives.

Keywords: Voter Apathy, Political Decay, Political Development, Electoral Process.

Introduction

In democratic dispensations, voting remains a veritable instrument to choose representatives (Eso, 2022), Ahamba, 2017; Chubuzor, 2019). It is an integral part of political development anywhere south east inclusive (Ajuzie, 2016; Iwuala, 2020). Apathy sets in when for some reasons, a people avoid taking path in voting. Voter apathy "is a subdivision of political apathy, which has become one of the foremost democracy quandaries I'm developing polities (Odigbo, Okeke and Okafor, 2022). Voter apathy has negative impacts on electoral processes and political development (Azubuike, 2016; Uzocha, 2020: Ikpegbu, 2014). No geopolitical zone, including south east, can be exempted from this ugly trend in Nigeria (Ogbulafor, 2017). As it spreads and permeates societal fabrics, so also does it circumvent and circumscribe political development (Fagunwa, 2015; Blais, 2000; Grey and Caul, 2000, all cited in Eso, 2022).

"Election remains meaningful when there is massive participation; and voter turnout indicates inclusiveness and legitimacy of the whole process "It confirms peoples indispensability towards, not only participation, but actually in their choice of preferred

leadership," (Odigbo, Okeke and Okafor, 2022), succinctly argue. From 2015-2023, south east political development has been circumvented with discouraging occurrences, which have discouraged the people from having quality representation. Within this period, "Nigeria's electoral processes were seen to lack credibility, transparency and acceptability" (Odigbo, Okeke and Okafor, 2022). Electoral processes in the south east, like elsewhere, were characterized by thuggery, assassination of opponents, harassment of voters by security personnel, snatching of ballot boxes, etc. Escalating these, is the growing inadequacies, and unfair conducts of officials of the electoral umpire (permanent and ad hoc). Both state officials and those of independent Electoral offices (INEC) connive to manoeuvre the processes. At the recent 2023 election, even the new electoral act, and the introduction of BVAS and IREV, never saved the situation. Results announced were worse than useless with the hope of the masses dashed.

At that presidential election on the 25th February, 2023, about 47 percent of the registered voters participated in the south east unlike previous elections, which is a slight increase from about previous 41 percent. Still at that, there were reported cases of vote-buying, ballot box snatching, inflated vote numbers, intimidation of voters, and assassination of opponents. Assassinations were common in Enugu state and Imo State. There was no voting at certain wards; with high vulnerable places, to include Imo state, Abia North, Enugu state and Ebonyi state. What happen during elections, and the do-or-die affair that accompany them, reveal the fractured relationship between the government, the electoral umpire, the courts/tribunals and the voters. It also exposes the damaging underdeveloped level of politics in the south east, how it has permeated societal fabrics, and the frustration and helpless of citizens (Ogbulafor, 2023).

This paper is an attempt to review voter apathy, political decay and political development in south east. The introduction will be followed by conceptual framework. The next section will be the nature, reasons and consequences of voter apathy in south east before conclusion and recommendations.

Theoretical Framework

The Decision-Making Theory was adopted as the framework for analysis of this study. The proponents of the Decision-Making theory include Richard Synder (1916-1997). Others are Herbert Simon and Harold Lasswell. They emphasized that politics is the process of allocating value through decision-making. Harold Lasswell posits that power is participation in decision making process.

The decision-making theory is commonly used in the study of public policy analysis and International Relations. Decision making involved selecting the best course of action from among various alternatives. Decision making is a conscious activity (Obikeze and Obi, 2004). Through decision making, they emphasize, excellent option from many are determined, analysed and selected. For clear political actions, there is need to analyse it from the standpoint of the decision makers (Nwokoye, 2008).

This theory has relevance with the topic. First, the position of the actors in decision making is of primary pertinence. These actors include voters and political gladiators. But the electoral processes in south east within 2015-2023 were characterized by voter apathy which has reduced participation, poor decision making process and poor political development. Regrettably, the voting masses are constitutionally bound to partake in the decision making process by voting as a civic responsibility from 2015 to 2019, apathy characterized the mood of voters. In 2023, voters determined to change the narrative through the new electoral act were again, disappointed by the results released by the electoral umpire, further causing voter apathy as well as emasculating political development in the zone.

Statement of the Problem

Election remains meaningful when there is massive participation; and voter turnout indicates inclusiveness and legitimacy of the whole process "It confirms peoples indispensability towards, not only participation, but actually in their choice of preferred leadership," (Odigbo, Okeke and Okafor, 2022), succinctly argue. The challenge of insecurity and conspicuous activities of NON-STATE is a serious challenge to our political development and have contributed to political decay. Senseless and systematic intimidation of voters particularly pre-election, during-election and post-election period. All these dynamics have contributed to what is today known as voters' apathy in our country. It is against this background that the following question were raised in an attempt to address the hydra-headed problem.

Research Questions

1. What are the causes of voters' apathy and political decay?
2. What are the hindrances to effective political development in the South East?
3. How do we address the challenges of voters apathy and political in the South-East?

Objectives of Study

1. To examine the causes of voters apathy and political decay.
2. To find out the hindrances to effective political development in the South East.
3. To address the challenges of voters apathy and political decay in the South-Eastern Nigeria.

Methodology

The study adopted the secondary method, and extant literature on the area was relied upon for data.

Conceptual Clarifications

Voter Apathy and Political Development Conceptualized

Voter apathy as a concept in social science has elicited scholarly curiosity. This is more because, it borders much on democratic and political development. Recently, public opinion has focused on voter apathy, as it has disrupted political development in less developed polities (Anugbuagu, 2020).

Voter apathy is seen as a decline in participation of citizens under the electoral system. Crew, et al in Odigbo, Okeke and Okafor (2022), sees it as "a situation when the eligible voters are unwilling, and deliberately avoid participation in elections". Fagunwa (2015) citing Crew, et al avers that voter apathy is a situation in the electoral process that is characterized by "deficient response, indifference and voters non challenge". Generally, voting is the method through which electorates elect their representative or express their opinion on an issue. In democratic states, voting power is the highest power of the electorate "political sovereignty" to determine who will represent them in parliament and other government positions (Ezeh, 2017). Anything stopping or discouraging citizens to perform this civic responsibility is voter apathy. Things that lead to voter apathy include election rigging, violation of an electoral act, illegal interference with the process of an election, whether directly or indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly, gerrymandering, smuggling or snatching of ballot box, diverting electoral materials, doctoring and falsification of election result, harassment of voters.

Political development means a systematic growth and improvement on the political life of a people (Floyd, (2020). Political development in a democratic south east, necessarily demands steady improvement in the processes of governance that serves the interests of a greater number of people. There has to be steady and increased improvement on the chosen political ideologies and values (Floyd, 2020; Anyanku, 2019). In a democracy, political development keeps abreast with acceptable electoral processes, unreserved mass participation geared towards achieving quality leadership, governance and representation (Agodi, 2021; Nwakpi, 2022).

Political Decay

Political decay refers to internal political contradictions that lead to stagnation of political institutions. According to Francis Fukuyama in his work *The Origins of Political Order* political decay is the stagnation of the dynamic process by which competition among institutions produces contradictory political development. He advanced two types of political decay to include institutional rigidity and repatrimonialization. Repatrimonialization is a situation in which a leader exchanges favours in return for support from a group of followers. In case of Nigeria, patronizing an ethnic group or Geo-Political zone for giving votes to a particular candidate is a known fact.

Nature, Reasons and Consequences of Voter Apathy on Political Development in South East

The paper emphasizes political development and voter apathy within 2015-2023. No election has taken place in the south east without an accompanying trauma. Voter apathy in the south east mostly come in two forms; the refusal of voters to register; and refusal to cast their votes (Fugunwa, 2015). Both challenges are common regarding the republican and egalitarian nature of the people of the area. The Igbos who make up the present south east, are majorly private business men, and hardly have time for usual protocols that characterize the electoral processes. That these elections are rigged even accentuates their ambivalence towards elections as the table below shows:

Table 1: Showing the Percentage of Voter Turnout in Nigeria's Presidential Election across the South East (2015-2019).

S/N	State s	Registere d voters for 2015	Accredi ted Voters for 2015	Total Vote cast 2015	Voters turnout (%) for 2015	Registere d voters for 2019	Accredi ted Voters for 2019	Total vote cast	Voters turnou t (%) for 2019
1	Abia	1, 349, 134	442, 538	401, 049	33%	1, 932, 882	361, 561	344, 471	20.90 %
2	Anam bara	1, 963, 427	774, 430	703, 409	39%	2, 447, 996	675, 273	625, 035	46.04 %
3	Ebony i	1, 071, 226	425, 301	393, 337	40%	1, 459, 933	391, 747	379, 394	30.16%
4	Enugu	1, 381, 563	616, 112	585, 632	45%	1, 944, 016	452, 765	451, 063	25.33%
5	Imo	1, 747, 681	801, 712	731, 921	46%	2, 272, 273	585, 741	542, 777	34.41%

In Abia, the number of voters registered in 2015 were less than those registered in 2019; but a greater number of voters registered in 2019 while lesser number actually voted. This shows a drastic reduction of voters within 2015 and 2019, with a percentage difference of 12.10 percent. Again, the total number of voters accredited in 2015 were more than those accredited in 2019 by a difference of 79, 977.

In Anambra State, more people registered in 2019 than in 2015; but more were accredited in 2015 than in 2019. Voter turnout was more in 2019 than in 2015 by 7.04 percent. This reveals that voting, most times, do not depend on either the number registered or those accredited. There is a trending apathy. In Ebonyi state, more voters registered in 2019 than in 2015; but lesser number were accredited in 2019 than in 2015. The percentage of voters' turnover was more in 2015 than in 2019 showing a significant reduction of interest among voters.

In Enugu state, more voters were registered in 2019 than they did in 2015; but total vote cast was more in 2015 than in 2019 showing a significant reduction; again, more people

were accredited in 2015 than 2019, showing a reduction in voting capacity and interest. In Imo State, more people registered in 2019 than 2015, but the percentage of voting was very low in 2019 compared to 2015 showing voter apathy.

TABLE 2: Showing Voters Apathy Differences from (2015-2019) General Election in South East.

S/N	States	Voters turnout for 2015 (%)	Differences in voters decline from (2015-2019) election in south east (%)	Voters turnout for 2019(%)
1	Abia	33%	12.1%	20.90%
2	Anambara	39%	6.41%	32.59%
3	Ebonyi	40%	9.84%	30.16%
4	Enugu	45%	19.67%	25.33%
5	Imo	46%	11.59%	34.41%

Compiled By Authors but Adopted from Odigbo, Okeke and Okafor (2022).

In table 2, showing the percentage differences voters apathy within 2015-2019 in south east, in 2015 voters turnout was 33 percent; but in 2019, there was a voter's turnout to 20.90 percent showing a reduction of 20.92 percent. The same scenario played out in Anambra. In 2015, the percentage of voter turnout was 39 percent but reduced in 2019 to 32.59 percent leading to a 6.41 percent difference. In Ebonyi states there was a percentage voter turnover in 2015 of 40 percent which drastically reduced in 2019 to 30.16 percent showing a difference of 9.84 percent. In Enugu state the percentage of voters' turnover was 45 percent in 2015 but drastically reduced to 25.33 percent showing a difference of 19.67 percent.

In Imo State, apathy like in south eastern states, is endemic. In 2015, voter turnout was 46 percent but drastically fell to 34.41 percent, difference. Thus, electoral processes in the south east are characterized by widespread violence, mass rigging, thuggery, irregularities and other malpractice. Instances abounded where people who registered could not vote by virtue of systematic disenfranchisement by the electoral umpire in connivance with certain political gladiators. According to Odigbo, Okike and Okafor (2022) in Eso (2022), "the 2015 general election which appeared to be highly credible in the history of election in Nigeria, recorded one of the worst apathy. It is the same in all electoral years with a slight difference in 2033, different because Nigerian citizens, including those of south east, decided to change governance through a third force popularly known as OBIDIENTS. Voters came out enmass more than ever experienced before. Though some little changes were achieved, and inspite of the electoral Act that approved electronic transmission of votes, voters were again disappointed when results were finally announced by the electoral umpire head by Yakubu Mohammed. Strangely, this time, the presidential election was seemly rigged by the electoral umpire, with the masses and politicians who felt cheated asked to approach to court. Arrests, intimidation of votes, vote buying, snatching of ballot boxes, and

disenfranchisement by preventing voting at certain Wards, were common practices. The South East turned to a mournful mood (Kanayo, 2023).

Kanayo (2023) further lists the reasons for voter apathy in south east to include;

1. The do-or-die attitude of political gladiators;
2. The unpopularity of politicians among voters;
3. Bad governance and the disconnect between leaders and followers; and
4. Greediness among politicians.

The consequences of voter apathy to political development include bad governance. Leaders who succeeded to get political power mostly rigged themselves into such positions. Being in power, they use themselves not owing the masses the obligations to provide the needed necessity. This results to non-payment of workers are owed several months salaries; this includes about twenty-two months owed to medical doctors. In Imo and Ebonyi states, workers are either owed several months' salaries, or paid stipends. Governors incline to bourgeois liberal development approach that do not impact directly on citizens. Governments do not care about infrastructural development because there are no obligations to the people. Due to this, there is hardly attraction investments. The negative attitude of politicians in the south east accounted for the reasons why security personnel and agencies appear to be used for the abuse of electoral processes. The militarization of elections in the zone end up accentuating and exacerbating violence, killing etc for selfish ambition (Onwuama, 2019; Odigbo, Okeke and Okafor, 2019), hence voter apathy.

Regrettably, the judiciary which is supposed to encourage democratic political development to join the political gladiators to mitigate mayhem. Public opinion in the zone now perceive judiciary as an epitome of corruption. The constitutional provision granting the state executives to appoint State High Court Judges, makes it worst. Adimora (2020), puts it thus: "Laws in Nigeria-South east are perceived to be made for the poor". The rule of law hardly applies to politicians and the powerful. The poor and less privileged are robbed of justice, denied the right to be heard, to live and even die. Cases are judge on technicalities rather than evidence.

Finally, voter apathy in the South-East has bred disconnection between the government and the people, a great disconnect that led to frustration and alienation within the electorate. Sustained voter apathy in the zone, will endlessly emasculate government legitimacy; and also produce weak and comatose institutions (Osi, 2006). Voter apathy has reduced south east governments to oligarchies. It has turned South East democratic political development to a decaying institution. However, low voters turnout could be as a result of improved accreditation process by the Independent Electoral Commission (INEC).

Conclusion

This paper examined voter apathy and political development in south eastern Nigeria. It argues that voter apathy has been proliferate in south east within 2015-2023. It has also argued that voter apathy has been a consequent of south east bad electoral processes, normally characterized by thuggery assassination of opponents, harassment of voters,

connivance by politicians with the security personnels and the electoral umpire to deliberately disenfranchise voters, rig elections and announce fake results; which has made governance and political development generally poor in the zone.

Recommendations

Considering the foregoing, the following recommendations were made:

- The electoral process should be more democratized through a re-engineering of institutions, and strict application of the electoral laws.
- Voting should be a constitutional prerogative of voters in participating in decision making process, as well as exercising their choice and preferences over their leadership.
- Institutions and stakeholder in the electoral process in Nigeria should be strengthened to be able to deliver on their core responsibility.

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